April 2023

The Effect of Alternative Seating on School Function and Task Behavior in a Second-Grade Classroom

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The Effect of Alternative Seating on School Function and Task Behavior in a Second-Grade Classroom

Abstract

Background: The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of alternative seating (KidsErgo chairs) on second-grade students’ attention and task behavior/completion skills during academic instruction and work time.

Method: The quasi-experimental two-group pretest/posttest study included 24 students in one urban parochial school classroom. A subset of students was identified for close momentary time sampling of classroom behaviors while all students were assessed with the behavior/task completion subtest of the School Function Assessment (SFA).

Results: SFA scores improved in the students with low baseline SFA scores (LSFA), but not in the students with high baseline SFA scores (HSFA). Students in the LSFA group exhibited significantly more off-task behaviors than the students in the HSFA group throughout the study. Task initiation was significantly improved when alternative seating (KidsErgo or ball) was selected by the students in both groups.

Conclusion: When used as a Tier 1 intervention in an elementary school classroom, alternative seating may positively contribute to school function in students functioning at lower levels of participation. Alternative seating, regardless of baseline school function, led to increased observations of task initiation in fewer than 10 s. These findings suggest that KidsErgo is a suitable seating alternative for the general student population as a Tier 1 intervention.

Keywords
alternative seating, elementary school, attention, task behavior, task initiation excessive movement, school function

Cover Page Footnote
The authors declare that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interest that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript. The alternative seats were donated with no expectation of a study or publication.

Credentials Display
Julie H. Hunley, Ph.D, OTL; Stephanie Beisbier, OTD, OTL; Cynthia Clough, Ph.D, OTL,

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This applied research is available in The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot/vol11/iss2/12
Providing alternatives to traditional seating in school settings is a strategy to help children better attend to classroom instruction and participate in seated schoolwork. The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA, 2015) recognizes providing options to traditional classroom desks, chairs, and floor sitting as aligning with therapy approaches that help a child maintain productivity, support student participation, and prevent “inattention, poor posture, and restlessness when sitting for prolonged periods” (p. 5).

Alternative seating is hypothesized to offer dynamic vestibular and proprioceptive input, which is often restricted in traditional classroom seating (Burgoyne & Ketcham, 2015; Erwin et al., 2016; Stapp, 2018). There are several types of alternative seating, including stability balls, various seat cushions, and specialty chairs, such as the KidsErgo. KidsErgo is dynamic because it provides the child with movement not available in a conventional static chair. The preponderance of literature produced by occupational therapists regarding alternative seating is guided by a sensory processing framework (Gochenour & Poskey, 2017). School occupational therapists promote alternative seating as part of a multifaceted sensory-based strategy that supports children’s need to move during their school day, especially during instructional time (Reynolds et al., 2017). Alternative seating also allows children to develop dynamic sitting balance, core muscle strength, and postural control (Seifert & Metz, 2016). The movement options available to children on alternative seats are hypothesized to meet their sensory seeking and physical activity needs, that then afford children the ability to remain on-task and focused during traditional seated work (Gochenour & Poskey, 2017).

By framing a child’s inattentive behavior at school through a sensory processing lens, occupational therapists find ways to help children and teachers manage environmental stimuli to promote a child’s optimal occupational performance. When a child can filter and respond to sensory input in a graded manner that matches the stimuli in which they are immersed, they are demonstrating sensory modulation (Parham & Mailloux, 2015). Alternative seating is one of many tools occupational therapists offer children to support sensory modulation in classroom settings (Stapp, 2018).

Current best practices in school occupational therapy service delivery include the use of multitiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS reach the general student population through Tier 1 interventions that are universal and address a broad range of student needs (Arbesman et al., 2013; Cahill, 2019; Seruya & Garfinkel, 2020). Tier 2 interventions in a MTSS approach target children with an identified need for supports beyond that of the general student population. Tier 3 interventions are individualized and intensive interventions that address specific student challenges and problems (Arbesman et al., 2013; Cahill, 2019).

**Effects of Alternative Seating**

Alternative seating has been shown to positively affect school-related behaviors and performance in elementary school students. Recently published systematic reviews have found varying degrees of positive and some neutral effects on student attention, in-seat behavior, and classroom performance (Chacko et al., 2019; Gochenour & Poskey, 2017; Rollo et al., 2019). In addition, an early randomized controlled study of second-grade students (n = 61) sitting on Disc ‘O’ Sit cushions found significant improvements on the Behavioral Rating Inventory of Executive Function (Pfeiffer, et al., 2008) and Stapp’s (2018) quasi-experimental study of 25 general education fifth-grade students seated on Disc ‘O’ Sit cushions demonstrated significant improvement in on-task behavior while off-task time decreased.

Stability ball chairs have been studied more frequently than the Disc ‘O’ Sit. Erwin et al. (2016) compared stability balls to standard chairs with fourth-grade general education students. Because no
significant differences in off-task behaviors were observed, the authors concluded that the use of stability balls in the classroom did not produce unintended behavioral consequences. Fedewa et al. (2015) studied the effects of stability balls in four general education second-grade classrooms. The results indicated that students exhibited more time on task with the teacher and with their peers than did children in the control group but did not increase overall on-task time during instruction. A significant and perhaps surprising finding by Fedewa et al. (2015) was the decrease in discipline referrals in the intervention classrooms relative to the control classrooms. Most recently, Metz et al. (2020) reported that ball chairs had no effect on productivity and a modest effect on in-seat behaviors of first-grade students. An interesting finding was that there was a significant decrease in undesired behaviors when they switched from the ball chairs back to standard classroom chairs over the course of the study (Metz et al., 2020).

The current body of evidence regarding alternative seating suggests that children who have challenges with on-task seated behavior during classroom instruction benefit from the use of dynamic seating in place of a traditional classroom chair (Gochenour & Poskey, 2017). In Tier 1 classroom interventions, children who were not experiencing specific attention or seated behavior challenges did not necessarily become more attentive on alternative seats but were also not adversely affected by their use (Chacko et al., 2020; Seifert & Metz, 2016). Overall, alternative seating was not found to be a disruption to classroom routines, and use of the seats correlated with fewer discipline referrals (Fedewa et al., 2015). Teachers and students expressed a preference for having seating options available in the classroom (Gochenour & Poskey, 2017). The use of alternative seating options as a classroom-level Tier 1 intervention shows efficacy for improving in-seat behavior and attention to tasks. The broader impact on academic performance is not known, but detrimental effects of alternative seating were only noted regarding handwriting legibility in one study (Metz et al., 2020). Across the reviews, none of the studies assessed the impact of ErgoErgo seats made specifically for children (KidsErgo). The KidsErgo stool was developed as a tool to address healthy sitting. The manufacturers of KidsErgo (2019) report that classroom teachers identify that posture, concentration, participation, and student behaviors are positively impacted by the use of the product. However, evidence of KidsErgo efficacy was not found in the peer-reviewed literature.

**Purpose**

This study explored the effect of alternative seating (KidsErgo chairs) on second grade students’ attention and task behavior/completion skills during academic instruction and work time.

**Method**

**Research Design**

This quasi-experimental two-group pretest-posttest study received IRB approval from the respective university and support from the administration of the participating elementary school. Faculty and students from the occupational therapy program contributed to the design and data collection. All children in a second-grade classroom of an urban parochial school were invited to participate. The classroom teacher provided consent forms to the children and requested that parents review and return them. Following the study, the classroom teacher was allowed to keep all 12 KidsErgo chairs. No monetary compensation was provided to the participants or researchers, and the authors report no conflicts of interest.

**Participants**

The study participants were selected by convenience through a preexisting relationship between the university and the parochial school. Just one teacher met the inclusion criterion of having previous
experience with alternative seating using an established protocol. This teacher’s classroom included 24 second-grade students. All of the students were eligible for inclusion. The students parents (N = 24) provided consent for the study. Only half (n =12) of the students were directly observed during the study to understand more fully how seating effects the students with the highest and lowest school function.

**Instruments, Materials, and Equipment**

This study used the School Function Assessment (SFA) as one of two measures of student performance. The SFA is a criterion-referenced assessment that measures students’ performance in school-related functional tasks (Coster et al., 1998). The tool is a questionnaire completed by one or more school professionals who are highly familiar with the student being assessed. For this study, the activity performance subsection of Task Behavior/Completion was rated by the classroom teacher for each child represented in the study.

This subsection has 19 items that represent the typical progression of skills in the named category. Some item examples include attending a story or teacher-directed lesson for more than 15 min, recovering after failure, initiating work promptly after receiving directions, and having good independent work habits (Coster et al., 1998). Each item is given a rating of one to four. A score of 1 correlates with the child not being able to perform the task, and a score of 4 represents consistent performance of the task. With 19 items, the maximum raw score for Task Behavior/Completion is 76.

Structured observations, a second measure of student performance, were employed through momentary time sampling. Momentary time sampling is a method of systematically recording behavioral occurrences during a specific period of time using codes that define a specific observable behavior in a specific setting (Ottenbacher, 1986). A behavioral observation data collection form (BODCF) was developed by the university faculty and students.

Three occupational therapy students from a university occupational therapy program on a Level I fieldwork rotation and one faculty member were data collectors. All data collectors participated in two 60-min training sessions to become familiar with the collection tool and the process. Agreement on the protocol for data collection was established and weekly contact occurred to ensure continued compliance and continuity throughout the 6 weeks of the data collection. A trial data collection period occurred prior to the introduction of the intervention. The purpose of the trial was twofold: (a) it served as an opportunity for the second-grade students to adjust to the presence of data collectors in the classroom and (b) it allowed for a test of the use of the BODCF. The BODCF was modified in response to this trial. The BODCF was altered from a continuous 10-min collection capture to twenty 1-min momentary time sampling periods over the course of 25 min with one 5-min break in mid-collection. The modified tool better captured the time span of the academic period and improved the ease of use for the data collectors. The modified BODCF was then used for 6 weeks of data collection during the intervention phase.

The BODCF included the collection of student-selected seating at the start of math instruction and the frequencies of the following behaviors: excessive movement, off-task behavior, initiating tasks in less than 10 s, initiating tasks in more than 10 s, and seeking a different seat. Included behaviors mirrored those found in task behavior/completion items from the SFA and related alternative seating literature. Each data collector used the form to record observations of the two students they were assigned. In each session, three observers recorded observation frequencies of the behaviors of six students during a 10-min period marked by 1-min observation windows.

The KidsErgo chair was the alternative seating option used in this study. The seat is made from sturdy recyclable plastic and is cylindrically shaped with an accordion-style base. Each seat is 15” in
height and 14” in diameter. Because of the accordion-style construction, the seat compresses with the weight of a body, and the individual using the seat can tilt with ease backward and forward without becoming unstable. The KidsErgo chair allows for movement that is purported to engage core muscles, activate the spine, stretch the legs, and allow for movement of the pelvis (ergoErgo, n.d.).

**Procedure**

The classroom teacher completed the SFA subsection of task behavior/completion for each of the twenty-four students. The subsection total score was calculated for each student. The six students with the highest scores (HSFA) and the six with the lowest scores (LSFA) were selected for behavioral observation data collection. Figure 1 details the data collection sequence and the number of students at each stage. No other demographic, diagnostic, or academic information was collected. All of the students were identified by a number designated by the classroom teacher, and all materials were coded with the student number. The university faculty, occupational therapy students, and the classroom teacher were blinded to the high (HSFA) and low (LSFA) groupings.

**Figure 1**

Data Collection Sequence

1. Teacher completed the SFA task behavior/completion (N = 24)
2. Researchers calculated subsection totals and divided class (N = 24) into quartiles
3. Students in the top and bottom quartiles were labeled HSFA (n = 6) and LSFA (n = 6)
4. Researchers collected behavioral observation data on students in the HSFA (n = 6) and LSFA (n = 6) groups
5. Teacher completed the SFA task behavior/completion subscale for all students (N = 24) after the intervention

The students in the second-grade classroom participated in their regular activities in the classroom. The classroom was equipped with standard chairs (24), ball chairs (24), and KidsErgo chairs (12). The standard chairs and ball chairs were introduced at the start of the academic year as part of the teacher’s typical classroom environment. They were retained as seating options when the KidsErgo were introduced in February to minimize any potential disruption to the classroom. The study and data collection occurred in March and April. The students were instructed by the classroom teacher to self-select their seating throughout the school year. The teacher presented all chairs as suitable options and provided clear parameters for their use. Because of the number of KidsErgo chairs available (12) and the structure of the study, access to the KidsErgo chair was assured for the HSFA and LSFA scoring groups on the days designated for data collection. All of the classroom students were on a daily rotation for the KidsErgo chair, all had access to the standard chairs, and all had the option to choose a ball chair each day of the week. The students self-selected their seating for each session except in the final session when all were on standard chairs.

The classroom teacher had regular control over seating arrangements in the classroom. The students’ desks were arranged in intentional groupings created by the teacher. It was customary for her to adjust the seating schema each week. The seating arrangements had no impact on the availability of the type of chair for each student. All of the students in the classroom were identified by their designated number, which was clearly visible on the top of each desk. The numeric identifier was pre-established at the beginning of the school year for use by the teacher and was not designated by the study. A ‘map’ of the seating arrangement was constructed each week prior to data collection. The location of the 12 students
in the LSFA and HSFA groups was made evident on the map. Each data collector was assigned three students in optimal viewing range as determined by the seating map. The three students assigned to each data collector varied weekly depending on the shift in the location of student desks. Data collectors did not know which students were in the LSFA and which were in the HSFA groupings.

Each week, for 6 weeks, the three occupational therapy students and one occupational therapy faculty member entered the classroom on the same day of the week and during the same timeframe. Because of the naturally occurring adjustments in the flow of a second-grade classroom schedule, there were minor differences in classroom activities each week. However, each week the subject matter (math), the teacher, and the overall classroom expectations were consistent.

The second graders were typically settling in from a transition and preparing to begin math instruction as the data collectors entered the room. Following a 2-to-3-min transition time, the faculty member provided a visual signal, and all four data collectors began to use their timers to collect observations in 1-min increments. Data collection continued for 10 min, allowing for ten data collection points. After a 5-min break, data collection resumed in ten 1-min increments. On leaving the classroom after data collection, the fieldwork students provided BODCFs to the faculty member, who then securely stored them for later analysis.

Relevant data from the BODCFs included the type of seating and chair the student used and the frequency of the following behaviors: excessive movement, off-task behavior, and initiating tasks in less than 10 s.

**Data Analysis**

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 23; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY) with the level of significance set to p < .05. School function and classroom observations were analyzed with descriptive statistics. School function assessment data were analyzed with a t-test to determine the effect of the intervention on school function. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for each of the three classroom behaviors (excessive movement, off-task behavior, and initiating tasks in less than 10 s) to determine the main and interaction effects of the intervention. The chair type (KidsErgo, standard chair, ball chair) and the SFA group (LSFA or HSFA) were fixed variables, and classroom behavior was the dependent variable. KidsErgo and ball chair were combined to form a single category called “alternative” for a simplified one-way ANOVA alternative versus standard seating to determine effects on classroom behaviors.

**Results**

Attendance at intervention sessions was 99.9%. Chair selection was self-selected with the exception of Session 6 when no KidsErgo chairs were available. Over the course of the intervention sessions, the students selected KidsErgo (64.7%), ball chair (16.2%), and standard chair (19.1%). In Session 1, student chair choice was divided between KidsErgo (n = 7) and the ball chair (n = 5). KidsErgo (n = 8) was favored over the ball chair (n = 1) in Session 2, while all of the students selected KidsErgo in Session 3. Selection in Session 4 was KidsErgo (n = 9) and the ball chair (n = 3). Standard chairs were only selected in Sessions 5 and 6, with Session 6 having no alternative seating options available per teacher-directed arrangement. Student choice of seating by session is illustrated in Figure 2.
Figure 2
*Student Chair Selection Frequency by Session Number*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Number</th>
<th>KidsErgo</th>
<th>Standard Chair</th>
<th>Ball Chair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Function Assessment

Baseline data from all of the second-grade students included the SFA scores (n = 24). The mean for the entire group was 63.04 (SD = 13.79). The SFA mean for the LSFA group (n = 6) was 43.17 (SD = 5.492), with scores ranging from 34 to 48. Scores for the HSFA (n = 6) were all identical at 76, with a mean of 76 (SD = 0). Post intervention, the SFA scores changed significantly (p = .006) in the LSFA group, but not in the HSFA or overall group. Changes in the SFA scores are found in Figure 3.

Figure 3
*Change in the SFA score by SFA Group (Low vs High)*

Behavioral Observation Data

Results of a series of three two-way ANOVA tests did not find significant interaction effects of chair type and the SFA group on behavioral observations. A main effect of the SFA group was found for off-task behaviors that were observed significantly (F = 4.54, df = 1, p = .037) more often in the students in the LSFA group when compared to the frequency of off-task behaviors observed in the HSFA group. The students seated in standard chairs were observed initiating tasks less frequently (M = 4.54, SD = 2.47) than students seated on KidsErgo (M = 7.63, SD = 4.43) and the ball chairs (M = 8.00, SD = 6.18). There was no interaction effect of chair type in the analysis of off-task behaviors. No significant interaction or
main effects were observed for chair selection or the SFA group and observations of excessive movement or task initiation. After combining KidsErgo and the ball chair seating to create a new variable, alternative seating, one-way ANOVAs were generated to determine the effect of alternative seating (KidsErgo plus ball chair) on classroom behaviors. One behavior, task initiation, was significantly affected by chair type (alternative versus standard) (F = 5.356, df = 1, p = .024). Figure 4 shows the mean behaviors by seating type, standard versus alternative.

**Figure 4**
*Classroom Behavior Means by Chair Type, Standard Versus Alternative*

![Figure 4](image)

**Discussion**

This study’s purpose was to evaluate the impact of alternative seating (KidsErgo chairs) on the seated behavior of elementary school children in a general education classroom. In this study, our use of dynamic seating options for an entire classroom is an example of a Tier 1 intervention. Under a Tier 1 model, whole class and peer-to-peer comparisons determine whether classroom behaviors and academic performance are typical and appropriate for a grade level. Tier 1 supports are implemented for all of the students in general education and are intended to be preventative and proactive; the occupational therapist provides education and training to teachers and uses a population-focused approach with general education students.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) recognizes dynamic seating as a viable intervention to promote student participation (2015). Time on task (Fedewa et al. 2015), on-task seated behavior (Gochenour & Poskey, 2017), and in-seat behaviors (Metz, 2020) were improved when the students sat on dynamic seating during classroom instruction. Student participation was positively affected by the use of dynamic seating options, similar to the KidsErgo.

The students who were identified by the classroom teacher as having challenges in the general education classroom and those who presented with good overall attention and on-task behavior are...
represented in this study of the effect of the KidsErgo chair. The direct comparison of the effect on the
two groups contributes to the literature by targeting the lowest and highest school function performers in
a classroom setting. The students in this study’s sample (N = 24) were in a general education classroom,
and, to our knowledge, none had been diagnosed with disabilities. The SFA standardization sample (n = 363 [special needs], n = 315 [regular education]) was used to set the criterion score so that 95% of the
students without disabilities scored at or above the criterion score of 72 (maximum score = 100) (Coster et al., 1998). Although none of the students in our small parochial school sample were diagnosed with
disabilities, it is reasonable to conclude that some of the students would have been identified with
disabilities in the public school system. Because our sample’s baseline SFA scores included some below
the criterion, the lowest quartile was labeled LSFA. The students in the lowest and highest quartiles were
selected for observation to document further the behaviors of the students perceived to be the lowest
(LSFA) and highest (HSFA) functioning.

Observations of the students in the HSFA and LSFA groups confirmed the efficacy of alternative
seating as a classroom-wide Tier 1 intervention. Task behavior/completion scores for the LSFA group
significantly improved with alternative seating and the scores of the HSFA group were not adversely
affected. Other studies have concluded that alternative seating options are an effective tool for increasing
attention and work behaviors of students who display distractible behaviors while also serving as a non-
distracting option for students who self-select alternative seats but are not regarded as students with
challenging attentional behaviors (Erwin et al., 2016; Gochenour & Poskey, 2017; Metz et al., 2020;
Seifer & Metz, 2016). The SFA scores are not sensitive to daily changes in attentional behaviors or
environmental factors, like variations in schedules, classroom routines, or student disposition.

Momentary time sampling of student behaviors during math instruction varied between the LSFA
and HSFA groups. These observations were sensitive to the potentially confounding effects of the
classroom environment and individual student factors. As expected, the students in the LSFA group were
observed in off-task behaviors significantly more often than the students in the HSFA group. Using the
SFA to stratify the students into lower and higher functioning groups has provided evidence for variability
in behaviors that contribute to school function. This observation is supported in the literature (Gochenour
& Poskey, 2017). Various types of alternative seating have been studied with the underlying sensory
hypothesis that affording student-directed sensory input can increase seated task behavior
(Gochenour & Poskey, 2017; Reynolds et al., 2017; Stapp, 2019). Therefore, KidsErgo and the ball chair
seating data were combined as alternative seating and compared to standard chair seating. In this study,
task initiation was significantly improved by alternative seating. This is similar to the findings of
Gochenour and Poskey (2017), who found that various dynamic seating improved task-related behaviors.
Dynamic seating supports sensory modulation, which, in turn, prepares the student to initiate and engage
in classroom tasks (Parham & Mailloux, 2015; Stapp, 2018). The LFSA group had the least number of
excessive movements recorded when the majority of students used the KidsErgo chairs in Sessions 2
through 5. The highest rates of excessive movement for the LFSA group occurred in Sessions 1 and 6,
when the students most often sat on standard chairs. These data indicate that observable excessive
movement does diminish for children who display challenges in task behavior/completion when using
alternative seating when compared to standard chairs as found by Gochenour and Poskey (2017) in their
systematic review.

The HSFA group showed the most excessive movement behavior in Sessions 1 and 2 when all of
the students in the group used the KidsErgo chairs. This may have resulted from the students “trying it
out” and getting used to the seat during instruction time. This is consistent with the findings of Seifer and Metz (2016), who reported an initial novelty effect that diminished with use and eventually shifted to increased student attention to the task. The remainder of the observations indicated few instances of excessive movement for the HSFA students in Sessions 3 through 6.

It is essential that occupational therapists are guided by evidence in selecting and implementing interventions in special education services and their expanded role in general education (IDEA, 2004). The results of this study contribute to our understanding of the impact of alternative seating on the students’ learning-related behaviors when provided as a whole class intervention.

**Limitations**

The number of participants monitored (n = 12) is a relatively small sample size and occurred during math instruction. Broad generalizations of the findings are, therefore, limited. The responses of the 12 students in this study suggest a positive effect during a limited math classroom experience across 6 weeks. There is no longitudinal data to follow the 12 students into their next grade level and determine if they continue to self-select alternative seating and the effect that choice has on their learning patterns. Considerations for future studies would include extending a study to more than one classroom, increasing the number of student and teacher participants, collecting data for more than 6 weeks, and follow-up interaction with the participating teachers and students.

**Conclusion**

The KidsErgo chair is a viable alternative seating option for children in elementary school who have a history of difficulty with task behaviors limiting their ability to complete tasks during instruction time. Occupational therapists can offer the KidsErgo chair, alongside regular chairs, stability balls, stools, disco seats, and others, from which students can self-select their seating. In this study, alternative seating improved task initiation in students with lower school functioning and was not distracting, beyond a short novelty stage, for children with higher school functioning. This finding suggests that this chair is a suitable seating alternative for the general student population as a Tier 1 intervention.

**References**


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https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot/vol11/iss2/12
DOI: 10.15453/2168-6408.2040