

Should Teachers Learn how to Formally Assess Behavior? Three Educators' Perspectives

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Abstract

Functional behavior assessment is a technique supported by research, to assess behavior to determine causes of behavior and develop effective behavior interventions. In this article we discuss how special and general education teachers are prepared to assess students when they struggle academically, but are not typically prepared to assess students when they struggle behaviorally. Research shows little consensus about whether teachers can effectively conduct functional behavior assessments while attending to their responsibilities in the classroom. One argument is that the complexity of the process may be prohibitive for teachers to conduct valid functional behavior assessments on their own. Others argue that with training and support, teachers can effectively use functional behavior assessment to address behavior in their classrooms. In this article, three educators (two teachers and a behavior specialist) who have been taught to complete functional behavior assessment give their perspectives on teachers' use of functional behavior assessment in the classroom.

Introduction

Teachers are taught a variety of assessment techniques to help students succeed in school. They learn to assess their students' math and reading skills, their knowledge of social studies and science content and their ability to write. When teachers are faced with a student who is challenged by the subject matter and is struggling, teachers have a variety of assessment methods in their skill set that helps them identify the student's problem and provide instruction to address the problem. Unfortunately, the same is not true when it comes to addressing challenging behavior. For purposes of this paper, challenging behavior is defined as the behavior all teachers, both special education and general education, may be faced with daily in their classrooms such as chronic talking out, off task, verbal aggression and noncompliance.

Although teachers are taught how to assess academic challenges, teachers are not equipped to systematically assess challenging behavior in their students. Instead they may intervene by reacting to the behavior without knowing the cause or reasons for the behavior (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011). A method that has been shown to be an effective way to assess behavior is the functional behavior assessment (Gable, Park & Scott, 2014). While functional behavior assessment (FBA) is a term most associated with special education, FBA is a method that if used proactively, can help all teachers both general and special education, avoid escalating behavior in the classroom and intervene efficiently while behavior is challenging but mild in form (Moreno and Bullock, 2011).

Functional behavior assessment has its roots in applied behavior analysis and consists of a series of methods to analyze the function or causes of challenging behavior in order to create an effective intervention. The premise behind FBA is that all behavior serves some purpose or function related to access to reinforcement. There are two main functions of behavior, these include access to positive reinforcement in the form of an activity, sensory stimulation, a tangible item or attention; and, access to negative reinforcement in the form of escaping or avoiding an activity, attention or sensory stimulation (O'Neill et al, 1997).

Functional behavior assessment may include indirect and direct assessment procedures. For indirect methods the challenging behavior is not observed directly but instead evaluated through the use of behavior rating scales, checklists and interviews with those familiar with the challenging behavior. Direct assessment procedures involve directly observing challenging behavior. A direct assessment may include recording the antecedents, behaviors and consequences of a behavior over time and in a variety of contexts. This method is commonly referred to as the ABC method and allows the assessor to record what happens right before (antecedent) the challenging behavior occurs and what happens right after (consequence) the challenging behavior occurs. The practitioner then can analyze the data and detect patterns in antecedents and consequences and formulate a hypothesis about the function or reason for the behavior, and the events that trigger the behavior. Functional analysis allows the practitioner to test the hypothesis by manipulating various conditions to see if the hypothesis holds true (Cooper, Heron and Heward, 2007; Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin and Lane, 2007). Once an FBA is complete the practitioner can develop a function based intervention. A function based intervention, based on the functional behavior assessment will consist of reinforcement for a replacement behavior that serves the same purpose as the challenging behavior but is more socially acceptable. For example, hand raising would be reinforced instead of shouting out. The

function based intervention may also include changes to the events that typically occur right before the behavior and adjustments to the consequences of the challenging behavior (Umbreit, et al., 2007).

Research on Educators and Functional Behavior Assessment

Research has shown that functional behavior assessment is an effective means to assess challenging behavior and provide information about the behavior to develop function based interventions (Gable et al., 2014, O'Neill, Bundock, Kladis & Hawken, 2015). While widely used by behavior analysts and researchers in clinics, private practice and research settings, the use of FBA by teachers in the schools is limited. Within schools the guidelines are not clear regarding which methods of FBA to use (Scott, Anderson and Spaulding, 2008). Gable et al. (2014) note that school personnel tend to rely on indirect methods of functional behavior assessment out of the need for efficiency. Indirect assessments are the quickest assessment to complete and can be done outside the classroom setting, however they do not necessarily yield valid results. Research indicates that there is little correspondence between results of indirect assessments and direct systematic FBA processes. Consequently, for teachers to use FBA procedures that are effective and valid they would need to be using a variety of FBA methods, not just an indirect assessment method (O'Neill et al., 2015). Thorough functional behavior assessments incorporating both indirect and systematic direct methods are time consuming. The amount of time needed for an FBA is considered to be problematic for teachers who may not have extra time in their classrooms to conduct valid functional behavior assessments as they attend to their students and classroom responsibilities (Scott et al., 2008).

In order to investigate if teachers are using FBA in the schools, Scott et al. (2004) reviewed 12 research studies conducted with students in the schools regarding the implementation of FBA and function based interventions. They found some form of direct or indirect FBA was used and positive results were reported, but the majority of the studies were researcher directed and the teachers in the schools played a limited role implementing the procedures. Scott et al. (2004) suggest that the rigorous requirements of a traditional FBA are not conducive to the general education classroom, making it difficult for teachers to conduct valid FBAs while attending to their teaching duties. Similarly, Allday, Nelson and Russel (2011) conducted a review of 45 research studies regarding teacher involvement in the FBA process. They found that overall, various forms of FBA as well as hypothesis testing and function based intervention were used. However, they found that teachers were not typically involved with collecting data and did not have knowledge of various data collection methods. In addition, they found that teachers were not involved with testing hypotheses developed from direct observations. They concluded these factors may result in FBA processes that may not yield valid results.

When teachers do not have comprehensive training on the methods associated with FBA it makes sense that they would not use functional behavior assessment processes that produce valid results. Research has shown that many teachers are unaware of FBA and do not have the training to implement the various forms of FBA that require experience and expertise. Meyers and Holland (2000) surveyed general and special educators and found that 75% of special educators had heard of FBA but only 42% were trained to conduct FBA. Additionally, they found that 17% of general educators had heard of FBA and of those, only 12% had some training on how to conduct FBA. Similarly, Young and Martinez (2016) surveyed over 700 educators and found that only 20% were familiar with functional behavior assessment.

McCahill, Healy, Lydon and Ramey (2014) reviewed 25 research studies that focused on training instructional aids, teachers and administrators to conduct FBA using some form of indirect and direct assessment methods. Of those studies reviewed four relied on a combination of indirect and direct methods and in 21 of the studies researchers trained educators to use some form of functional analysis where they systematically manipulated variables which were representative of those variables occurring in the classroom. After training, they found that the participants were able to conduct functional behavior assessments and develop hypotheses about the function and in those studies that included interventions, the school personnel were able to implement interventions and reduce challenging behavior. They also found a high degree of treatment integrity. In those studies where the participants were asked about their perceptions of the process the majority reacted positively to the process. McCahill et al. (2014) acknowledge that the types of FBA processes taught and implemented in their review varied and they suggested that there continues to be a lack of agreement about what types of FBA are the most effective for use in the classroom on a daily basis.

The social validity of the FBA processes is another reason suggested that teachers may not be using FBA in their classroom. Social validity has its origin in behavior analysis and refers to determining the acceptability of treatment goals to the client and others affected, the acceptability of the procedures by the client and those implementing the procedures and the validity or social importance of the results (O'Neill et al, 2014). They examined the social validity of the FBA process from the point of view of school personnel who use FBA to assess behavior and develop function based behavior plans. O'Neill et al. (2014) argued that although there is contradictory research about whether educators, after training, can implement FBA procedures effectively and with validity in their busy classroom, there is very little research regarding the acceptability of these procedures to teachers and other educational providers. O'Neill et al. (2014) were interested in determining how acceptable the FBA procedures were to special educators as well as school psychologist and if there would be a difference between these two groups. The FBA procedures included indirect assessment such as interviews, rating scales, questionnaires as well as systematic direct observation and functional analysis. They found that both the special educators and the school psychologists in general had an overall positive perception regarding the usefulness and practicality of a variety of FBA procedures. School psychologists were more concerned than special educators about the time it takes to complete direct FBA procedures. The authors indicate the results may reflect the special educator's ability to spend more time daily with students in the classroom, whereas the school psychologists have to carve out time to observe students in contexts in which challenging behavior occurs.

Three Educators' Perspectives

Within the research on teachers use of FBA in the schools there is little consensus regarding whether teachers can effectively conduct FBAs and develop function based interventions. Consequently, it is important to continue to examine this issue in order to determine if there is a need for pre-service and in-service teachers to learn how to formally assess behavior using functional behavior assessment techniques. One way to do that is to gather information directly from teachers, and other personnel in the schools who use FBA, about how they perceive various FBA processes; which FBA processes they use the most; and, whether they believe they can effectively use FBA procedures to address challenging behavior in their classrooms.

The purpose of this paper is to further explore the attitudes of educators toward FBA through first hand written accounts from three educators who have taken two graduate classes on FBA and function based intervention. The three educators chosen to discuss their experiences for this paper were selected by the first author based on their current position in the school in which they work. One is a special education teacher, one is a general education teacher and the third is a behavior specialist. Each of the educators took and completed two graduate classes with the first author. The first class covered the various forms of functional behavior assessment and data collection procedures and the second class covered single subject research designs, data analysis and intervention based on FBA.

The educators were asked to write about their experiences with functional behavior assessment in their professional lives and were specifically asked to think about how they approached behavior prior to learning about FBA, and how they use their knowledge of FBA after completing the course work. They were also asked to discuss their thoughts on the benefits and disadvantages of educators using FBA to address behavior.

General education teacher

For the past 10 years I have been a general education teacher of students in kindergarten and 1st grade. At no time had I ever heard of functional behavior assessment (FBA) in any form, shape or fashion. I had never even heard of any sort of assessment which could be used to assist with students who routinely struggled with behavior in the classroom, such as chronic talking out, being off task, verbal aggression and noncompliance. When I began taking classes, it was eye opening to learn of such a method to analyze the reason why a student's behavior occurs and how to address it in a proactive manner.

For my first nine years of teaching, I used my instincts when it came to addressing behavior. Basically, depending on the student and what the behavior was, I simply did the best I could with addressing and correcting problem behavior. On some occasions, I would separate the student from others in the classroom usually in a single desk where there was no interaction with others. At other times I sat the student near me for additional support with staying on task. There were also times where I would ask a student to go next door to my partner teacher's classroom for a time out from our classroom. Finally, on rare occasions, I would call down to the office for assistance. Never, had I thought about the function of behavior when intervening in this way. Looking back, I suspect I reinforced the challenging behavior at times since I was not aware of the function.

Now that I have training in completing FBAs, I have begun an FBA on two students in my classroom. One student, who is new, has struggled with being off task for most of her day since Pre-K, preventing success in the learning objectives presented on a daily basis. The other student has difficulty keeping his hands to himself, which has led to several incidents where he is removed from areas such as PE, lunch, library or recess after hitting others. For both students, the challenging behaviors are providing difficulties for them in all areas of the school day and may possibly be increasing. My goal is to address these issues now, before they magnify and become full-blown issues in the near future.

In both cases, I began with using direct assessment procedures in my own classroom. I used the ABC method in which I recorded the antecedents, behavior and the consequences observed during times where the challenging behaviors had tended to present themselves. This was done with the assistance of an instructional aide in the classroom. It was simply too difficult to gather the information while conducting class with 22 students in the room. I also observed

one of the students in physical education and also during lunch. This was somewhat helpful, but I felt the behavior changed due to my presence in the environment.

Next, I used indirect assessments completing structured interviews with others on staff who have also observed the students challenging behaviors during their class time. I also gave one individual a questionnaire to complete on their own. For each student I also met with their parents and interviewed each of them for further information, as well as, to gain their perspective. In both cases, I then analyzed the data to formulate my hypothesis as to the function of the behavior and the events which bring about the behaviors. My next step is the functional analysis. Although this is still new to me, I feel it is becoming an invaluable tool that will help in numerous ways. By combining the direct observation with the indirect assessment and making use of a functional analysis, I feel I am getting the most information possible to conduct an effective FBA.

As a teacher studying to be a behavior analyst, I am doing my best to complete this in my classroom, but find it quite difficult to do it all. Without the assistance of an additional person in my room, such as the instructional aide, I have struggled to fully focus accurately on collecting data without distractions. I do not want any of these distractions to interfere with the careful and objective observations I need for my data collection process. Getting indirect information from others is easier, when I find the time to interview individuals who interact regularly with the students. The functional analysis has been another challenge. Manipulating what happens before and/or after the challenging behavior is not the difficult part of the functional analysis, I find it almost impossible to continuously record data with a full class of students and activities going on.

In my opinion, conducting an FBA and developing a function based intervention should become the norm for teachers to address challenging behaviors that interfere with not only that student, but also create issues for the entire class and in some cases other classes nearby. All teachers should be trained on FBA to have a useful tool for assessing challenging behaviors and to be able to develop productive interventions for the good of their students. The disadvantages for teachers conducting functional behavior assessments I foresee are time and effort. Many teachers simply feel they just don't have time for one more responsibility pushed upon them and others may not see the benefit for putting forth the effort. However, with proper training and additional support, I believe a behavior specialist and the teacher can make a difference in the lives of the students who have behavior challenges interfering with their success.

Special Education Teacher

I am an elementary In Class Support Teacher who primarily works with students in 3rd-5th grade. Before being trained to do an FBA, I did not fully appreciate how function drives behavior. I ended up addressing the student's behavior instead of the function driving it. Consequently, I often contributed to the perpetuation of the very behavior I was trying to deal with. For example, if a student was continually blurting out or interrupting, I would address that behavior. I might have done a social lesson on the appropriate ways to get the teacher's attention, or had a discussion with the student about expected behaviors in the classroom. Either way, the student got my attention. If the function of that student's behavior was attention, I fed right into it, and the behavior would intensify.

As a special education teacher, I was familiar with Functional Behavior Assessments, at least from the perspective of the forms completed by the school psychologist during the process of developing a student's behavior intervention plan. The template used was scripted, and did not

reflect the kind of conclusions I experienced in my FBA classes. Prior to my training, I did not realize how information for an FBA was gathered and how useful that information could be. Upon completing the classes, I now do my own FBAs. The school psychologist is more than glad to help, proof, and offer suggestions, but doing FBA's for my students has helped me have a better understanding of my students and allows me to best meet their needs. I stopped grouping my student by behaviors and started doing more grouping by behavior plus function. For example, in math class I had five students demonstrating work refusal by not completing a math worksheet the class was given. After a quick informal assessment, I determined that four of the students could verbally explain the process of dividing whole numbers by a fraction. Three of the four students have very slow processing speed, and, from experience, I knew they get anxious about keeping up with their peers if the assignment is lengthy. They can doddle or completely shut down in avoidance. I told them to choose odds or evens and they only had to complete those problems. All three started working and completed their assignment. The fourth student, who also understood the math concept, was clowning around. I knew, from experience with this student, that he desperately wanted attention. I negotiated time with me doing a preferred activity after the assignment was completed in exchange for completing the assignment. He started and finished. The fifth student was not able to explain the math concept to me. He hates to admit that he does not know something and was trying to avoid the assignment. I worked a couple problems with him and, in the process, created some mentor solutions that he could reference as he worked through the rest of the problems. He started and finished. In summary, all five students were refusing to work on their assignment. Of those five, one student was seeking attention, three students were trying to avoid the assignment because of the number of problems that had to be completed and one was trying to avoid because he didn't understand the concept he was supposed to be practicing. If I had not attempted to understand the function behind why these students were not doing their assignment I would have probably ended up doing what a lot of teachers do: prompt, prompt, threaten, prompt, prompt, threaten... and still have not helped my students make progress.

Taking ownership of the FBA processes allows me more input developing a functional behavior intervention plan that has the best chance of being successful. Not only do I work in partnership with the general education teachers to collect data for the FBA, creating the behavior plan is equally collaborative. It is imperative to consider the parent's or teacher's skill level, resources, schedule and even her vision for her classroom when developing a behavior intervention plan. I could independently come up with the most elaborate, inventive plan, but if it is not contextually sound for those responsible for implementing it, that plan is going to fail.

Conducting an FBA takes time. It takes time to gather information for informal assessments, do direct observations, and develop a plan. In the past, our school psychologist would always produce the FBA and behavior intervention plan and simply present them to us. The time spent is worth it because the interventions are much more likely to be effective. First, through the process I develop a deeper understanding of what is driving my student's behaviors. Secondly, by working collaboratively with the other teachers this information is shared and the students starts with a team of adults that are willing to work together to provide the consistent and predictable environment needed for success. Finally, behavior is fluid, not fixed. Conducting the FBA and putting a behavior intervention plan in place is just the start of the process. I still have to be able to be flexible and responsive to how different social and

environmental settings affect my students' behaviors. Authoring my own FBA's is conducive for follow through including any future adjustments.

I do think a possible barrier to widespread use of FBA is the format some schools use. This can promote more of a 'form letter' type approach, which is not conducive to the in-depth investigation that should be done. I worked with these forms for several years and never gleaned from them the type of information that the direction observation narrative format yields.

In summary, FBA has been a wonderful tool to add to my skill set. Using it effectively, can help guide teachers in dealing with the most difficult behaviors. However, thinking functionally is also a mindset. I am on a team of seven other special education teachers and 14 special education paraprofessionals. In this past year, our conversations about behavior have shifted. We talk more, both among ourselves and with the general education teachers, about the functions of those behaviors; how to avoid inadvertently reinforcing them; and what a suitable replacement behavior would be. We do this without a formal FBA, because some behaviors, if not most behaviors are not persistent and do not require a formal FBA. The more we understand the function of behaviors the more we are able to intervene early on before behaviors become persistent. Thinking functionally should be foundational to every teacher's behavior management plan. Looking beyond the behavior allows teachers to stay empathetic; it keeps the focus on the student as a person; and, most importantly, it allows teachers to avoid attributions while gaining useful insights that will best help students.

Behavior Specialist

Prior to working as a Behavior Specialist, I worked as school psychologist. As a school psychologist I had training and experience completing FBAs that included observations, parent interviews, and teacher interviews. Since I have completed graduate level coursework in functional behavior assessment and functional behavior interventions, I complete FBAs with a more in depth understanding of behavior and functions of behavior. While I follow the same format of observations and interviews, I have greater awareness of how the environment, consequences and antecedents affect behavior. Therefore, my observations are more precise and my interviews are more focused. I can more accurately identify the function of the behavior and consider how the environment or people in the environment act on the behavior. This allows me to design more effective and focused interventions. Previously, I introduced multiple interventions without consideration of the function, now I have knowledge about how to plan and implement function based interventions. Additionally, I use data collection throughout the intervention to evaluate effectiveness, and to make changes in the behavior plan as needed.

When I am assigned a case, the first thing I do is observe the student in the classroom. Then I meet with the teacher to complete a functional interview. I get an understanding of the target behavior and when the behavior most often occurs. I follow up with ABC observations at the times the teacher identified the behavior to occur most often. Then, I meet with the parent to get information about how the student behaves at home and I complete a functional interview with the parent.

If the student is able to answer questions and has some understanding of his own behavior I include a student interview in the FBA. For example, recently, I worked with a 10 years-old student with good insight into his own behavior. He was motivated to change his

behavior, so I was able to include him in the intervention planning by allowing him to choose the type of behavior monitoring tool he wanted to use. As his behavior improved, I discussed self-monitoring with him and he helped design the self-monitoring form that was used. When a student is able to participate at this level in the FBA and intervention plan, it helps create buy in and accountability.

Since availability of time interferes with the ability to complete a thorough FBA, I have worked to include teachers in the process. I have taught a few teachers how to take ABC data by using a simple form and modeling. This has been helpful with completing FBAs when time is limited. I am able to corroborate the teacher's data with my own observations and interviews, and then plan effective function based interventions. However, it is difficult for teachers to take data and run their classrooms at the same time, therefore, I have been successful in getting only a few teachers to participate in the FBA process. Also, in my position as a behavior specialist in my district, I work with a paraprofessional who has been trained in data collection and implementing function based interventions. She often works with me to collect baseline data and to complete ABC observations. Additionally, with my guidance, she implements the plan in the classroom and models the intervention for the teacher. This has been most helpful in allowing me to work around the barrier of limited time.

The benefit of conducting FBA and developing function based intervention is that more effective interventions can be implemented and there will be better outcomes for students. When behavior can be managed before it becomes problematic and disruptive, teachers can better focus on instruction for all of their students. The classroom environment is more conducive to learning. The amount of time it takes to complete a thorough FBA is the only disadvantage of the use of FBAs in the public schools. Generally, behavior specialists have a high caseload so it is difficult to devote the time needed to conduct FBAs for every case. The demands of the classroom interfere with the ability of teachers to focus the time and attention needed to conduct an FBA. Additionally, teachers usually do not have the needed training to complete FBAs. While time is a constraint, taking the time to complete an FBA and develop a strong behavior plan saves time in the long run. Interventions are more successful when the function of the behavior has been considered.

Based on my experiences working as a behavior specialist, I believe that it would be beneficial for general education and special education teachers to learn to conduct FBAs. Although teachers may have too many demands in the classroom to conduct an FBA independently, with proper training, they could collaborate with behavior specialists to do the job. A foundational knowledge of how antecedents impact behavior, and how consequences maintain behavior, will help teachers to identify appropriate and effective interventions before behaviors escalate. When there is limited understanding of the function of behavior, teachers tend to try any strategy that they may have learned from colleagues, a workshop, or the internet (Teachers Pay Teachers and Pinterest are popular resources for many teachers). While these may all be good strategies, if it is not an intervention based on the function of the behavior, it can do more harm than good. Often teachers inadvertently reinforce the behavior by using an intervention that is not function based and they do not recognize when they are reinforcing the behavior. When teachers have a better understanding of behavior and function they are more successful at managing behavior before it becomes significant and a disruption to the classroom environment.

Conclusion

While this paper does not resolve the question about whether educators should learn how to formally assess behavior, it does shed light on the issues surrounding the question. The educators agreed with the research that time is an issue when it comes to conducting valid FBAs, for teachers running a classroom or behavior specialists having large caseloads (Scott et al.,2004). The time intensive process of conducting thorough FBAs requires support from colleagues and para-professionals. While the educators agreed with previous research about the time intensive nature of the FBA process, they also supported previous findings about the social validity of the process (O'Neill et al., 2015). Each educator expressed an appreciation for learning how to assess behavior and learning to think functionally about behavior. Each indicated that the FBA process resulted in better outcomes when it came to behavior intervention as opposed to when they would intervene without knowing the function of behavior. Each was supportive of all educators learning how to conduct an FBA to learn how to address the function of behavior.

Whether teachers have the time or desire to conduct their own FBAs or leave it up to consultants or school based behavior specialists, it is important for them to know how to assess behavior. As indicated by the educators, when teachers understand functions of behavior and how to assess behavior they are better equipped to participate in the behavior assessment and planning if consultants are required. Teachers' participation in the process assists consultants or school based behavior specialists design interventions that meet the needs of the student as well as the teacher in the context of the classroom. Additionally, teachers who understand the foundations behind functional behavior assessment will observe behavior in terms of function during their normal classroom activities. Subsequently, they will be able to address minor classroom nuisance behavior effectively and efficiently before the behavior escalates to the point it interferes with learning in the classroom and requires a complete functional behavior assessment. Educating pre-service and in-service teachers and other educational staff about functional behavior assessment should be undertaken by schools as well as teacher preparation programs. It would be of benefit for all educators to have another tool at their disposal to not only address their students' academic needs but behavior needs as well.

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