USING TEACHER GREETINGS TO INCREASE
SPEED TO TASK ENGAGEMENT

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We used a multiple baseline design across participants to determine if teacher greetings would reduce the latency to task engagement. Three participants were identified by their respective teachers as having difficulty initiating task-appropriate engagement at the beginning of class. Latency was measured from teacher greeting until the participant was actively engaged for 5 consecutive seconds. Results showed that teacher greetings were effective at reducing latency to task engagement for all participants.

  Key words: antecedent, task engagement, teacher attention

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A common problem faced by many classroom teachers is student failure to engage promptly in a designated task (Wehby & Hollahan, 2000). This failure may result from a student wandering around the classroom, talking with nearby classmates, or sitting passively rather than beginning the designated task. Failure to engage in tasks can lead to a delayed start to academic instruction and possibly an escalation of other problem behaviors. Students who are engaged in appropriate tasks are less likely to be engaged in problem behaviors (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). Providing teachers with an intervention that encourages task engagement would help to reduce time away from academic instruction.

Teachers desire simple, quick interventions (Carnine, 1997) that effectively manage student behavior. Greeting students is one such intervention. Allday and Pakurar (2007) used a multiple baseline design across participants and settings to measure the effects of teacher greetings on students' on-task behavior. Their intervention included greeting the target student at the door using the student's name,

followed by a brief, positive interaction that communicated expectations. Results of their study found that teacher greetings increased on-task behavior during the first 10 min of class. To provide additional, empirical support for this simple intervention, the current study sought to extend this finding by determining if teacher greetings could increase how quickly students engaged in on-task appropriate behavior, thereby decreasing the latency to task engagement. Reducing the latency to task engagement provides teachers with more time to complete academic tasks.

METHOD

Participants and Settings

Participants were two students enrolled in a high school (i.e., Grades 10 through 12) and one student enrolled in junior high school (i.e., Grades 8 and 9) in a suburban area of Oklahoma. Participants were nominated by their teachers as having difficulty engaging in tasks at the beginning of class. Teachers noted that participants engaged in disruptive behaviors to a higher degree than did their peers at the beginning of class. Participants were observed in general education classrooms, and none was receiving special education services. A fourth participant was not able to complete the study because he was suspended from school due to behavior problems.

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Tom was an eighth-grade boy who talked excessively in class and walked around the room without permission. Sessions were conducted beginning at 9:05 a.m. in his social studies class taught by a male teacher and a male intern. Bill was a 10th-grade boy who often was not in his seat following tardy bell, was not prepared with necessary materials, and disrupted classmates with loud talking. His sessions began at 12:00 p.m. in an English class taught by a female teacher. Joe was an 11th-grade boy who often sat in his seat without his necessary materials, looked around the room without working, and talked with classmates rather than preparing his materials for work. His sessions began at 1:35 p.m. in his social studies class taught by a male teacher.

Design and Procedure

A multiple baseline design across participants and settings (two schools) was used to determine the effectiveness of teacher greetings on the latency to task engagement.

During baseline, teachers were asked to continue their daily routines. This routine did not include greeting students at the door. Teachers were not aware of the nature of the planned intervention during baseline.

After baseline, the experimenter asked the teacher to greet the target student as he entered the classroom with the student's name and a positive statement that encouraged task engagement (e.g., ''Hi Joe, I am glad you are here today! I appreciate you being prepared to work!''). Teachers were not provided with a script (due to the potential insincere nature of a prescribed response), nor were they instructed to modify contingencies related to on-task or off-task behavior during baseline or intervention. Teachers were told to resume their regularly scheduled activities after completing the greeting.

Response Measurement, Interobserver Agreement, and Treatment Fidelity

Task engagement was defined as actively participating in the designated activity by (a) being oriented toward the teacher or task, (b) having necessary materials, (c) following teacher directions, and (d) listening through verbal (e.g., asking questions) and nonverbal (e.g., nodding head or eye contact) means. Observers used an iPod Touch with Behavior Tracker Pro (version 1.20; Maher & Maher, 2010) software to record latency to task engagement.

Prior to data collection, each classroom was observed to determine the teacher's daily routine that signaled the beginning of class. This was completed so that observers would know when to begin latency recording. It was determined that Bill's and Joe's teachers used a clear verbal cue (e.g., ''All right, get out a sheet of paper'') to signal that class was beginning after the tardy bell rang. Tom's teacher posted work on the board prior to class. When students entered the classroom, they were expected to get out a sheet of paper and answer questions the teacher had posted on the board; therefore, simply entering the classroom served as the cue that class had begun. Observers entered each classroom prior to the beginning of the observation period. Data collection began when the predetermined cue was provided and ended when task engagement was observed for 5 consecutive seconds. After completion of data collection, observers left the classroom. A second observer independently collected data during 24% of the observations, and interobserver agreement was calculated by taking the lower latency observed (in seconds) and dividing by the higher latency observed (in seconds). Mean agreement was 99% (range, 96% to 100%) for Bill, 91% (range, 83% to 96%) for Joe, and 98% (range, 94% to 100%) for Tom.

Treatment fidelity was determined by recording whether the teacher greeted the student entering the classroom by (a) using the student's name and (b) including a brief, positive interaction that communicated expectations. Both of these criteria had to be met for the treatment to be delivered with fidelity. Only one instance of Bill's teacher not implementing

the intervention was observed; that datum was not included in the results. Specifically, the teacher did not acknowledge that he had entered the room, nor did she initiate any communication with Bill.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 presents the time to task engagement for each participant. Bill's latency to task engagement decreased from 179 s (range, 89 to 303 s) during baseline to an average of 44 s (range, 15 to 109 s) when the teacher implemented the greeting. Joe's latency to task engagement averaged 54 s (range, 26 to 88 s) during baseline, and 23 s (range, 6 to 33 s) during the teacher greeting condition. Tom reduced the latency to task engagement from an average of 114 s (range, 100 to 140 s) during baseline to 29 s (range, 15 to 50 s) during the teacher greeting condition. Across participants, a total of six intervention data points overlapped with baseline data points, representing 16% of total data points, or a percentage of all nonoverlapping data points (Parker, Hagan-Burke, & Vannest, 2007) of 84%. Effect size was determined using methods described by Parker et al. and resulted in an effect size of $\Phi^2 = .46$, which suggests a strong effect.

These results support the earlier findings of Allday and Pakurar (2007), in that teacher greetings changed student behavior in the desired direction. This study extends the previous findings, in that teacher greetings reduced the time needed to begin working on appropriate tasks. It is possible that the teacher greeting served as a discriminative stimulus to engage in on-task behavior, because the greeting signaled the availability of teacher attention for task engagement (e.g., Ferguson & Houghton, 1992). However, we did not determine if teachers were more likely to provide attention for on-task behavior during the teacher greeting condition than in baseline. Future studies should evaluate the mechanisms that underlie the effectiveness of this simple intervention.
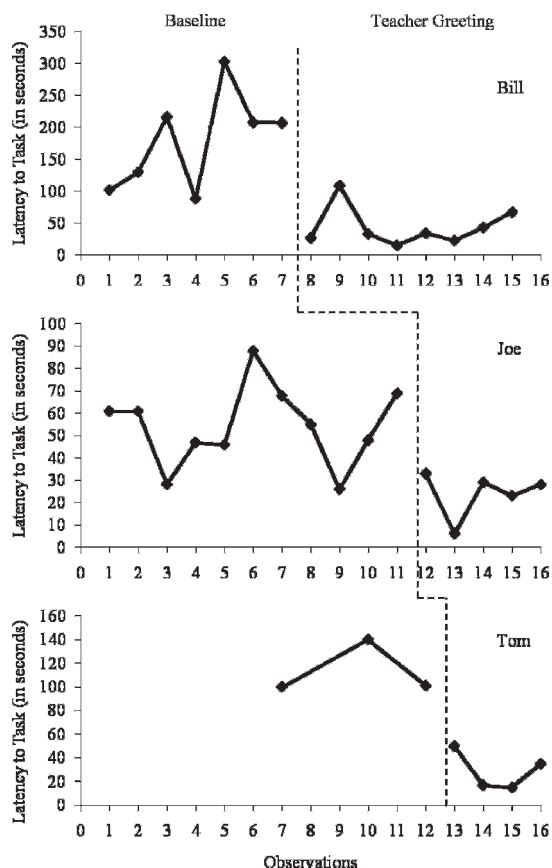

Figure 1. Latency to task engagement (in seconds).

Participating teachers anecdotally noted the ease of the intervention and its clear impact on the students' behavior. However, formal social validity data were not collected. Other limitations of the study include the use of only male participants and the attrition of one participant. As requirements to cover more academic content increase, the need to engage students quickly in appropriate tasks will help teachers to provide more time for content coverage and less time for problem behavior. Teacher greetings can serve to encourage faster task engagement and sustained attention to task (e.g., Allday & Pakurar, 2007). Future research should examine the effects of teacher greetings on other areas of academic progress and determine the effects of fading the intervention from every day to a

more intermittent schedule (e.g., every other day).

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