Effects of Choice Versus Task Preference on Students with Behavioral Problems

Jean A. McGrath
Eastern Illinois University
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Effects of Choice Versus Task Preference on Students with Behavioral Problems

BY

Jean A. McGrath

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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Effects of Choice Versus Task Preference on Students With Behavioral Problems

Jean A. McGrath

Eastern Illinois University
Abstract

This study compared the effects of choice and assignment of preferred academic tasks on disruptive behaviors and task engagement within the regular education classroom. Two first grade students, identified by their teacher for frequent off-task and disruptive behaviors, participated in this study. After formally assessing academic task preferences, a multielement design was used to evaluate three conditions: (a) assigning a non-preferred academic task, (b) assigning a preferred academic task, (c) providing a choice of academic tasks. Results indicated that both assignment of a preferred task and provision of a choice in tasks had minimal effects on disruptive behavior and task engagement for these students. Levels of task engagement and disruptive behavior were observed to be inconsistent across sessions in all conditions. Possible causes for the erratic data, as well as future directions to support this line of research are discussed.
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction and Review of Literature</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Methodology</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Participants and Setting</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Response Measurement</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Tasks and Materials</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Preference Assessment</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Experimental Conditions</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Procedure</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Results</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Task Engagement</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Problem Behaviors</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Peer Comparisons</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Discussion</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. References</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Figures</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Appendices</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Consent to Participate</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Debriefing Statement to Parents of Participants</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Figure 1: CH Task Engagement</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Figure 2: CH Problem Behaviors: Motor Off-Task</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Figure 3: CH Problem Behaviors: Verbal Off-Task</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Figure 4: CH Problem Behaviors: Passive Off-Task</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Figure 5: AP Task Engagement</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Figure 6: AP Problem Behaviors: Motor Off-Task</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Figure 7: AP Problem Behaviors: Verbal Off-Task</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. Figure 8: AP Problem Behaviors: Passive Off-Task</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction and Review of Literature

Students with emotional and behavioral problems frequently display patterns of behaviors that do not work within the rules and regulations of the classroom. Disruptive behavior within the classroom setting is predictive of less academic engagement time, lower grades, and poor performance on standardized tests (Stage and Quiroz, 1997). As a result, behavior management programs have been implemented, focusing on the manipulation of consequences through token or point rewards for good behavior (Dunlap, DePerczel et al., 1994). In response to findings that these programs are ineffective in controlling some students' behaviors, researchers have started to explore the possibility of effective approaches that seek to prevent, rather than suppress poor behaviors in the classroom. These strategies attempt to change the student's environment by altering curriculum. Using functional assessment, interventions are designed to be more responsive to the individual students, rather than focusing on a general means of controlling behaviors (Dunlap et al., 1994). Functional assessment, according to Hergenhahn and Olson, is "the investigation of how certain stimuli and certain responses vary together" (1997). By manipulating certain stimuli, functional assessment is concerned with how their manipulation affects the behaviors of the individual. Research using this method of functional assessment has been emphasized as a means of controlling disruptive behaviors and increasing task engagement in the classroom.

Iwata, Dorsey, Slifer, Bauman, and Richman (1994) suggest that an individual's avoidance of undesirable events may be demonstrated in a number of ways, including an individual's refusal to complete the task or attempt to escape the situation. In these instances, the problem behaviors serve as a negative reinforcement, maintaining the
avoidance of undesirable events (1994). Considering this information within the classroom, undesirable class work may serve as the antecedent that gives rise to the disruptive behavior in the classroom. By altering the antecedents to the behavior rather than the consequences, problem behaviors may be prevented. Therefore, by modifying the aversive event (class work), escape or avoidant behavior (disruption in the classroom to avoid work) will likely decrease.

Much research has explored the altering of the individual student's curriculum through the use of choice and preference in completing tasks. Previous research has shown that allowing students to choose a task or activity leads to better task engagement and lower levels of disruptive behavior in the classroom than when no choice is provided with the same type of assignment (Cole, Davenport, Bambara, and Ager, 1997; Dyer, Dunlap, and Winterling, 1990; Dunlap et al., 1994; Powell and Nelson, 1997). Similarly, research demonstrates that allowing students to engage in preferred activities decreases problem behaviors, while increasing desirable behaviors (Foster-Johnson, Ferro, and Dunlap, 1994; Cooper et.al, 1992; Harding, Wacker, and Berg, 1999).

Foster-Johnson et al. (1994) examined the influence of activity preference on both appropriate and problem behaviors on three individuals with moderate to severe disabilities. These students were identified as displaying problem behaviors that were disruptive to the class routine and reduced the opportunities for learning. These behaviors included inappropriate use of materials, off-task behaviors, and noncompliance.

To determine preference, the teacher identified a pool of five activities consistent with the instructional objective. After the students were presented with each of these
activities, preferences of the activities were determined by three factors. These included the extent to which the student interacted with and manipulated the materials without a teacher prompt, the degree of resistance when the activity was removed, and any initiation toward the materials when they were removed. Each of the activities was rated based on these items, and preferences were assigned to the different activities by averaging these ratings over three days.

Activities identified as highly preferred and non-preferred were presented in a reversal design, alternating between the two conditions. Data were collected from videotapes, using a systematic observation system. Results indicated that all three students demonstrated a higher percentage of problem behaviors during the non-preferred activity than the preferred activity conditions. Similarly, desirable behaviors increased significantly during the preferred activity.

In a similar study performed by Cooper et al. (1992), the effects of task preference were tested in a self-contained special education classroom setting. In this research, task demand (high or low) was examined concurrently with task preference to determine the effects on disruptive behavior and off-task behavior, using two elementary aged boys with mild to moderate disabilities. These students also demonstrated severe off-task or inappropriate behavior during academic activities. Each teacher then identified target behaviors. Using a system of preference assessment similar to Foster-Johnson et al. (1994), math and reading activities were ranked by task demand (high or low) as well as preference for each individual. Results indicated that giving students high preference tasks significantly increased appropriate behaviors while decreasing off-task behaviors.
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When given tasks at the student's instructional level, performance increased when the preferred reading and math activities were assigned.

Further research has gone beyond the identification of task preference as a method of decreasing disruptive behaviors. This research proposes the possibility of students' choice making abilities in reducing these behaviors. Studies have demonstrated that choice making can increase social relatedness and task performance, and decrease levels of disruptive behavior (Dunlap et al., 1994). Because classroom programs for behavioral correction tend to be characterized by high levels of rules and coercion, students with behavioral and emotional difficulties represent a very appropriate group for interventions utilizing choice making in the classroom.

Dyer, Dunlap, and Winterling (1990) explored this line of research by specifically examining the effects of choice making on three children with high levels of disruptive behaviors such as aggression, self-injury, and tantrums. Each of these children was severely developmentally delayed, scoring at an average of 1.5 years on the Vineland adaptive and maturity scales. Three to four educational tasks were identified for each of the students, and were judged by students' teachers to be of about the same preference. Also, used in each session were three to five preferred stimuli used as reinforcers for correct performance on tasks. The teachers also judged these preferred stimuli.

For each child, a choice condition and no-choice condition were presented. For both conditions, the same tasks and reinforcers were presented. In the choice condition, the child was able to choose from the available selection of tasks, and in the no-choice condition, tasks were assigned upon the teacher's initiation and schedule. Results showed
that the choice conditions always produced lower levels of problem behaviors than did the no-choice condition.

Upon further evaluation, however, choice-making opportunities had no effect on the rate of responding on the instructional tasks. According to Green et al., (1988) teachers' selections are not as effective in identifying reinforcers for students as a systematic assessment of preferred stimuli is. Therefore, it is suggested that rate of responding may have been increased if students had picked their own reinforcements for completing a task. However, the provision of choice in task completion had a significant effect on disruptive behaviors for each student.

A similar study, performed by Dunlap et al. (1994) showed the same results. Two eleven-year-old boys referred by their homeroom teachers for inadequate task engagement, inappropriate and aggressive verbal behavior and physical aggression were the participants in this study. These students were enrolled in a self-contained classroom serving children labeled as emotionally handicapped. When these students were given a menu of activities to choose from, it was found that task engagement increased and disruptive behaviors decreased. Task options were developed from the students' weekly twenty word spelling list. The kinds of assignment choices were consistent across weeks, and included activities such as writing the words three times each, creating sentences using the words, writing definitions for the words, and completing worksheets from the spelling textbook. Higher levels of disruptive behaviors were present for both students when the teacher chose the activity for the students to complete from the same activities menu. This suggests, like previous research, that choice-making abilities have a strong
effect on the reduction of disruptive behaviors and also allows for increases in positive task engagement.

Powell and Nelson (1997) showed similar results when extending this research to include children in the regular classroom. In this study, a second grade student diagnosed with ADHD was used. This seven-year-old boy had not been identified as having special education needs and received all instruction in the general education classroom. The student displayed several problem behaviors, including noncompliance, being away from his desk, disturbing others, and off-task behaviors. During the no-choice phase, the student was directed to work on the same task as the rest of the class. In the choice phase, the child was presented with three different language arts assignments taken from the class curriculum, and he chose one to complete. Each of the assignment choices varied in content, but was identical in length and difficulty level. Assignment choices varied and included spelling lists, silent reading assignments, and grammar and punctuation exercises.

Results indicated that compared to no-choice conditions, the student's levels of undesirable behaviors decreased during choice conditions. These results also suggest that choice procedures can be helpful in managing the behaviors of students in general education classrooms as well as special education. This intervention can be applied to these settings with little disruption to the rest of the class.

Previous research has firmly established both choice making and task preference as interventions to control undesirable behaviors and increase those behaviors that are desirable. Several researchers have begun to explore the relation between preference and choice making. The question stands as whether or not choice-making serves as "... an
accurate means of identifying highly preferred stimuli", or perhaps the opportunity for the student to make choices provides the greater benefit than having the teacher provide the student with preferred alternatives (Dunlap et al., 1994). Cole et al., (1994) have questioned whether positive behavior change results from the act of actually choosing or from obtaining the preferred activity. It is a very difficult task to differentiate between the effects of choice making and task preference. The few research studies that have been done concerning this issue have been relatively inconclusive.

Dunlap et al., (1994) attempted to explore the differential effects of choice making and task preference in reducing disruptive behaviors. These researchers studied a five-year-old boy who frequently displayed noncompliance, negative verbalizations, and physical aggression in the classroom. In all sessions of this study, the boy was expected to listen to a story being read by the teacher. In one condition the teacher selected the books to be read, and in another condition, the student selected the books. It was established that when the student was given the choice to select the book, his problem behaviors in the classroom were reduced as compared to the no choice condition.

In the second phase of this study, the books that this student had selected to be read previously were pooled together, and assumed to be his preferred selections. From this selection of books, the student was then given the choice and no-choice conditions in the same manner as before. Results indicated that even in the preferred selections phase, choice conditions had a similar positive effect as in the first phase. In the no-choice condition, very high levels of disruptive behaviors occurred. The researchers concluded that choice making had a much greater effect on behaviors, whereas preference did not show any effects in this study (Dunlap et al., 1994).
Vaughn and Horner (1997) also attempted to explore the differential effects of choice versus preference using five students with moderate to severe intellectual deficits. Each student was nominated by his or her teacher based on the teacher's perceptions that the student engaged in escape-motivated problem behavior during instruction. Similar to Dunlap et al. (1994), task preference was assigned informally. Tasks that were likely to occasion high levels of problem behaviors were considered to be non-preferred. Those tasks that occasioned low levels of problem behaviors were considered to be of higher preference. Students were then given a choice between two lower preference tasks, and two higher preference tasks in each condition, respectively. In a second phase of the study, the teacher chose the task from the high and low preference categories.

This study was consistent with other research indicating that providing the student a choice of task reduces the level of escape-motivated problem behavior by providing the student with a means of avoiding aversive stimuli. However, Vaughn and Horner (1992) also demonstrated a small effect that there were some conditions in which simply choosing the task appeared to reduce both the aversive nature of the lower preference task and the likelihood of escape-motivated problem behavior. They, therefore, concluded that choice has a greater influence in reducing problem behaviors.

Recognizing the need for further investigation concerning this line of research, Cole, Davenport, Bambara, and Ager (1997) attempted to compare the effects of choice and assignment of preferred and non-preferred tasks on the work performance of those students with behavioral disorders. Three boys, ages eleven, twelve, and thirteen, participated in this research. Each of these students attended a university-affiliated lab school for students with emotional/behavioral disorders. Five tasks were selected which
Effects of Choice

included: stapling, sealing envelopes, bagging, pad making, and stuffing folders. In order to assess preference of tasks, a systematic assessment method was used. Students were presented with pairs of the tasks, until all options were exhausted, and were asked which they would like to work on best. Individual task preferences were determined using the last five preference assessment sessions, to avoid possible sampling effects.

Task engagement and disruptive behaviors served as the dependent measures of this study. Participants were exposed to three conditions: being assigned a preferred task, being assigned a non-preferred task, and being provided a choice between preferred and non-preferred tasks. Results indicated that for two students, task engagement was highest under choice conditions and preferred task conditions as well. For the third student, task engagement remained relatively high and stable across all three conditions. For each of these sessions, disruptive behaviors remained consistently low (Cole et al., 1997).

These results conflicted with previous research done by Dunlap et al. (1994), and Vaughn and Horner (1992), finding that choice of tasks resulted in no additional beneficial effects over merely assigning a preferred task. The findings were also surprising in that disruptive behavior remained low and stable over the three different conditions. Similarly, task engagement remained relatively high and stable across all three conditions for one student. This may have been a result of the tasks selected. Perhaps these tasks such as stapling, pad making, and stuffing folders did not present enough challenge and aversion as an academic task would present.

Findings related to choice and preference in previous research were rather inconsistent. These inconclusive findings suggest that further research must be done to determine the differential effects of choice-making and task preference on problem
behaviors and task engagement in the classroom. Dunlap et al. (1994) and Vaughn and Horner (1992) studied the different effects of choice making and preference related to academic tasks using an indirect preference method, which involved determining the child's preference from an outside source, rather than the child's report. Both studies found that choice-making had a much larger effect on behaviors than task preference. Using a systematic preference assessment method on a group of tasks not directly related to academics, in which the child directly and systematically reported his preferred activities, Cole et al. (1997), found no differences in the effects of choice and preference conditions.

In order to test the different effects of choice making and task preference within the classroom setting, using a systematic assessment method to determine the preference of tasks directly related to academics is necessary. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to compare the effects of choice making and task preference concerning academic tasks on problem behavior and task engagement of students in the regular classroom. This was an extension of previous research, as it compared preferred, non-preferred, and choice conditions within the regular classroom, using academic tasks. This study attempted to extend previous research to the general education setting, rather than special education programs.

Considering results of past research, it was predicted that both choice and preference of academic tasks would result in lower levels of problem behaviors and high levels of task engagement than the assignment of the non-preferred academic tasks. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that providing a choice of academic tasks would have a
greater effect on lowering problem behavior and increasing task engagement, more so than assigning a preferred academic task.

**Methodology**

**Participants and Setting.**

One boy (CH) and one girl (AP) were selected by their teacher to participate in this study. These students were in the first grade at an elementary school in a small city in the mid-west. There were twenty-one students in this classroom. AP and CH were chosen to participate based on their problem behaviors and lack of task engagement during independent seatwork time. AP's teacher described her behavior as frequently out of seat, yelling out during seatwork time, and distracting other students by talking out and making noises. The teacher described CH's problem behavior as off-task frequently, participating in daydreaming for extended periods of time, talking out to other students, getting out of seat frequently, and some instances of aggression. Both students attended same regular classroom for the full day.

Because the teacher identified that the children displayed these problem behaviors during independent seatwork time, all sessions took place in their regular classroom while the students worked on language arts assignments independently. This language arts seatwork began every morning at the same time, lasting approximately thirty minutes. Activities that students worked on during this time included spelling practice, grammar, writing, and reading assignments. Each activity was consistent with the first grade language arts curriculum.
Response Measurement.

Two dependent measures were used in this experiment. The first was task engagement, defined as "manipulating materials in a manner required in completing a task, requesting assistance, or receiving feedback from the observer" (Cole et al., 1997). The second dependent measure was problem behavior, defined as the occurrence of off-task behaviors that negatively affect the completion of work. These off-task behaviors were further defined in three categories, which included motor, verbal, and passive off-task behaviors (Shapiro, 1996). Motor off-task behaviors were defined as any instance of motor activities that were not directly associated with an assigned academic task. These included any out of seat behavior, manipulating objects not related to the academic task, physically touching another student, turning or fidgeting around in seat, or bending and reaching around desk. Verbal off-task behaviors were defined as any audible verbalizations that were not related to the academic task. Such behaviors that were included in this category were making any audible sound, such as whistling or humming, talking to another student, calling out answers, or making unauthorized comments or remarks. Finally, passive off-task behaviors were those times when a student was passively not attending to an assigned academic activity for a period of at least three seconds.

Data were collected across 21 consecutive school days at the same time each day. Observations occurred during the independent language arts seatwork period that lasted approximately 30 minutes each day. Task engagement and problem behaviors were recorded using the Behavioral Observations of Students in Schools System (B.O.S.S.) (Shapiro, 1996). This tool allowed for systematic observation of academic engagement.
as well as motor, verbal, and passive off-task behaviors within fifteen-second intervals. Using the B.O.S.S., academic engagement time was recorded with a momentary time sampling method. At the beginning of each interval, it was determined if the student was engaged in his or her activity, and the coding sheet was marked appropriately.

Accordingly, the B.O.S.S. allowed for problem behaviors to be recorded using three different categories: motor, verbal, and passive off-task behaviors. These behaviors were recorded using a partial interval observation method. If any of the three behaviors occurred at any point in the interval, it was marked on the coding sheet in the appropriate box only once.

Also, the B.O.S.S. required that data be collected on peers in the same classroom. Using the same method of data collection, at every fifth interval a different peer was selected as a comparison for the target students. Because two students were observed at each session, observations occurred at alternating intervals. One student was observed for one fifteen-second interval, and the other was observed for the following interval. This alternating method continued throughout the entire session. A trained graduate student observed and recorded behaviors of the students throughout the session. Inter-observer agreement checks with another trained graduate Psychology student took place during 20% of sessions. Inter-observer agreement was measured to be approximately 85% for both students.

Tasks and Materials.

Prior to data collection, the teacher identified a set of language arts activities that she routinely assigned to the students during independent seatwork time each morning. These activities were designed to allow the students to practice and develop skills that
had been presented in previous instruction. These activities included several different areas within Language Arts instruction, including spelling, writing, and reading. Specific examples of the types of activities in the area of spelling included practicing spelling words through the completion of word puzzles, drill practice, and spelling worksheets taken from the spelling curriculum. Examples of activities for practicing writing skills included paragraph development from a given topic sentence and writing sentences using a set of spelling or sight words. Reading activities included reading passages or short books and illustrating the main idea, phonics practice through the use of worksheets, and completing word puzzles for sight word practice. Each of these tasks was consistent with the first grade curriculum goals for language arts, although they involved different content and materials. Furthermore, the teacher judged that each task was of the same difficulty level and assumed to take approximately the same time to complete. These activities were then used to assess the students' preference and give the students a choice of tasks in the experimental conditions.

Preference Assessment.

In order to formally assess the preference of tasks for AP and CH, a preference assessment was conducted weekly. In the beginning of each week of data collection, AP and CH were shown a list with sets of three activities. These activities were chosen from the set of language arts activities that the teacher had previously identified as regular activities, as described above. The students were then asked to rank (1-3) the activity they liked to do best. Items that were assigned the number 1 were considered to be preferred activities. Those that were assigned a 2 or 3 were considered to be non-preferred activities.
Experimental Conditions.

The students were exposed to three conditions across the data collection period. These conditions were designed in order to differentiate the effects of choice and task preference in reducing problem behaviors. The students were presented with one condition per day, and the selection of conditions was randomly assigned.

*Control/Non-Preferred Task.* The first condition involved having the teacher assign a non-preferred academic task. This task was one that the student ranked as a 2-3. Many times this activity matched with the one the rest of the class was assigned for that day. Under this condition, if the child exhibited high levels of disruptive behaviors and low task engagement, support was given to the notion that not allowing students to have any control over their work would negatively influence problem behaviors.

*Preferred Task.* The second condition involved the teacher assigning a preferred academic task. This task was one that the student rated highly during the preference assessment in the beginning of the week, ranking it as something they liked to do best (1). When presented with this condition, if the child demonstrated fewer disruptive behaviors and an increase in task engagement in comparison to the other conditions, support was offered that preference was the variable that has the greatest effect of decreasing the problem behavior.

*Choice of Tasks.* In the third condition, AP and CH were allowed to make a choice of what item each would complete, based on a menu of options. The students were presented with three academic tasks, and were asked to choose which activity they would like to complete for that day. In this condition, the teacher did not assign an activity for AP and CH to complete. Rather, the children were allowed to choose which activity they
would complete, giving them more immediate control over the assignment. In this condition, if the child displayed lower levels of disruptive behaviors and higher levels of task engagement in relation to the other conditions, then the hypothesis was supported that choice had a larger effect on decreasing problem behaviors.

**Procedure.**

Prior to the implementation of the conditions, the teacher was provided with guidance about the parameters of interaction with AP and CH that was allowed. The teacher was instructed to avoid giving verbal prompts or directives to the student if he or she was off-task or disruptive. The teacher was also instructed to limit her interaction with the student, only prompting the student when necessary. This instruction was provided to the teacher to ensure that the verbal prompts did not alter the child's disruptive behaviors.

A preference assessment was first conducted individually with AP and CH at the beginning of each week to determine the activities that will be assigned for the preference, and control/non-preference conditions. Each morning during independent language arts seatwork time, the students were presented with one condition. The teacher either made the statement, "Here is the task you need to work on" (preferred and control/non-preferred conditions) or asked the question, "Which task would you like to work on?" (choice condition) to the student. After the task was selected by the student (choice) or assigned by the teacher (preferred and control/non-preferred), the student was instructed by the teacher to work on the task until told to stop. Verbal prompts were provided only when necessary, such as "Go sit down", or "Do the best you can". Verbal prompts made by the teacher were recorded, so that they would not serve as interference.
in altering disruptive behaviors. No other reinforcement or interaction was provided throughout the session (Cole et al., 1997).

**Results**

Task Engagement.

CH's task engagement was relatively stable across the choice (M=51.8%), preference (M=55.4%), and control/non-preferred conditions (M=59.7%), demonstrating no effect of choice or preference on the increase in task engagement in the classroom. CH's task engagement was variable within each condition, ranging from 31.3% to 89%. Examination of AP's data demonstrates a slight difference in task engagement in the choice (M=53.1%) and preference conditions (M=51.9%) in comparison to the control/non-preferred condition (M=45.3%). Although there was also some scatter in task engagement in each of the three conditions, these results indicate that providing a choice in academic tasks or preference of tasks provides a slight benefit in increasing task engagement for AP. However, choice of tasks resulted in no additional benefit over assignment of a preferred task for increasing academic engagement in this instance.

Problem Behaviors.

Data collected concerning problem behaviors were also scattered for both students across the three separate conditions. When looking at the three areas of problem behaviors identified as part of this dependent measure (motor, verbal, and passive off-task behaviors), the choice and preferred conditions had somewhat of a different effect on each of these areas for both students. CH's motor and verbal off-task behaviors were lowest in the control condition (M=15.7% and 9.9%, respectively), indicating that choice
and preference had no effect on reducing these problem behaviors. AP’s problem behaviors in the verbal area were also unaffected by the choice and preference conditions, as her levels of off-task behaviors were consistent across each of the conditions.

Assigning AP a preferred task seemed to reduce motor off task behaviors slightly ($M = 28.6\%$), in comparison to both choice ($M = 39\%$) and control conditions ($M = 35.1\%$). For both students, providing a choice or assigning a preferred task seemed to decrease passive off-task behaviors slightly in comparison to the control condition. However, the provision of choice provided little additional benefit over the assignment of a preferred activity. CH's passive off-task behaviors were somewhat higher in the control condition ($M = 24.5\%$) than choice ($M = 18.6\%$) or preference conditions ($M = 17.7\%$). Likewise AP demonstrated slightly less passive off-task behaviors in the choice ($M = 13.0\%$) and preference conditions ($M = 14.9\%$) than the control condition ($M = 17.7\%$).

**Peer Comparisons.**

Peer observations, recorded at every fifth interval throughout each observation session, revealed that several times the peers were displaying off-task or problem behaviors at levels equal to or exceeding those of the target students. The clearest example of this occurred when the peer comparisons had verbal off-task behaviors that exceeded CH's levels of verbal off-task behaviors (Peer: $M = 19.5\%$; CH: choice $M = 12.7\%$, preference $M = 14.9\%$, control $M = 9.9\%$). Levels of off-task behaviors for passive and motor off-task behaviors were noted to be lower for the peer comparison than target students. However, inspection of the individual, daily data revealed that on many days peer off-task behaviors were higher than target students in one or more areas. Peer behaviors were often variable, much like the behaviors of the target students.
Discussion

Previous research has firmly established both choice making and task preference as interventions to control undesirable behaviors and increase desirable behaviors for developmentally delayed and special education populations. This current study extends previous research findings to explore the relationship between choice and preference in the regular education setting using academic tasks. Unlike previous research, these results suggest that choice and preference do not have a powerful effect on increasing engagement levels and decreasing problem behaviors for children in the regular classroom. Although small differences in a few average percentages of task engagement and/or problem behaviors were noted when comparing the three conditions for both students, examination of the graphs shows no existing trend where one condition is superior to the others (Figures 1-8). Results obtained in this study are scattered, demonstrating that manipulating academic tasks in the regular classroom through the use of choice and preference affects both task engagement and problem behaviors very little. Results further suggest that choice does not seem to have an added positive effect over preference in reducing problem behaviors or increasing task engagement for the regular education students. Therefore, based on these findings, choice and preference of academic assignments may not be effective interventions to control task engagement and problem behaviors within the regular classroom.

Several limitations in this study may have affected the results obtained in this research. Firstly, conditions were implemented and observations were made at the beginning of each day. During this thirty-minute independent seatwork period, there was a lot of activity going on throughout the room, as this was also the period in which
attendance and any other morning business was attended to. The room was noisy at times, making the demands of independent seatwork more difficult. Peer comparisons of off task behaviors exceeded the off-task behaviors of the target students several times throughout the data collection. Secondly, observations were made during the last month of school, in which the children may have been distracted by the upcoming break. Percentages of off-task behaviors were erratic at times for both the target and comparison students, suggesting high levels of distractibility. Finally, choices and preference assessments were limited to three options each time. Allowing students to choose from a greater number of options may have increased the likelihood that choice and preference would impact behaviors, as a greater number of assignments may be more reinforcing to the student, capturing what he/she really likes to do. Furthermore, length and difficulty of assignments offered were judged to be of equal content by the teacher only. Implementing a more systematic method of ensuring equal content of materials used may have helped to increase the stability of behaviors.

Future research should focus on implementing conditions in an environment more suitable to independent learning, in which distractions are as limited as possible, given the busy nature of a classroom. Likewise, teachers and researchers should attempt to provide students with more options for choices of academic assignments. Future research should also consider obtaining an initial baseline measure of the student's off-task behavior in order to have an objective measure of the student's functioning in the classroom. Finally, the addition of work completion data to this research may be beneficial in understanding if giving students a choice or assigning a preferred task helps to foster the completion of assignments.
References


Figure 1: CH Task Engagement

- Control
- Choice
- Preference
Figure 2: C.H. Problem Behaviors: Motor Off-Task
Figure 3: C.H. Problem Behaviors: Verbal Off-Task

- Control
- Choice
- Preference
Figure 4: C.H. Problem Behaviors: Passive Off-Task

Effects of Choice
Figure 5: AP Task Engagement
Figure 6: AP Problem Behaviors: Motor Off-Task

- **Control**: Dashed line
- **Choice**: Square markers
- **Preference**: Solid line

The graph shows the percentage of motor off-task behaviors over sessions. The y-axis represents the percentage of motor off-task, ranging from 0 to 70. The x-axis represents sessions, from 1 to 7. The data points indicate fluctuations in behavior across different conditions and sessions.
Figure 7: AP Problem Behaviors: Verbal Off-Task

- Control
- Choice
- Preference

Sessions

Percent verbal off-task
Figure 8: AP Problem Behaviors: Passive Off-Task
Appendix A
Consent to Participate

April 23, 2001

Dear Parents,

I am a second year School Psychology graduate student at Eastern Illinois University. Currently, I am working on my thesis project under the supervision of Dr. Mike Havey, Psychology Professor. My interest is in developing interventions to help decrease disruptive behavior and increase task engagement in the classroom. Specifically, I am interested in seeing if allowing students to choose their assignment or work on an assignment that they prefer will help improve behavior in the classroom.

I will be working in Mrs. Bacon's classroom throughout the month of May. Students will be given a choice of language arts assignments or be assigned a language arts activity that they have said they preferred. I will observe their behavior during the morning seatwork time each day to see if these interventions are effective in improving behaviors in the classroom. If you are willing to allow your child to participate in this project, please sign this form, and return it to Mrs. Bacon. Thank you for your time, and please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns that you may have.

Sincerely,

Jean McGrath
581-3530

I give permission for my child, ____________________________, to participate in this project, testing the effectiveness of choice making and preference on behaviors in the classroom.

__________________                     ____________
Parent Signature                Date
May 30, 2001

Dear Parents,

Thank you for allowing your child to participate in this project, testing the effects of allowing students to choose their assignment or work on an assignment that they prefer on behavior in the classroom. With the help of Mrs. Bacon and your child, I have been able to test these interventions in an attempt to improve disruptive behavior and increase the learning experience for students. I have shared the information that we have learned about your child concerning the effectiveness of choice making or preference of assignments with Mrs. Bacon. If you would like more information on the results of this study, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Jean McGrath, School Psychology Graduate Student
(217) 581-3530