The Effect of Small Group Instruction on Student Work Completion

By Lauren Behringer

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of small group instruction on student work completion in a general education sixth grade language arts classroom. There has previously been little research on general education students and small group instruction. Students were selected to be in the study based on a history of poor work completion in the first half of the year. The experimental group was made up of 9 students. The measurement tool was a researcher-created data tracking sheet. The researcher awarded points in 6 on-task behavior categories through time sampling using 10-minute intervals within a 65-minute class. There was a total possible score of 60 points per class period and a possible 600 points available under each condition. The baseline period and the intervention period were each 10 days. The mean on-task behavior scores, prorated for absences, did not differ significantly in the baseline (Mean = 274.11, SD = 42.23) and intervention (Mean = 277.00, SD = 62.13) conditions [t (8) = 0.23, p = .82]. Implications and ideas for future research are discussed.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

In middle school, it is a common problem for students to either to rush through their work without sufficient effort, turn in work that is incomplete or blank, or not hand in anything at all. This raises the questions of what are students doing during class and how can teachers help students complete their work? This is particularly problematic in a large group setting where it is difficult to monitor the on-task behavior of each student and to provide individualized encouragement and reminders to be on-task.

Work completion variations have been studied extensively in special education settings, but there is a lack of studies in general education settings. Bannister (2011) states, "middle school reading teachers can incorporate strategies of differentiation, such as integrating small-group instruction with whole group instruction, to meet individual student needs in their classrooms" (p. 15). This study will focus on the link between on-task behaviors and the size of instructional groups in the hopes that by increasing on-task behavior, more quality work will be produced by students.

In order to assist general education students in work completion, providing individualized or small-group instruction can be beneficial. Middle school students often perceive themselves as trouble-makers or socializers, but Chapman, Greenfield, and Rinaldi (2010) explained that, "within small reading groups, males perceived themselves as problem-solvers in cooperating learning environments" (p. 114).

As a middle school educator, the researcher had noticed a trend in students demonstrating off task behaviors that lead to incomplete work. The researcher has also noticed a trend in

students looking and acting like they are on task, yet classwork is not completed or turned in. The researcher conducted a study to examine the variations in on-task behavior among students in a co-taught sixth grade general education class in a whole-group setting versus a small-group setting. This study will allow students to show their work ethic and cognitive skills in a small-group setting. The overall goal is to help students become independent learners as they begin their middle school years.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of small-group instruction on on-task behavior.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that there will be no statistically significant difference in on-task behavior scores among students in a sixth-grade co-taught general education class when they are taught in a small-group setting and when they are taught in a whole-group setting.

Operational Definitions

Whole-Group Instruction

Whole-group instruction is defined as classroom instruction in which the entire class is receiving the same lesson, at the same time, in the same room.

Small-Group Instruction

Small-group instruction is defined as classroom instruction in which a small group of students (9 students) are pulled into a separate room, away from the rest of the class, to receive the same lesson as the students who are part of the whole-group instruction.

On-Task Behavior

On-task behavior was defined as the following six possible behaviors.

1. eyes on assignment or teacher or other classmates if that is appropriate to the situation

2. visibly appear to be working on a task if appropriate (e.g., pencil to paper; head in book)

3. refraining from off task conversation when they are supposed to be listening, either to a teacher or other student in a discussion

4. refraining from any behavior that is obviously off task

5. raising hand to participate if appropriate

6. contributing to appropriate classroom discussion (e.g., answering question posed by teacher, volunteering relevant information, contributing to a group discussion)

On-Task Behavior Score

An on-task behavior score was generated through time sampling with 10 minute intervals in which students could receive one point in each category in the interval. For each condition, there were a total of 60 intervals. Scores were pro-rated to adjust for absences.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Classwork is an essential part of a student's education. Focusing on the completion of classwork allows students to expand their knowledge and skill set and refine skills that they have previously learned. However, whole group instruction is not always the most effective way for teachers to assess understanding and refine required skills for all students. Small-group instruction allows for teachers to provide differentiated instruction to students in a more intimate setting, thereby allowing students to ask and answer questions more easily than in a whole-group setting. According to Bannister (2011), "middle school reading teachers can incorporate strategies of differentiation, such as integrating small-group instruction with whole group instruction, to meet individual student needs in their classrooms" (p. 15) Therefore, it is important for educators to find the most effective ways to implement small-group instruction. Educators must also have buy-in to this method of instruction, which may mean refining classroom management techniques, and planning for student work activities while teaching a small group.

The following sections will discuss literature focused on small-group instruction. There will be a review of literature about the impact of small-group instruction on student learning, factors that influence student work completion, the relationship between small group instruction and student work completion and strategies to improve student work completion. Each section will focus on the methods used in multiple research studies and their findings.

The Impact of Small-Group Instruction on Student Learning

Improved student motivation is just one of the many impacts small-group instruction has on student learning. Studies show that small-group instruction leads to better self-confidence

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about reading in students. According to Chapman, Greenfield, and Rinaldi (2010), "within small reading groups, males perceived themselves as problem-solvers in cooperating learning environments" (p. 114). This shows that students working in small-groups shifted their mindset of themselves as learners and leaders which is a more positive self-image. In addition, students "preferred working in mixed-ability groups and pairs the most. They perceived getting more help within these groupings" (Chapman et al., 2010, p. 114). Mixing student ability within the small group can lead to students teaching each other, which helps to cement knowledge. A smaller teacher-to-student ratio allows for students to ask and answer questions, as well as allowing for teachers to take notice of the students who might not be fully understanding the skill at hand. This then allows the teacher to provide additional interventions as needed.

Teacher buy-in when transitioning to small-group instruction is crucial for the success of the practice. If teachers are not trained on best practices for small-group instruction, they will be resistant to the change. Reynolds (2010) states, "teachers were not adequately trained or did not feel comfortable in implementing a small-group structure within their classrooms" (p. 18) This research focused on the transition of a school from primarily whole-group instruction to a new reading framework that "required a large majority of teachers to change their primary delivery method from whole group to small group during their reading period" (p.18). Reynolds continued to explain the set-up of the reading framework within a 90-minute reading block.

> The framework consisted of 90-minute blocks and teachers were expected to use a small-group delivery method for 60 of those 90 minutes. There were three components to the framework: 1) whole-group instruction to begin the lesson, 2) small-group instruction for explicitly teaching groups of students at a teacher's station, and 3) whole-group instruction as a closure to the reading block. (p. 56)

This framework forced teachers to plan for students to work independently while instructing a small-group of students at a teacher station. The classroom management strategies as well as level of rigor in independent activities are crucial to the success of small-group instruction.

As a teacher, expecting students to work independently while focusing on a small-group provides challenges like focusing on what type of work to give students, how to manage behavior of the students not working in the small-group, and how to teach the norms. Reynolds (2010) explained that, "many teachers continued to struggle in the areas listed above and with implementing a small-group delivery method. On the other hand, there were teachers who had mastered different components of this framework and were able to successfully implement small groups within their classes" (p. 29). Successful implementation of small-group instruction allows for multiple other impacts to fall into place. Additionally, a smaller teacher-to-student ratio allows for teachers to take note of students who are achieving above the expectation and create enrichment opportunities for a specific small-group of students or individual student.

Factors That Influence Student Work Completion

Response prompting can influence student work completion by aiding students in transferring knowledge and refocusing thinking to answer a question or respond to a learning activity. Response prompting includes "systematic use and removal of prompts, with reinforcement provided for both prompted and unprompted correct responses, to facilitate the transfer of stimulus control" (Ledford, 2012 p. 414). In small-group instruction, this can look like a teacher telling a student that they will answer the next question or add the next response to a discussion, so that student has enough time to process their answer to contribute to the discussion or lesson. This influences student work completion because it is setting students up for success;

this method works very well with students with learning and processing disabilities because it does not force them to respond to a question or contribute to a discussion without having time to prepare an answer. Another factor that influences student work completion is on-task behavior. Response prompting aids in student on-task behavior because it is forcing the student to be mentally engaged in the discussion or lesson which then leaves no time for off-task behaviors to arise.

A third way to increase on-task behavior is to focus on the learning ability of the students in the small-group rather than the class as a whole-group. Mokhtari completed a study on strengthening academic vocabulary. This research grouped students by using the results of the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE). "This test is a standardized, group-administered test of overall reading ability" (p. 30). This assessment's identification of student knowledge led to the grouping for the study. Small-groups, regardless of homogeneous or heterogeneous groupings, allow for educators to differentiate for the students in front of them. The participants for the study engaged in small-group instruction for tutoring. This allowed for students to increase their work completion and understanding of reading strategies and skillsets.

The Relationship Between Small Group Instruction and Student Work Completion

Teachers hold a crucial role in small-group instruction. However, not all small-groups are teacher-led. Sometimes small-group instruction is best to be student-lead to allow for exploration. Teaching styles are one of the ways a teacher can differentiate for the students in a small-group setting. Monroe (2014) studies the impact of the 4MAT teaching model which "provides a teaching model that cycles the teacher through four major teaching quadrants" (p. 26). This model included 4 quadrants of teaching styles.

"Quadrant one teachers are interested in facilitating individual growth… Quadrant two teachers 'like facts and details, organizational and sequential Thinking'… Quadrant three teachers see knowledge as enabling learners to be capable of making their own way… Quadrant four teachers are interested in enabling learner self-discovery" (p. 30). Although Monroe focused on how teachers differ by teaching within one of these quadrants, a teacher leading small-group instruction could work to best reach her students by learning about each of these teaching styles and creating small-group lessons in a specific quadrant that best connects to the learning styles of her students. Teaching styles and learning styles that align could lead to great strides in student learning and work completion.

Monroe (2014) continued to state that "proponents for small group instruction examined possible benefits of a small group delivery method and its effectiveness on student achievement" (p. 38). Student achievement within a classroom and student work completion are directly related because students who are not completing their work would also not be achieving high classroom grades. Students who are in a small-group setting and receiving appropriate instruction for their ability level and learning style, are more likely to complete work, which will increase their classroom achievement. Additionally, students who are demonstrating self-monitoring skills in the individual setting are completing their classwork, which increases their classroom achievement (Todd, A. W, Horner, & R. H., Sugai, G., 1999).

Strategies to Help Student Work Completion

On occasion, students are not completing their classwork due to behavioral issues. These students can be helped by using Tier 2 supports for behaviors. Tier 2 supports for behaviors can be one step in helping student work towards completion. Tier 2 supports for behavior can be defined as "students who are in need of additional instruction or supports are identified using

academic and behavioral measures" (Oakes et al., 2011 p. 549). These students have been identified by a teacher and are receiving additional supports to assist in demonstrating appropriate classroom behaviors which would allow for classwork to be completed in place of than behaviors which interrupt the learning experience. By implementing Tier 2 supports to students, teachers can allow for instruction to be structured to best fit students. These structures will allow for students to receive extra supports to complete work to the best of the ability. These Tier 2 supports allow for students to receive the help they need, which would directly influence work completion.

Another example in helping a student's work completion is to work with students who are English Language Learners. Often, these students do not complete classwork due to a lack of understanding or sufficient time. One way to assist these students is to provide "daily small group reading instruction that focus(es) on vocabulary in context and comprehension" (Bolos, 2012 p. 1). This daily instruction will help the English Language Learner acquire the necessary vocabulary to complete classwork activities. Another way to help these students complete classwork is to practice readalouds in the classroom. Bolos states that this strategy aids students in understanding key ideas and "creating a visual or paraphrasing what was read" (p. 3).

Language delays can be a factor in student work completion. Using play skills within a small-group setting can help students with language delays make great strides. According to Sauly (2012), "as play complexity increases, so do language use and vocabulary development" (p. 106). A teacher in a small-group setting can create role playing situations in which students are practicing necessary language skills. This can then connect to classwork experiences, which students with language delays would be more successful in completing the classwork.

Finally, self-monitoring and praise influence student work completion. Todd et al. (1999) stated that, "teaching self- management skills such as self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-recruitment and self-delivery of reinforcement has been associated with improved academic performance" (p. 66). This can be translated to small-group instruction by teaching students these skills. This will initially take time away from content-related instruction, but in turn will allow for students to gain more knowledge and complete their classwork in future lessons. Teachers must commit to teaching and re-teaching these skills, so that when students stop demonstrating these skills, the teacher can revisit the skill and practice it, so that students return to the path of success.

Summary

There are many benefits to small-group instruction. Teachers can reach the students who would normally fall behind during whole-group instruction. Students can ask questions and have them answered. Students who are not part of the small-group instruction at that time are practicing self-monitoring skills and refining other academic skills in an individual setting. Student confidence increases, which in turn increases the work completion of those students in the small-group, as well as the student practicing the self-monitoring skills in the individual setting.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The goal of this research study was to determine the impact of small-group instruction on student on-task behavior.

Design

The study had a pre-experimental design which was a variant of the one-group pre-test post-test in that behaviors were observed during baseline and treatment conditions with a group of students serving as their own controls. Purposive sampling was used to select students with a low rate of work completion among students in the researcher's classroom. The independent variable was whether students were in small group or large group instruction and the dependent variable was the on-task behavior score.

Participants

This research study was conducted in a suburban school on the East Coast. The middle school has an enrollment of about 1,200 students grades sixth through eighth. The students in this school were of multiple races and ethnicities including Hispanic, African American, Caucasian, and Asian. Due to being in a low-income area, there is a 25% mobility rate within this school. Ninety two percent of the students in this school receive Free And Reduced Meal Services (FARMS).

The 9 students were selected from a general education language arts classroom that consisted of 27 students. There were 6 male and 3 female students in this group. None of these students were English Language Learners or receiving of special education services. Six students in this group were African American, and 3 students were Caucasian. The students were selected based on a work completion score based on the number of missing assignments and failed

assignments from the first and second quarters. There were seventeen students remaining in the whole-group setting.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a data collection chart that had the on-task behaviors across the top and the student names down the side. The on-task behaviors that were tracked are:

1. eyes on assignment or teacher or other classmates if that is appropriate to the situation

2. visibly appear to be working on a task if appropriate (e.g., pencil to paper; head in book)

3. refraining from off task conversation when they are supposed to be listening, either to a teacher or other student in a discussion

4. refraining from any behavior that is obviously off task

5. raising hand to participate if appropriate

6. contributing to appropriate classroom discussion (e.g., answering question posed by teacher, volunteering relevant information, contributing to a group discussion)

This was used to collect data through time sampling using 10-minute intervals within a 65 minute class over the course of 20 school days for a total possible score of 60 points per class period. The data was collected at the end of the 10 minutes, awarding a point, or "1", for students who demonstrated on-task behavior for the majority of the time within the 10 minute period for behaviors one through four. For behaviors five and six, they were awarded a point for raising their hand and contributing based on the researcher's impression as to whether the amount of hand raising and contribution to discuss were appropriate to the situation. The on-task behavior points earned over the 10 school days under each condition (prorated for student absences) were

added together to produce the on-task behavior score. At the end of each day, the recordings for on and off task behavior for each criterion were totaled. Under each condition, the maximum number of points available was 600. There is no reliability or validity information for this instrument.

Procedure

The researcher gathered data in a sixth grade language arts general education class. The first two weeks allowed for baseline data to be collected on the pre-determined students in the sample group. The students were selected based on a work completion score based on number of missing assignments and failed assignments from the first and second quarters. During the second two weeks, the participants were in a small group. During this time, the nine students engaged in the same lesson as the students remaining in the whole group but were in a separate classroom. The researcher led the lessons during the whole group baseline period and during the small group intervention period. The co-teacher taught the whole group during the intervention period. The types of learning activities, independent and collaborative, were similar during baseline and treatment conditions.

Over the course of 4 weeks, student on-task behavior was recorded on the data collection sheet by this researcher. The small-group instruction was introduced the third week of the study. The study ran from March 12-16, 2018 and March 19-23, 2018 for whole-group instruction. The study ran March 27, 2018, April 3-6, 2018, and April 9-13, 2018 for small-group instruction.

The On-Task Behavior scores were prorated to adjust for absences. The On-Task Behavior scores per student under the two conditions were compared by a non-independent samples t-test.

RESULTS

This study was designed to focus on the effects of small group instruction on student on-task behavior/work completion among students with a history of not turning in assignments and failing assignments. This study consisted of 9 general education students who, during baseline, were within a larger class of 27 students and during the intervention were in a group of 9 for their daily language arts instruction. The total number of possible points under each condition was 600. The mean on-task behavior scores, prorated for absences, did not differ significantly in the baseline (Mean = 274.11, SD = 42.23) and intervention (Mean = 277.00, SD = 62.13) conditions [t (8) = 0.23, p = .82]. Please See Table 1. Consequently, the null hypothesis, that there will be no statistically significant difference in on-task behavior scores among students in a sixth-grade co-taught general education class when they are taught in a small-group setting as opposed to a whole-group setting, failed to be rejected.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-test Results for On-Task Behavior Scores

Condition	Means	Standard Deviations	t-statistic
Baseline	274.11	42.23	0.23 (NS)
Intervention	277.00	62.13	
Notes: N = 9 NS = non-significant at $p \leq .05$			

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to see if there was a difference in sixth grade student on-task behavior in a small group versus a whole group. The null hypothesis, that there would be no statistical significant difference in on-task behavior scores among students in a sixth-grade co-taught general education class when they are taught in a small-group setting as opposed to a whole-group setting, failed to be rejected.

Implications of Results

The results of this study showed that small group instruction does not necessarily lead to more on-task behavior or higher work completion. Most students in the sample performed similarly in the whole group as they did in the small group. For example, during the whole group, student attitudes toward school work were negative; students would complain about completing the work when it was an independent assignment, and would often engage in off-task conversation during partner assignments. These attitudes did not change during the small group lessons. The expectations for the students in the small group setting remained the same – students were to complete their work and remain on-task during the lesson.

These findings are important because many programs suggest using the strategy of small group instruction when possible to allow for more one-on-one instruction and supports. The general education students in this study did not increase on-task behaviors with the opportunity of small group instruction. However, it is important to note, as will be discussed in the validity section, that the students had gone from a large group with two teachers to a small group with one teacher. During the whole group instruction, the co-teacher worked as an assistant to guide and redirect students when necessary. The co-teacher's function was solely to prompt students

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when necessary. The ability to prompt students in the whole group setting was similar to the ability of the researcher to prompt students in the small group setting. Thus, the current results do not suggest that it will increase work completion by breaking down a larger group into a smaller group and moving them to a different classroom if the student-teacher ratio remains the same, particularly if the amount of teacher efforts to keep children on task remains similar.

Although for many students the intervention did not make an observable difference in behavior and there was no difference in on-task behavior scores, there were some students that benefitted. There were many Tier 2 behavior supports in the small group including frequent breaks, re-focusing in the responsible thinking classroom, and administration intervention, if necessary. For some students, these supports helped them refocus on learning and return to the small group when ready due to a lesser number of students to cause distractions to the learning environment.

Theoretical Consequences

According to Ledford (2012) students learn best during small group direct instruction. Direct instruction is defined as, "instruction involving only an educator and a student (1:1)" (Ledford, 2012, p. 413). The Ledford study showed that a small group setting allows for an increased instructional time and can allow for students to engage in observational learning. This study did not show an increase in instructional time, rather it showed no change in student on-task behaviors. Consequently, it does not support the theory that a smaller group size in and of itself promotes increased instructional time.

The results of this study are also relevant to theories about the importance of Tier 2 behavior supports, which are discussed by Oakes, W. and Oakes, W. P. (2011). Behavior supports were abundant during this study. The students selected for the sample demonstrated chronic disruptive

behaviors ranging from refusing to work to walking out of class or yelling at other students across the classroom. Focusing on carefully implementing Tier 2 behavior supports was an intricate component of this study. As noted in the implications section, observational data suggested that some students benefitted from the Tier 2 behavior supports; however, current results suggest that Tier 2 supports may be insufficient to create widespread change in the classroom, particularly in terms of on-task behavior.

Threats to the Validity

Instrumentation was a threat to the internal validity of the study. Although this researcher tried to define objectively the behaviors for the ratings, there was still some subjectivity in determining ratings for some categories which impacts the reliability and validity of the instrument. Subjectivity in ratings is of particular concern because of the risk of experimenter bias effect, which is a threat to external validity, since the researcher was the one completing the ratings.

Another threat to internal validity was the space in which the small group was situated. This study had students working away from the regular classroom, but in a common area of the building which had traffic passing through during the class period. This likely increased the distractions to students and consequently interfered with the effectiveness of the intervention in improving on-task behavior.

There are many factors impacting external validity. The baseline data was gathered in a co-taught classroom with two general educators in which this researcher led instruction while the co-teacher circulated around the room and encouraged students to stay on task. This changed when the small group instruction began. The researcher continued to lead the lesson in the small group, but there was no longer an additional teacher who could focus on prompting students to

stay on task. There may have been a reactive arrangement in which students responded to the change in class structure for reasons other than being in a small group. More importantly, this aspect of the design influences the extent to which these findings can be generalized because the outcomes may have been different if there had been more of a change in student to teacher ratio.

There are limitations as to how these results can be generalized. These results can be generalized to general education middle school students and students with a history of poor work completion. These students can be students who struggle with completing their work for a magnitude of reasons, and these students can have created a pattern of poor work completion that can be very difficult to break. These students can be students who, no matter what the intervention, they will not change their behaviors to focus on classwork, unlike more motivated students who could refocus in a smaller group with less distractions and complete classwork.

Another threat to the validity was the length of the study. This study was brief with 2 weeks of baseline data and 2 weeks of intervention. This short timeline may have created a barrier in identifying an effective intervention.

Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature

There has not been much research on the influence of small group instruction on on-task behavior in the general education setting. However, this study can connect to research like Reynolds (2010) which focused on the transition to teaching in a small group setting within a classroom. This was a change in the delivery of instruction for the researcher. The school administration decided to provide a certified general education co-teacher to the classroom and this researcher had not considered small group instruction until the master schedule had been released. Therefore, like in the Reynolds (2010) study, the researcher had to learn to become comfortable with the small group versus the whole group.

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Implications for Future Research

Based on the results of this study, more research should be done on best practices for whole group instruction of general education students. Often, research is conducted for students who are identified as students with disabilities or enriched students, but there is a lack of research on the best practices for students who are in the general education classroom. Future research could examine strategies for making movement into smaller groups, such as enrichment settings, more effective.

Future research could also evaluate interventions for children with multiple chronic behaviors when placed in small group settings. Often, students are held back from their best potential because they are demonstrating chronic disruptive behaviors or they are distracted by other students in the classroom demonstrating these behaviors. In a small group setting, it is possible that interventions could be more intensive.

Future research could conduct a similar study, but with a longer timeline. A longer intervention period would allow for routines and procedures to be established and there may have been less of a reactivity effect

One of the areas to study when determining the effectiveness of small group instruction would be the level of student work completion. Students often appear to be on-task by looking at their book or raising their hand and creating a general answer, but the level of work completion offers an additional look at the actual time on-task.

Another area to study would be the student to teacher ratio in the whole group versus the small group. This study had 2 teachers in the whole group and 1 teacher in the small group, with a similar ratio in each. Having a lower student to teacher ratio in the small group could offer different results.

Summary

This study compared the on-task behavior of students in a sixth-grade general education language arts class with a history of low work completion when they were in a large group setting with two teachers to when they were in a small group setting with one teacher. Under these circumstances, there was no significant difference in on-task behavior. Researcher observations suggested that although general education students in a small group setting can get individual supports and redirections, some students in the small group setting took this as an opportunity to demonstrate the same chronic disruptive behaviors as they did in the whole group, while others were able to refocus on learning after breaks and prompts. Although shifting to instruction within a small group was not efficient in the current study to increase on-task behavior, it is imperative that research continue to examine strategies to improve on-task behavior and work completion among general education students, as there is a lack of information on how to best serve the general population.

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