Effects of Behavior Specific Praise on Disruptive Behaviors

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Problem</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Definitions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Review of the Literature</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Important for Young Learners</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Teachers Affect Student Behaviors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Positive Reinforcement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Methods</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Results</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Discussion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications of Results</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theoretical Implications of the Research 16
Threats to Validity 16
Connections to Previous Studies 17
Implications for Further Research 18
Summary 19
References 20
List of Tables

1. Table 1. *Frequency Data for Disruptive Behavior during Daily Activities and Behavior Specific Praise*  
   12

2. Table 2. *Means, Standard Deviations, and t-statistic for Disruptive Behaviors During Baseline and Behavior Specific Praise Intervention*  
   13
Abstract

This research examines how the use of a positive reinforcement strategy, behavior specific praise, affects the frequency of disruptions in a virtual classroom of fifteen pre-kindergarten students. This study used a single variable pre-experimental design that involved a group pretest and a posttest design. Both the baseline period and intervention period were three days long. The intervention increased the use of behavior specific praise used by the teacher. The teacher used behavior specific praise each time a student properly used their microphone to participate. A non-independent samples t-test was conducted with the independent variable being behavior specific praise and the dependent variable being frequency of disruptions. The number of disruptive behaviors per child was prorated to adjust for absences. The mean frequency of disruptive behaviors per child during baseline (Mean = 3.53, SD = 3.60) was significantly higher than the mean frequency of disruptive behaviors per child during the intervention (Mean = 1.47, SD = 1.55) [t(14) = 2.49, p = .026]. Consequently, the null hypothesis that there would be no statistically significant difference in the frequency of disruptive student behaviors between baseline and during an intervention phase implementing behavior specific praise among pre-kindergarten students was rejected. Implications and ideas for future research are discussed.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Early childhood teachers face a myriad of unwanted student behaviors. Students are adjusting to a new environment with new rules, routines, and procedures. The first months of school are spent reinforcing classroom rules and expectations. It is a huge adjustment for most children, especially if they have not been in any other environment but their homes. There is an endless list of strategies that teachers can use to teach students appropriate behaviors. Teachers can respond negatively or positively to students’ behavior. Responding negatively was a common occurrence in classrooms. However, research shows that negative responses from teachers can increase students’ unwanted behaviors instead of decreasing the behaviors. Today, research suggests educators use positive reinforcement in their classroom management system to encourage and teach appropriate behaviors (Gable et al., 2009).

Praise is a common type of positive reinforcement that classroom teachers use. Teachers give students a general statement of approval. It is an extremely simple and effective way to motivate students to demonstrate wanted behaviors. Praise in the classroom could be the teacher saying, “Good job!” However, research has shown that praise can be more effective when it is specific to the behavior that was displayed; for example, a teacher could say, “Good job raising your hand!” By rewarding the student with praise and identifying the specific behavior that caused the reward, the student will be more likely to raise his/her hand. There is evidence of behavior specific praise resulting in more on-task student behavior (Floress et al., 2017).

As an early childhood educator, this researcher has experienced the tiring first couple months of school, weeks spent correcting behaviors that are often corrected by the time students
reach the primary grades. Often, children that have a hard time adjusting to pre-kindergarten during the first marking period of the year have behavioral problems throughout the year and often throughout kindergarten. Having experienced positive results using positive reinforcement and behavior specific praise, the researcher was interested in the effect of using behavior specific praise to correct disruptive behaviors.

**Statement of Problem**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of behavior specific praise on disruptive student behaviors in a pre-kindergarten class.

**Hypothesis**

The null hypothesis is that there will be no statistically significant effect on the difference in the frequency occurrence of disruptive student behaviors between baseline and during an intervention phase in which children receive behavior specific praise among pre-kindergarten students.

**Operational Definitions**

**Positive reinforcement** is the positive reward for a behavior. The purpose of this positive reward is to teach, maintain, or increase expected student behaviors (Duncan et al., 2000).

**Behavior specific praise** is a statement of approval that identifies a specific characteristic that was demonstrated by the student. Like general praise, students are more likely to benefit when it is given immediately after a behavior (Floress et. al., 2017).

**Disruptive behaviors** are behaviors that interrupt or stop the teacher’s instruction. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, instruction was virtual. Disruptive behavior will be defined as students turning on their microphones without raising their hand or getting permission from the teacher to turn on their microphones.
Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

Students come into classrooms from all different types of environments and backgrounds. In the classroom, this vast array of different environments and child rearing practices that mold children can result in a wide range of behaviors when they come into the school setting. As a result, teachers are having to manage more students demonstrating unwanted behaviors in the classroom. Schools are having to hire trained staff to work on behavioral teams to manage and mediate extreme disruptive student behaviors. These unwanted behaviors in children can lead to social and academic problems.

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the importance of behavior management and how teachers can affect student behaviors. Section one discusses the importance of teaching students appropriate behaviors at a young age. Section two explores how teacher behaviors and practices affect student behavior. The last section will discuss the effects of teachers using positive reinforcement in their classrooms.

The Importance of Behavior Management for Young Learners

Teachers spend a majority of the beginning of the year teaching classroom rules and expected student behaviors. This is especially true in early childhood classrooms when students are coming to school for the first time. Being the first school experience, young children can come into the early childhood grades displaying disruptive and unwanted behaviors. Typically, children with extreme behavioral problems often begin having difficulties during their preschool years (Stormont et al., 2005). There are a multitude of factors and combinations of factors that increase a child’s chances of showing unwanted behaviors. Research has shown that some
biological factors include being born at a premature weight and having developmental delays. There are also environmental factors like the student’s family environment or family adversity, such as, poverty, and family stress levels (Fox et al., 2002).

There are a wide range of behaviors that can be considered disruptive or unwanted. It is important to address these issues when students are young. If problem behaviors persist, they can evolve into extensive tantrums, self-inflicted injuries, or destruction of property (Fox et al., 2002). Disruptive behavior can affect the other students in the classroom as well. When teachers have to spend time managing disruptive behaviors, instructional time is lost (Whipple, 2014). Children displaying disruptive behaviors can endanger themselves, others, and disrupt the learning environment.

Children with behavioral problems often have difficulties in other areas as well. These children often face social challenges and can experience peer rejection. In addition, children can develop antisocial behavior problems (Stormont et al., 2005). The child’s behavior can lead families to avoid social gatherings, limiting the child’s social experiences (Fox et al., 2002). Learning appropriate social skills can impact a child’s life long term.

These problems continue as children get older. Research shows that young children that have behavioral problems that do not correct or learn adaptive behavior are extremely unlikely to be successful if supports are not used by third grade (Stormont et al., 2005). These behavioral issues are often maintained or intensified as the child progresses into other grades.

**How Teachers Affect Student Behaviors**

Education is a conduit to new social experiences and expectations. Individuals’ personalities are shaped greatly by their educational experience. Part of this is due to teacher behavior and the content that is taught to their students (Yasseen, 2010). Teachers can facilitate
and encourage students to behave appropriately. Teachers can encourage appropriate behaviors, as well as model and communicate what behaviors are acceptable in the classroom. It is important for teachers to encourage and model appropriate behaviors for students because behavioral expectations learned in early childhood classrooms can be applied to school settings and non-school settings (Fox et. al., 2002).

Teachers’ behaviors can greatly affect students’ behaviors in the classroom (Kennedy & Jolivette, 2008). Yasseen (2010) quoted O’leary and O’leary: “the way teachers attend to their pupils determine in large measures, what the children will do” (p.48 ). Just like parents, teachers have different behavioral management strategies and styles. Students can react differently to these different teachers’ mannerisms and behaviors. Teachers can encourage correct behavior or react negatively to unwanted behaviors; this all influences how the student will behave. In a study of how teachers’ behaviors affect students’ behaviors, researcher Bassam Yasseen (2010) found that when there is a high level of teacher behavior such as, rewarding students verbally and nonverbally, there is a high level of student behavior. Yasseen observed students following teacher directions, raising their hand to participate, and seeming more energetic than when there were low levels of teacher behaviors observed in the classroom.

The classroom rules and routines are set by the teacher. He or she has control of determining how behaviors are managed and the routines for that management. This creates the tone of the learning environment and can affect how the students behave (Yasseen, 2010). To set the classroom tone, teachers create a list of expected behaviors for students to follow when they are in the school building. By creating a set of rules and expectations, teachers show students how to be responsible for their own behavior. Along with rules, teachers establish behavioral
routines and procedures. This helps mitigate disruptive behavior before they occur by addressing any confusions students may have (Gable et al., 2009).

**Purpose of Positive Reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement is the positive reward for a behavior. The purpose of this positive reward is to teach, maintain, or increase expected student behaviors (Duncan et al., 2000). An example of this would be if a student raises his/her hand instead of calling out, and the teacher praises the student for raising his or her hand. The positive reinforcement would be the praise as a reward for behaving appropriately. The wanted outcome would be that the student will raise his or her hand instead of calling out in the future. There are many different types of positive reinforcement that teachers can use in the classroom. Teachers can implement positive stated rules and expectations or use positive behavior tickets (Simonsen et. al., 2008).

The way teachers react to students’ behaviors can impact students negatively or positively. Negative reactions from teachers often lead students to engage in more disruptive behaviors. Reprimanding students has been shown to have an immediate effect on student behavior but does not alleviate the unwanted behavior in the future (Gable et. al., 2009). Contrastingly, positive reinforcement has been shown to greatly influence the occurrence of appropriate behaviors in the classroom (Kennedy & Jolivette, 2008).

Along with increasing the frequency of expected student behaviors, using positive reinforcement can create a better relationship between students and teachers as well as create a more supportive learning environment (Gale et. al., 2009). The systematic use of positive reinforcement is centered around creating an environment that students can succeed in (Menendez et. al., 2008). Students should feel as if they are in a safe environment in the classroom. They should trust that their teachers are there to help and to help them succeed.
Students that feel comfortable in school and with their teachers may be more likely to participate in classroom discussions and activities. Positive reinforcement can lead to students participating more academically (Yasseen, 2010).

A type of positive reinforcement is providing positive behavior specific praise. This is when teachers give students a statement of approval for a specific behavior. In a study conducted by Rebecca Beckner (2007), when teachers used more positive feedback instead of reprimands with students, an increase of on-task behavior was shown in students during whole group activities. Beckner observed and recorded data on four students during the intervention that involved teachers using positive and specific feedback. All students showed increasing levels of on-task behavior during the intervention with one student’s trend leveling off.

**Conclusion**

Learning appropriate behaviors is crucial during a child’s early years, especially the first couple of years in a school setting. If children who display disruptive or unwanted behaviors do not learn appropriate behaviors early on, unwanted behaviors can become more frequent and escalate as the child progresses into higher grades. Teachers play an important role in helping these children learn appropriate behaviors, especially at school. The way in which a teacher responds to student behavior is crucial. Teachers can respond positively or negatively to a child displaying unwanted behavior. This response from the teacher can greatly impact the frequency of these unwanted behaviors. Positive reinforcement has been shown to decrease unwanted student behaviors and increase student engagement and participation in classroom activities. Teachers can use a specific type of reinforcement, called behavior specific praise, to decrease unwanted student behaviors and increase on task behavior.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

This study examined the impact of behavior specific praise, a positive reinforcement strategy, on disruptive behaviors. The objective of this study was to determine if behavior specific praise would affect the frequency of disruptive behavior in a virtual pre-kindergarten classroom.

Design

This study used a single variable pre-experimental design that involved a group pretest and a posttest design. Baseline data on the frequency of disruptions was collected, and then the behavior specific praise was implemented. Baseline and intervention periods lasted 3 days. The posttest data was collected during the intervention. In this study, the independent variable was whether the teacher consistently used behavior specific praise, and the dependent variable was the number of disruptive behaviors during class per student.

Due to the school’s scheduled hybrid learning date, the researcher had a short and limited time to collect data while the students were still virtual. Affecting the already limited time were unexpected snow days and asynchronous learning days that prevented the researcher from collecting data. The researcher did not want to collect data after the transition to hybrid learning due to many changing variables in students’ routines and environment that could affect the occurrence of disruptive behaviors. Consequently, the baseline and intervention periods were brief.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used for the study. The participants were pre-kindergarten students in the researcher’s class. The public Title 1 school, which reflects a high frequency of
students receiving free or reduced lunch, is in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The school has approximately 846 students. The demographic makeup of the students are as follows: 27.9% African American, 6.8% Asian, 30.4% Caucasian, 25.1% Hispanic, 8.7% Multiracial, 53/3% male, and 46.7% female. 50.6% of students receive free or reduced meals. About 9% of students receive special education services. 17.8% of students are English language learners.

There were fifteen student participants in this study. The demographics of this group were as follows: eight African American, one Asian American, three Caucasian, and three Hispanic American. Four students had individualized education plans and received special education services. Eight students were female, and seven students were male.

**Instrument**

A form created by the researcher was used to collect both the pretest and posttest data. For each two-hour class, the researcher recorded each time a student performed a disruptive behavior. For qualitative information, the researcher also recorded the time at which the disruption occurred. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the virtual school setting, disruptive behavior has been defined as a student turning on his or her microphone without raising his or her hand and/or getting permission from the teacher first.

**Procedure**

The researcher collected data in a half day pre-kindergarten classroom. Baseline data was collected during each class for three days. The data was not collected in three consecutive classes due to a snow day and the weekend. During the data collection, students participated in a lesson each day that included teacher-led instruction, whole group activities, and independent work. The researcher recorded on the form each time a student was disruptive during the entire span of the two-hour classes.
Prior to the behavior specific praise intervention, when students interrupted, the researcher would remind students of the expectations. The researcher would hold up a picture of the microphone icon when it was off and remind students that they have to wait their turn before they turn on their microphone. Students were also reminded that it is kind to wait until it is one’s turn to share to turn on the microphone. The researcher would use behavior specific praise when students turned on their microphones occasionally throughout the year, but it was not consistent or used to praise the whole class.

For the intervention period, the researcher had decided to use behavior specific praise as the positive reinforcement strategy due to the virtual setting of students. The researcher would give behavior specific praises to students who turned on their microphone after receiving permission by the teacher. For example, the teacher would say, “I love that you waited for your turn to turn on your microphone! Great job!”

The researcher also gave whole group behavior specific praise. After an activity or teacher-led lesson, the researcher would praise the whole class if everyone waited to turn on their microphones. For example, “Wow during our letter job, EVERYONE in our class waited their turn to turn on their microphone! Fantastic job, pre-k!” Each activity or teacher-led lesson was about fifteen to twenty minutes long.

During the intervention sessions students participated in a lesson each day that included teacher-led instruction, whole group activities, and independent work. Each of those activities would be about fifteen to twenty minutes long. The researcher used behavior specific praise when students turned on their microphones at appropriate times. In addition, after each activity or lesson (about every fifteen to twenty minutes), the teacher would use behavior specific praise
for the whole class if every student used their microphones at the appropriate times during the duration of the lesson/activity.

The frequency of disruptive behaviors was prorated for students that had absences. The mean frequency of disruptive behaviors per student during baseline and intervention periods was compared using a non-independent samples t-test. The timing of disruptive behavior within the class period was considered qualitatively.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study examined the effects of using the positive reinforcement strategy, behavior specific praise, on the frequency of classroom disruptions in a virtual half-day pre-kindergarten classroom. Disruptions were defined as students turning on their microphone without being called on. The researcher used behavior specific praise when students participated appropriately by waiting for the teacher to call on them to turn on their microphone. Behavior specific praise was also used to reward the whole class for participating appropriately after each activity or lesson. The researcher recorded the amount of disruptions by each student during the baseline and intervention period. For qualitative data, the researcher recorded the time that each disruption occurred.

As the frequency data shows in Table 1, the interruptions were frequent in the beginning of the day during opening routines. During baseline data collection, disruptions started quickly after class would start. During the intervention, interruptions during the opening routines decreased significantly and the interruptions would start much later than they did during baseline data collection. Interruptions during closing procedures occurred daily during the baseline data collection as well. However, during the intervention period, there were zero interruptions during closing procedures.

Table 1

*Frequency Data for Disruptive Behavior during Daily Activities and Behavior Specific Praise*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Baseline Disruptions</th>
<th>Intervention Disruptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening Routines</td>
<td>1:00 PM-1:35 PM</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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</table>
A non-independent samples t-test was conducted with the independent variable being behavior specific praise and the dependent variable being frequency of disruptions. The number of disruptive behaviors per child was prorated to adjust for absences. The mean frequency of disruptive behaviors per child during baseline (Mean = 3.53, SD = 3.60) was significantly higher than the mean frequency of disruptive behaviors per child during the intervention (Mean = 1.47, SD = 1.55) [t(14) = 2.49, p = .026]. Please see Table 2. Consequently, the null hypothesis that there will be no statistically significant difference in the frequency of disruptive student behaviors between baseline and during an intervention phase implementing behavior specific praise among pre-kindergarten students was rejected.

**Table 2**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and t-statistic for Disruptive Behaviors During Baseline and Behavior Specific Praise Intervention*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-statistic</th>
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<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>2.49 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td></td>
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N = 15  
* Significant at p ≤ .05
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine if the positive reinforcement strategy, behavior specific praise, has a significant impact on the frequency of disruptions in a virtual pre-kindergarten classroom. The study found that the number of disruptive behaviors were significantly lower during the intervention period than during the baseline data collection. The null hypothesis that there would be no significant impact on the frequency of disruptions during the intervention period was rejected.

Implication of Results

The data collected from this study indicated that increasing behavior specific praise will decrease the frequency of disruptive behaviors in a virtual pre-kindergarten classroom. The use of behavior specific praise impacted the amount of instructional time, student engagement, and created a more positive classroom environment.

Before the study behavior specific praise was not used to correct disruptions; rather the teacher would remind students of what the correct behavior was. During the baseline data collection, the teacher continued to remind students to raise their hand and to keep their microphones off until they were called on. Students that did demonstrate the correct behavior were acknowledged with individual positive praise, but it was not consistent. During the intervention period, students were praised for following the proper procedure to share during class. After a lesson or activity, the whole class was praised for keeping their microphones off until they were called on.

During the intervention, students were raising their hand more to participate. They seemed more engaged and focused during the intervention period. After receiving individual
praise, students would be visibly happy. They smiled or would raise their arms up to cheer for themselves for doing a good job. They would also smile and cheer when the whole class received a compliment for using their microphones correctly. There was a sense of teamwork and unity among the students when they were all praised as a whole class. It was clear that the students enjoyed the behavior specific praise, and the data shows that they adjusted their behavior to receive it. This created a more positive and warmer classroom atmosphere.

The researcher noticed instructional benefits of using behavior specific praise during the intervention period. Instruction went more smoothly, and the researcher was able to teach more material during the intervention period with there being less disruptions from students. Cheering on the students and rewarding them in a positive way created more positive relationships for the researcher as well. The researcher enjoyed seeing the students feel proud of themselves and celebrate their positive behavior, especially those students who were frequently interrupting during the baseline data. The researcher noticed that she paid closer attention to those students whose name appeared often on the baseline data. Those students were very happy to receive the behavior specific praise. The researcher felt that implementing behavior specific praise was very simple yet very effective.

The study showed that implementing behavior specific praise will decrease the frequencies of interruptions in the classroom. Any teacher in any classroom would be able to implement behavior specific praise to correct unwanted behaviors in various settings and situations. Along with its effectiveness, this positive reinforcement strategy was easy to implement and cost efficient. Teachers do not have to purchase or prepare any materials to use behavior specific praise. It would be helpful for instructional staff to be trained on positive reinforcement and behavior specific praise. Professional developments on positive reinforcement
and ways to use behavior specific praise throughout the school year could help this strategy to be the most effective in schools and classrooms.

**Theoretical Implications of the Research**

Many studies have been done on positive reinforcement and praise as effective strategies to teach and maintain appropriate student behaviors in the classroom. This study gives evidence that when teachers use behavior specific praise, students are more likely to demonstrate the appropriate behaviors that they were praised for. The positive feedback for a specific behavior created an enjoyable experience for students that increased the frequency of them demonstrating that specific behavior. This supports a study from 2009 that shows early childhood teachers use of specific praise increased students’ compliance and engagement. By providing praise immediately follow an appropriate behavior, children who enjoy praise will be more likely to demonstrate those appropriate behaviors in the future (Fullerton et. al., 2009).

**Threats to Validity**

This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020-2021 school year was virtual from September 2020 to March 2021. The school system began to prepare for hybrid learning in February 2021, leaving a small window of time for data to be collected for this study. Hybrid learning would involve students coming into school, and the researcher teaching in-person and virtual students simultaneously. The researcher did not want to have data from a virtual setting as well as a hybrid setting. There would be many variables that would be changing that could affect the data, so the data had to be collected in the last two weeks of February before hybrid instruction began in March. Wednesdays would not be included in the data collection because classes ended early on Wednesdays. This short time duration affects the extent to which the results could be generalized; it is possible the positive
effects of the intervention may have worn off once it was no longer novel. This is a threat to external validity.

During the short two weeks of data collection, there was Presidents’ Day, a snow day, and an unplanned asynchronous day (a day with no live instruction). The data collection started on a Tuesday after a three-day weekend for Presidents’ Day and was interrupted by a snow day. The disrupted school schedule can cause students to feel out of routine and impact behaviors in the classroom. This is a threat to internal validity.

Another threat to validity is the sample size of students. The study included a small group of fifteen pre-kindergarten students. The low number of participants in this study increases the chance that the general population was not represented; therefore, the small number of participants could make the results of the study ungeneralizable to the population. This is a threat to external validity.

The researcher was collecting data on all fifteen students during the baseline and intervention periods. Disruptions were recorded as they occurred during instruction. Due to the number of students and the researcher teaching while recording disruptions, errors could have occurred during data collection. This is a threat to internal validity.

Connections to Previous Studies

In a study conducted by Fullerton et al. (2009), researchers looked at the effect of training teachers to use specific praise to address problem student behaviors in the classroom. Four early childhood teachers and four children (a teacher and child pair was established) who demonstrated problem behaviors were participants in the study. The study measured the frequency of teacher praise, both specific and nonspecific, and recorded data on the children’s behaviors, engagement, and compliance.
According to Fullerton et al. (2009), during the baseline period, teacher and child behaviors were observed and recorded during a targeted transition activity. Baseline data was collected for five minutes for a minimum of three sessions per week until a stable baseline occurred. The procedure was repeated for each teacher and child pair. After the baseline was established, each teacher received 1.5 hours of individual training on using behavior specific praise. At the end of the training, teachers came up with behavior specific praises that they could use during the targeted transition period. The phrases were written on index cards and posted in a visible area for the teacher to refer to during the transition period. The same procedure for the baseline period was used during the intervention period. The researchers found that all four of the teachers’ behaviors all showed a significant increase in the use of behavior specific praise, and all four of the children showed an increase in compliant responses.

During the current research, the teacher’s use of behavior specific praise for classroom disruptions was much lower than the intervention period; however, unlike the research done by Fullerton et. al., the teacher received no formal training on behavior specific praise. Both studies showed that behavior specific praise increases the compliance of early childhood students in the classroom and decreases unwanted student behaviors.

**Implications for Future Research**

Future research could vary greatly from this current study, considering the study had taken place during a global pandemic. Future research could take place in a physical classroom rather than a virtual classroom. The definition of disruption would have to be modified to fit the physical classroom.

Due to the pandemic and the switch to hybrid learning, the current study had a short window of time to collect the baseline data and the intervention data. A future study could be
conducted over a longer period to well establish a baseline. In addition to well establishing a baseline, if future researchers collected data over a longer period, they could see the intervention continues to be effective. A future study could also consider decreasing the frequency of behavior specific praise after a certain amount of time and see what impact it has on disruptions.

Another factor to consider for future research would be the sample of students. This study used convenience sampling, so the number of participants was small and were all in the same grade level. Using a larger group of participants could ensure a better representation of the population, making the results more generalizable. A future study could also include students of different grade levels to see if the effectiveness is increased or decreased as students get older.

Summary

The results of this study showed that the use of behavior specific praise can significantly decrease the frequency of disruptive calling out behaviors of pre-kindergarten students during virtual instruction. Disruptions can impact the classroom environment and instructional flow. Educators need to know how to manage disruptive behaviors because that increases students’ on task behavior and creates a positive experience for students. Using behavior specific praise as a positive reinforcement strategy can decrease the frequency of classroom interruptions and create a positive learning environment for students.
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