

Trends

Educational Research

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Improving Student Attention

Children with learning problems often have difficulty paying attention in school. Teachers frequently work one-on-one with such students to increase attention. But such special treatment is not always possible and, even when it is available, children's thoughts may wander when the teacher is not immediately at hand. One promising solution may be teaching children to monitor their own attention.

Researchers at the University of Virginia have developed methods to teach children how to assess their own intentional behavior. Daniel Hallahan and his colleagues have found that when children use *self-monitoring*, their involvement and academic productivity increase.

A teacher needs three things to teach children how to self-monitor their attention: a tape recorder, a cassette tape, and a sheet of paper for the student's record. The tape must have prerecorded beeps spaced at random intervals anywhere from 10 to 90 seconds apart. The average interval, about 45 seconds for most students, can be adjusted upward or downward as needed. On the paper, marked in a column, the student checks if he or she is on- or off-task when the beep sounds.

Before students can use self-monitoring, they must understand what "paying attention" and "not paying attention" mean. The teacher may demonstrate paying attention by sitting with eyes forward while an imaginary teacher is talking at the front of the room. To show inattention, the teacher might gaze out the window while an imaginary teacher speaks. The teacher instructs the student to self-monitor during seatwork by asking, "Was I paying attention?" each time the beep sounds. The student then marks the answer on paper. Students working in small groups may use a common signal cue, using wrist counters instead of paper to record their attention.

Do children who have been taught to self-monitor need to carry a tape recorder for the rest of their lives? Obviously, no. To wean the successful child from this procedure, the researchers suggest that the teacher can take away either the recorder or the paper, and eventually both. Instead of using prompts, the child asks silently, "Was I paying attention?" If the answer is "Yes," then the child is encouraged to say to himself or herself, "Good job."

Self-monitoring has proven particularly useful with learning-disabled

children working alone at their desks or in small groups, but it may not work well with children who have severe behavioral problems. The researchers also warn that self-monitoring will not help students learn new material. The approach works best with drill-and-practice exercises in which children are strengthening knowledge they have already acquired.

For more information, send for *Improving Attention and Self-Monitoring: A Manual for Teachers* by Daniel Hallahan, John Lloyd, and Laura Stoller at the Learning Disabilities Research Institute, 405 Emmet St., University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

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Textbooks

CONNIE MUTHER

What To Do When All Textbooks Fail

Brant W. Abrahamson, a 20-year veteran social studies teacher at the Riverside-Brookfield High School in Riverside, Illinois, wrote to me that he had developed a simple technique for locating Western bias in world history textbooks. Abrahamson and his colleagues identified the sections intend-

ed for use as daily assignments and tabulated content by region. A relatively quick page count revealed that all 11 world history textbooks studied showed an overwhelming Western bias—devoting between 45 and 75 percent of the total content from 1000 BC to 1950 AD to Europe and the Anglo world. This was only the beginning of an extensive study resulting in the

rejection of *all* textbooks. Then he wrote to me for suggestions.

What can you do if you decide to reject all major textbook programs?

1. *If you already have quality materials that are out-of-print, call the publisher for permission to duplicate.* In many cases your request will be granted.

2. *Investigate materials (not necessarily "textbooks") produced by small*

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