Intervention in School and Clinic

Have Students Self-Manage Their Academic Performance

Laurice M. Joseph and Moira Konrad

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Self-management skills are critical to achieving academic success, yet students with disabilities often fail to execute these skills because they have not learned appropriate strategies. Self-management is defined as "the personal application of behavior change tactics that produces a desired change in behavior" (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007, p. 578). For example, if Sheila's goal is to leave the grocery store with 20 items needed for tomorrow's dinner party, her self-management strategy might be to take a list of those items to the store to help her remember to purchase them. If her goal is to get in and out of the grocery store quickly to have time to prepare the dinner, she may use a more sophisticated self-management strategy, such as organizing her list according to where items are located in the grocery store.

Strategies similar to those used by Sheila to accomplish her daily living activities can be adapted for students to help them achieve academic goals. For example, Barry and Messer (2003) taught self-management strategies to

students with behavior problems, resulting in an increase in academic productivity and accuracy. In another investigation, students with disabilities learned to self-manage their level of accuracy by using answer keys to self-correct math errors (Bennett & Cavanaugh, 1998). Other investigations demonstrated that self-management (i.e., self-graphing) helped students meet math, reading, and writing achievement goals (McDougall & Brady, 1998).

After a thorough review of the professional literature, several conversations with educators, and observations of students, we identified many effective self-management tools. Given that students are ultimately responsible for applying these strategies, the purpose of this column is to provide students with 20 self-management strategies that they can use to improve the quality and quantity of their academic work. Certainly, educators and parents will need

to teach students how to apply these strategies, but with proper instruction (i.e., modeling, opportunities for practice, and continuous feedback), students can begin to take more and more responsibility for their own academic outcomes. This list is not exhaustive but represents a range of options that can be used across a variety of settings and skills.

1   **Use a *MotivAider* (Flaute, Peterson, Van Norman, Riffle, & Eakins, 2005).** A MotivAider is an electronic device (i.e., similar to a pager) that vibrates at predetermined intervals to prompt students to implement a self-management strategy such as recording on-task behavior. This device can be purchased at www.habitchange.com.

2   **Use *self-management software* (Fitzgerald & Koury, 2006).** Two software programs that are available to help students develop self-management skills are KidTools and KidSkills. These programs provide students with a variety of tools (e.g., contracts, learning strategies, self-monitoring plans) to help them address their target skills. The programs can be downloaded at no cost from kidtools.missouri.edu.

3   **Use a *self-manager card* to recruit teacher praise (Todd, Horner, & Sugai, 1999).** At periodic checkpoints throughout the lesson, students record plusses and zeros on their "self-manager cards" according to whether or not they demonstrated target behaviors. After self-recording a predetermined number of plusses, the student can recruit teacher praise by raising his or her hand.

4   **Use a *signal system* (Heward, 2006).** A signal system is an alternative to hand-raising in the classroom during independent seat work. For instance, a signaling device may be a can that is half covered in red and half covered in green construction paper. Students turn the can one end or the other to let the teacher know they need assistance, and they continue working on the assignment while they wait for help.

5   **Use *self-talk* (Corral & Antia, 1996).** Students can make self-verbalizations that include prompts, reminders, and questions to encourage them to execute good work habits. For example, Josh might ask himself on his way to social studies class, "Do I have my homework in my social studies folder?"

6   **Use *graphic organizers* (Awe-Hwa, Vaughn, Wanzek, & Wei, 2004).** Graphic organizers help students connect the information so that they can view the relationships between and among concepts. Students can use these organizers in a variety of ways. For example, organizers can be used to guide students' understanding of text and help them prepare for upcoming tests or written assignments (Lenz & Schumaker, 1999; Swanson & De La Paz, 1988).

7   **Use a *stopwatch* (Cooper et al., 2007; Joseph, 2005).** Students can use a stopwatch to manage efficiency by recording how long it takes them to begin an assignment (latency measure) or to complete an assignment (duration measure). Students can set goals to decrease the amount of time it takes them to start or finish an assignment but should be encouraged to attend to the quality of their work as well. In addition, teachers can work with students to identify and overcome barriers (e.g., disorganization, attending to distractions) to being an efficient worker.

8   **Use a *kitchen timer* (Cooper et al., 2007).** A kitchen timer can be used to encourage students who quit easily to persevere through challenging assignments. For example, students can set a timer for 5 minutes to encourage themselves to persevere through the multiple steps required to solve a complex math problem or to continue to engage in the writing process. Each time the timer goes off, students should be encouraged to self-reinforce their persistence. As students' endurance builds, the timer can be set for longer periods of time.

9   **Use a *tape recorder* to prompt self-recording (DiGangi, Maag, & Rutherford, 1991).** Prerecorded tones randomly spaced 30 to 90 seconds apart are played during independent seat work. Students self-record their behavior (e.g., on task or off task) when they hear the tone. To make this strategy even more powerful, students can plot their number of on-task tally marks on a graph.

10   **Use a *planner* to prioritize assignments (Dawson & Guare, 2003).** Students can record their homework assignments in a daily planner and develop a system of cues to help them plan and organize their study time. This may be as simple as using a highlighter or numbering system to prioritize their assignments. Students may also write in their planners an estimate of how long it will take to complete each assignment. Students who need more structure can use a specially designed homework planning worksheet that prompts them with specific questions such as "Do I have all the materials?" "How long will it take?" and "When will I take breaks?"

11 **Use the *ACT-REACT* strategy (Rock, 2005).** Students can learn a six-step strategy for self-monitoring their performance: (a) *A*rticulate goals, (b) *C*reate a plan, (c) *T*ake pictures, (d) *R*eflect using self-talk, (e) *E*valuate progress, and (f) ACT again. Training students to use this strategy should include explicit modeling of these steps and teaching students to self-record their productivity using a timepiece set to prompt at 5-minute intervals.

12 **Use a *self-determination contract* (Martin et al., 2003).** This type of contract prompts students to plan, work, evaluate, and adjust. Specifically, they plan what task they will accomplish (e.g., number of pages to complete) and how long it will take them to accomplish it. Next, they work to complete the planned task, which includes recording the start and stop times, how much was completed, and how many points were earned (after teacher scoring). Then, they evaluate by answering a series of questions (e.g., "Began on time?" or "Completed planned amount?") and adjust by responding to another set of prompts to determine whether they should plan differently next time (e.g., begin earlier or do more problems).

13 **Use a class work *completion checklist* or classroom performance record (Young, West, Smith, & Morgan, 1991).** Students can use a checklist that is placed in a folder, taped to their desk, or printed on their assignment to record when they have completed a task. For example, a task may be defined as completion of one math problem, a row of problems, or an entire page of problems.

14 **Record performance on a *graph* (Kasper-Ferguson & Moxley, 2002).** Students can count and graph the number of responses made or assignments completed across all content areas. For example, in math, students can count and graph the number of problems completed on their daily timed math fact probes. Similarly, students can count the number of words written in response to a timed story prompt. Be sure that times are held constant so that students can compare their performance from one session to the next.

15 **Use a *K-W-L* chart (McAllister, 1994).** Have students create a three-column chart to record what they *K*now and what they *W*ant to know about a given topic. After students have read about the topic or engaged in other class activities, have students record what they *L*earned about the topic. Students exercise self-management skills when they evaluate what they learned in comparison to what they already knew and what that wanted to learn. When students do not learn what they intended to learn, encourage them to determine ways to acquire this information.

16 **Use a *cue card* that provides a pictorial demonstration or written directions for how to complete a multistep assignment (Joseph & Hunter, 2001).** Cue cards can be used to illustrate the steps needed to complete math problems involving, for instance, carrying or borrowing. Students may also use a cue card consisting of story elements (e.g., characters, setting, conflict) to aid them in planning and writing a story (Martin & Manno, 1995).

17 **Use the *copy–cover–compare* strategy (McLaughlin & Skinner, 1996).** Students may use this strategy for practicing spelling words, math facts, or content area vocabulary. Students copy a model (e.g., a correctly spelled word) and then cover up the model and what they copied. Next, they attempt to reproduce the model from memory and afterward uncover the model and compare their response with the model.

18 **Self-score assignments using a *rubric*, checklist, or teacher-made answer key (Saddler & Good, 2006).** When students are beyond the acquisition stage of learning a skill, they can self-score their assignments to practice with immediate feedback.

19 **Keep a reflective *journal* on progress.** Students reflect on their strengths and needs by writing on a regular basis so that they are able to set future goals. Teachers can facilitate reflection by providing students with prompts, such as "How did you go about completing this assignment?" or "What would you do differently if you did this over?" (McMillan, 2001, p. 246).

20 **Use *self-evaluation* to assess the application of strategies.** As students apply these self-management strategies, they should be encouraged to evaluate the outcomes and make adjustments (e.g., modify the strategy or choose a different one) based on whether their goals were met.

Final Thoughts

All students can learn self-management strategies, particularly if teachers facilitate the use of these strategies to

promote good work habits, increase productivity, and improve work quality. Acquisition of these strategies may ease a student way into activities that require higher order skills. For example, students who have acquired self-management skills can meaningfully participate in the IEP process by collecting and charting their own academic progress data, reflecting on and sharing these data at the IEP meeting, and participating in instructional decision making. Involving students in this recursive process is a way to show them how self-management (e.g., planning, goal setting, and monitoring) leads to achieving success, which will be critical if they are to view learning as a lifelong journey of continuous improvement.

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