

How Do Teachers, Trained in Techniques of Functional Behavior Assessment, Use Their Knowledge and Skills in the Classroom: A Follow-up Study

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Abstract

To make the case for pre-service teachers to learn how to conduct functional behavior assessments (FBA) and create function-based behavior supports, this study aimed to determine if, once trained, teachers apply their knowledge in some form in their classroom. Researchers have demonstrated that both teachers and students benefit from teachers learning to conduct FBAs and creating function-based behavior supports. Nineteen teachers who had completed a master's level course covering functional behavior assessment concepts and procedures were surveyed to determine if they used their knowledge from the course to conduct formal FBAs to contribute to an individualized education plan (IEP) and in support of their classroom management efforts. Additionally, teachers were asked when they did not use formal FBA procedures if they attempted to determine the function of challenging behavior informally through daily observations of their students. Overall findings demonstrate the teachers used the FBA skills acquired during training both formally and through informal daily observations, with the majority indicating they applied knowledge of FBA during their informal daily observations of students. Teachers identified the main obstacle to conducting formal FBA as a lack of time, given their other responsibilities in the classroom. Implications for educator preparation are discussed.

Keywords: Functional Behavior Assessment, function-based behavior support, challenging behavior, teacher preparation

Challenging behavior in the classroom is a problem most teachers will face. For this paper, challenging behavior is defined as those behaviors a teacher may typically experience in the classroom, such as off-task, noncompliance, talking out and verbal aggression. Severe behaviors that result in physical injury to self or others and require the attention of behavior specialists are not the focus of this paper. Challenging classroom behaviors pose a problem for teachers and students in the classroom environment when they become chronic and interfere with learning. Teachers who are not skilled in managing behavior in the classroom may experience undue stress and may leave the profession prematurely. Additionally, students who present with behavior challenges in the classroom may suffer academic losses as challenging behavior interferes with learning (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011).

Teachers who know how to assess behavior are at an advantage when faced with challenging behavior. Assessing behavior to determine the function or purpose of the behavior is the first step in creating an effective intervention (Gable et al., 2014). The functional behavior assessment (FBA), while primarily associated with special education and mandates from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in public schools, is a tool available to all educators. The FBA consists of a series of techniques used to identify antecedent events that set the stage for challenging behavior and consequences that maintain behavior. Indirect assessments consist of interviews, checklists and surveys completed by those most familiar with the student engaged in the challenging behavior. Direct observations include antecedent, behavior, consequence (ABC) recordings where the events that occur prior to the challenging behavior (antecedents) and the consequences that follow the behavior are recorded.

Patterns of antecedents are identified to determine those events that most likely predict the occurrence of challenging behavior. Additionally, patterns of consequences are analyzed to determine how the behavior is reinforced. Subsequently, a hypothesis about the function or purpose of the behavior is developed. Finally, the functional analysis involves manipulating the environment to recreate conditions under which behavior occurs to test the hypothesized function (O'Neill, et al., 2015).

Behavior is considered to have two main functions or purposes. Behavior results in positive reinforcement in the form of access to attention, tangibles, activities, or sensory stimulation, and behavior results in negative reinforcement in the form of escape or avoidance of activities and sensory stimulation (Umbreit, et al., 2007). Once the antecedents and functions are determined, strategies are developed to modify antecedents when appropriate and reinforce replacement behaviors that serve the same purpose (function) as the challenging behaviors. Behavior interventions based on results of a functional behavior assessment have been widely researched and shown to be an effective means to address challenging behavior (Gable et al., 2014)

Teachers are uniquely positioned to assess the behavior of their students in the classroom. Teachers spend the most time with the student in the context of the behavior and can observe behavior continuously. This is not true of behavior specialists and school psychologists who must schedule observations with teachers and who may have large caseloads prohibiting them from observing behavior at ideal times or for extended periods. Consequently, it makes sense for teachers to have the skills to assess and subsequently address persistent mild challenging behavior found in the classroom before those behaviors escalate in severity and impact the educational attainment of the affected students and require more intensive supports.

Literature Review

Research on Training Teachers to Conduct FBA

Researchers have shown that teachers and students benefit from teachers learning to conduct FBAs and develop behavior supports based on results of the FBA. Using the Functional Assessment Hypothesis Formulation Protocol, Maag and Larson (2006) trained a teacher to conduct indirect and direct FBA, develop a hypothesis about the function of behavior, and design interventions based on the function. They found the teacher substantially reduced challenging behaviors in two students. Similarly, Renshaw et al. (2008), selected four general education teachers from a sample of 13 and trained them to use

function-based support. The teachers were taught to identify and define challenging target behaviors, conduct various forms of FBA, identify the function of behavior, develop a function-based intervention plan, and implement and collect data on the intervention. They measured the effects of their training by assessing teachers' knowledge; and assessing the change in student behavior. The authors found gains in teachers' knowledge after the training and their efforts resulted in improved student behavior. Christensen, Renshaw, Caldarella and Young (2012) trained a general educator to use the techniques of function-based support for students who are at risk for behavior disorders. They found the teacher increased her knowledge of principles and procedures associated with function-based support and was able to apply her knowledge of function-based support resulting in positive student behavioral outcomes.

Stoiber and Gettinger (2011) took a slightly different approach and compared an experimental group of teachers with a control group of teachers. They trained 35 teachers on functional behavior assessment, and positive behavior supports and compared them with a control group of 35 teachers who did not receive training. They found the teachers in the experimental group had greater knowledge and ability to apply FBA and positive behavior support procedures than the control group. The experimental group also reported more confidence in addressing challenging behavior after the training than before. Stoiber and Gettinger (2011) found the behavior of the targeted children in the teachers' classrooms in the experimental group improved significantly. There were fewer behavior challenges in the classrooms of the teachers in the experimental group than the control group after the intervention.

McCahill et al. (2014) conducted a review of 25 research articles to examine the effectiveness of training staff in educational settings to utilize functional behavior assessment procedures. From the review, they found the focus of the studies was primarily on school personnel dealing with mild challenging behavior. The outcome of training across the studies resulted in participants learning the skills to conduct various forms of FBA, and for those studies that included an intervention, success in reducing challenging behavior. They noted there were multiple methodological differences across the studies. For example, less than half the studies trained staff to create behavior interventions based on the results of the FBA, and none of the studies included training on all forms of functional behavior assessment. Furthermore, they found most of the studies reviewed did not include follow-up data on skill maintenance after training.

Follow-Up Research of Teachers Post-Training

The research shows that various approaches to training teachers to conduct functional behavior assessment and create function-based supports are effective. What is not clear is if once trained in FBA and function-based behavior intervention techniques teachers use those skills in the school after the training activities and support has ceased. Samudre et al. (2020), in their review of research on FBA training for general educators, found those studies they reviewed did not include follow-up information with the participants when researchers were no longer providing support. Strickland-Cohen et al. (2016) included a follow-up phase when implementing a training package to teach 36 educators to conduct FBA and create behavior support plans. They surveyed those educators 15 weeks after the training to determine if they used the skills they acquired during the training. They found that 58% of the participants had either conducted an FBA or led a team to create a behavior support plan. They also found that those who had used the skills could do so because it was part of their job responsibilities. The participants identified the primary barrier to conducting FBAs and creating behavior support plans was lack of time to devote to the task.

Purpose

To advocate for pre-service teachers to learn to conduct FBA and create behavior supports based on FBA, it is important to assess whether teachers, once trained, use the skills they acquire well after training has terminated. It makes little sense to promote training in FBA and function-based support plans if teachers cannot or do not use those skills independent of the training. The FBA process can be time-consuming and technically cumbersome for teachers given their other duties, making it less likely educators would use the formal techniques (Scott et al., 2010). Consequently, to follow up on teachers' use of FBA after training, it is important to not only assess their use of formal indirect and direct FBA techniques, but also the informal application of the FBA skills they acquired. For the purposes of this paper, formal FBA was defined as FBA that included setting aside time to conduct indirect assessment (surveys, questionnaires, checklists, rating scales) and to observe students to complete a direct observation ABC form. Informal application of skills is defined as teachers using their knowledge of functions of behavior and FBA in their daily observations of students in the classroom to identify antecedents that evoke behavior and consequences that maintain the behavior, to determine the function of the behavior.

The current research aims to expand the knowledge base regarding how teachers use FBA once trained in the techniques and concepts associated with the assessment and intervention process. The focus of the study was on how teachers who had taken a course on behavior assessment as part of a master's program in

special education used their knowledge of functions of behavior and functional behavior assessment in the schools in which they worked. The following questions were the focus of the research:

1. After completing the course, did the teachers conduct various forms of a formal FBA (indirect or direct ABC), determine the function of behavior, and develop function based behavior interventions as part of an individualized education plan (IEP) and/or as part of their regular classroom management?
2. If the teachers did not conduct formal FBA, did they informally assess functions of behavior and FBA to try to understand challenging behavior and come up with solutions through their daily observations of students?
3. What obstacles, if any, did teachers face in conducting FBA?
4. How did teachers respond to challenging behavior prior to learning methods surrounding FBA and function-based intervention?

Method

Survey

The survey was developed using Google Forms. Demographic information collected included whether the respondents were general or special education teachers; how long they taught after completing the class and whether they taught in an elementary, middle or high school. The survey consisted of questions regarding how often, on average, the respondents had conducted indirect and direct ABC functional behavior assessments; determined function based on assessment and, wrote or assisted in writing behavior plans based on the FBA as part of a formal individualized education plan (IEP) for special education services, and/or as an approach to manage behavior in their classroom. Further, respondents were queried about how often they conducted informal observations of students and used their knowledge of functions of behavior and FBA procedures to understand student behavior, even if they did not conduct formal assessments. A four-point Likert scale with never at one end and often (at least twice a month) on the other was utilized for respondents to rate how frequently they applied the skills related to FBA in their role as a teacher in a classroom. Furthermore, similar to Strickland-Cohen et al. (2016), respondents were asked to identify any obstacles they faced in utilizing methods of FBA. For this question respondents were given a list of potential obstacles including lack of administrative support for FBA outside an IEP; not enough time in the day; no need for FBA, and not knowing enough about FBA to use it professionally. Respondents could check all that applied. Finally, respondents were asked to describe their approach to

addressing challenging behavior before they learned about functions of behavior, functional behavior assessment and function-based interventions.

Participants

Students who were seeking a master's degree in special education and had taken a 15- week long, master's level special education course covering concepts and techniques of functional behavior assessment and function-based intervention were queried. The course was delivered online, and instruction consisted of recorded and synchronous lectures, readings, and supplemental videos over weekly topics. Students in the course were taught the concepts of positive and negative reinforcement; functions of behavior; identifying and defining target behaviors; writing behavioral objectives; running preference assessments; conducting FBA (both indirect and direct observation narrative ABC); analyzing FBA results; identifying antecedents and functions of behavior and developing behavior intervention plans based on the results of an FBA.

For the class, students were required to obtain informed consent from a subject on whom they could practice the various FBA skills listed above. Toward that end, students were given various assignments and they submitted the assignments to the discussion board for the instructor and classmates to review. For example, early in the semester, students were required to identify a challenging behavior (target behavior) and define that behavior. In the following weeks after receiving instruction, students practiced conducting functional behavior assessments on the target behavior. Students submitted indirect behavior assessments in the form of questionnaires and a direct observation ABC narrative chart. The students received timely feedback to their assessments in the discussion board and submitted corrections when necessary. Throughout the course students were able to practice each step of the FBA process including analyzing assessments and developing a behavior intervention plan. For the final project, students were required to choose a new target behavior to assess and go through the process independently.

Students in the course included general and special educators in public schools and those who worked in clinics delivering applied behavior analysis services. The course was offered once a year and those students who were teachers in the public schools and enrolled in the course over three years from 2018 through 2020 were

included, consequently, there were 55 potential respondents. A record review yielded the students' email addresses, and an email with a link to the survey was sent out. After six weeks of the initial request a reminder email was sent, followed by one more reminder six weeks later. Those in the potential pool of respondents were asked to complete the survey if they were currently teaching in the classroom or were teaching after they completed the course.

Forty-five of 55 email addresses were functional, and of those, 19 responded to the survey for a 42% return rate. Eighteen of the 19 respondents (94%) were special education teachers, and one was a general education teacher. Sixty-eight percent were employed at an elementary school, 16% at a middle school or junior high, and 16% were employed at a high school. Twenty-one percent of the respondents indicated they were in the classroom less than a year after completing the course, 16% indicated they were in the classroom a year after completing the course and 63% indicated they were in the classroom for two or more years after completing the course.

Results

Respondents were asked if they used their FBA skills to contribute to a behavior intervention plan when it is part of a formal individualized education plan (IEP). On a four-point scale from never to often, 58% indicated they never or rarely conducted an indirect or a direct ABC assessment. In comparison, 42% indicated they sometimes or often conducted an indirect and direct ABC assessment. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents indicated they never or rarely determined the function of behavior based on indirect and direct behavior assessment. In contrast, 42% maintained they sometimes or often determined function based on the indirect and direct assessment. Sixty-four percent indicated they rarely or never contributed to or wrote behavior intervention plans based on the results of the FBA, whereas 36% indicated they sometimes or often did. See Table 1.

Table 1

Respondents' use of formal FBA methods as part of an IEP

<i>I _____ for an IEP</i>	Never	Rarely (less than once a month)	Sometimes (at least once a month)	Often (two or more times a month)
conduct indirect assessments (surveys, interviews, record reviews)	42%	16%	21%	21%
conduct direct ABC assessment	47%	11%	26%	16%
determine function of behavior based on indirect or direct ABC assessments	47%	11%	16%	26%
write or help develop a behavior intervention plan based on function of behavior	32%	32%	16%	20%

Respondents were asked if they used FBA in their classrooms as their general approach to managing classroom behavior. Forty-eight percent of the respondents indicated they sometimes or often conducted indirect assessments, and 42% noted they conducted direct ABC assessments, determined function of behavior based on

indirect and direct ABC assessment, and wrote or contributed to a behavior intervention plan. Over fifty percent of the respondents noted they never or rarely used formal FBA techniques or determined the function of behavior in the classroom. See Table 2.

Table 2

Respondents' use of formal FBA methods as part of classroom management

<i>I _____ in my classroom as part of my approach to manage behavior</i>	Never	Rarely (less than once a month)	Sometimes (at least once a month)	Often (two or more times a month)
conduct indirect assessments (surveys, interviews, record reviews)	47%	5%	26%	22%
conduct direct ABC assessment	47%	11%	26%	16%
determine function of behavior based on indirect or direct ABC assessment	42%	16%	26%	16%
Write or help develop a behavior intervention plan based on function of behavior	37%	21%	11%	31%

To address times when respondents were not using formal FBA procedures, they were asked how they used their knowledge of functions of behavior and functional behavior assessment to informally assess challenging behavior. All the respondents indicated they sometimes or often tried to identify antecedent and consequence conditions through their daily observations of students. All the respondents noted they sometimes or often try to

identify the function of behavior through their daily observations. Finally, all but one of the respondents indicated they sometimes or often use their understanding of antecedent conditions and functions of challenging behavior to change behavior. See Table 3.

Table 3

Respondents’ use of informal observation to assess behavior

<i>When I do not conduct FBA procedures in my classroom</i>	Never	Rarely (less than once a month)	Sometimes (at least once a month)	Often (two or more times a month)
I try to identify antecedent conditions that lead to challenging behavior through informal observations of my students.			16%	84%
I try to identify consequence conditions that follow challenging behavior through informal observations of my students.			26%	74%
I try to identify the function of challenging behavior through informal observations of my students.			26%	74%
I use my understanding of the antecedent conditions and function of challenging behavior to change the behavior.		5%	21%	74%

Respondents were asked to report the obstacles they experienced in implementing a formal FBA. Twenty-six percent of the respondents indicated a lack of administrative support for FBA outside an IEP. Five percent indicated they did not conduct FBA regularly because student behavior was not problematic and there was no need. Five percent indicated they did not feel they knew enough about FBA to use it professionally. Fifty-two percent of the respondents identified there was not enough time in the school day to conduct a formal FBA and attend to all their responsibilities in the classroom. Twenty-one percent reported they did not experience any obstacles to using FBA.

Finally, respondents were asked to describe their approach to managing challenging behavior in their classroom before learning about functions of behavior, FBA and function-based interventions. Below are the representative responses:

“Prior to learning this information, I would manage behaviors by trial and error. It was not as methodical as what I currently do.”

“Prior to learning about functions of behavior, I would come to label students as “bad kids.” Now I know and believe there is a cause for every behavior.”

“I would have to call for assistance from other members of our special education administrative team which would sometimes take a couple of weeks before they could come into my classroom to help with behaviors.”

“I used a color behavior system for everyone. I did not understand that behaviors have a function. I did not know how to conduct a functional behavior assessment or create a function-based intervention.”

“My approach was mostly reactive instead of proactive. I would send students to the office-even if their function was escape. Now I know better. I anticipate what they will be doing, and I consider the function of the behavior.”

Discussion

The results constitute an encouraging extension of the research on teachers and FBA. The findings suggest that once teachers have learned the techniques of FBA and function-based behavior supports, they will use those formal techniques after the training both for contributions to IEPs and to manage classroom behavior. Nearly half of the respondents reported they continued to use indirect and direct observation FBA techniques to determine the function of behavior both for the purposes of contributing to a behavior plan in an IEP and to support their routine classroom behavior management. Moreover, the results also shed light on how teachers, once they learned the concepts and processes surrounding FBA, innovatively use that information by simplifying the formal processes and trying to determine the function of behavior through their daily observations and interactions with their students.

The results may be explained in part by the obstacles the respondents encountered in conducting functional behavior assessments. Approximately a quarter of the respondents indicated they did not have administrative support to conduct FBA outside of an IEP; one respondent indicated student behavior was such that there was no need for FBA. Another noted they did not feel they knew enough about FBA to use it professionally. Further, the majority indicated there was not enough time to use the formal FBA tools and craft behavior supports, given their other responsibilities in the classroom. These obstacles

may explain why more than half of the respondents indicated they never or rarely conducted formal FBA procedures. Nevertheless, all the respondents reported when they did not conduct a formal FBA, they attempted to understand behavior through their observations and interactions with their students.

Scott et al. (2010) suggested the FBA process could be simplified by retaining the basic concepts but doing away with the professional jargon and formalized process. They proposed educators could ask themselves a series of questions starting with what the behavior is; where and when it occurs; what purpose the behavior serves for the student; and what behavior may take its place so the student could get the same result. Similarly, Allday (2018) suggested that teachers who understand the basic functions of behavior and functional behavior assessment can think functionally about behavior to informally assess behavior and create behavior interventions. Allday (2018) stressed that thinking functionally about behavior should not replace formal FBA procedures for severe behavior but can be helpful to teachers in their daily interactions with mild challenging behavior in the classroom. The responses to the informal use of FBA demonstrate that while there may be obstacles to using formal behavior assessment methods, teachers still benefit from learning about functions of behavior and various behavior assessment and intervention techniques. The results suggest that upon training, teachers adopt an approach to behavior that is function-based, even if they do not regularly conduct formal functional behavior assessments.

The written responses to the survey reflect the respondents' lack of knowledge about functions of behavior and effective behavior intervention before enrolling in the course. One respondent indicated she would label students as "bad" instead of focusing attention on the behavior and its purpose/function. Others wrote their approach to behavior challenges was largely trial and error and reactive because they were not aware of functions of behavior and how to assess behavior to determine the function. These themes further support the idea that teachers benefit from training to address challenging behavior through behavior assessment and function-based intervention. Research has shown that before training on FBA and function-based intervention many teachers have limited knowledge of the functions of behavior and how to assess behavior to determine the function (Meyers & Holland, 2000; Young and Martinez, 2016). As a result, they may approach behavior challenges reactively with reprimands, loss of privileges, or removal from the classroom and inadvertently reinforce the challenging behavior. Many of the respondents in the present survey reflected on the ineffective approaches they took to address challenging behavior prior to learning about FBA and

function-based interventions. After training, the respondents were able to contrast their previous methods of behavior intervention with methods based on understanding the function of behavior and creating function-based behavior supports.

Implications for Educator Preparation Programs

Educator preparation programs in Texas are required to reference the state educator performance standards to develop the curriculum in their programs of study (19Texas Administrative Code, §235.1, 2019). The Teacher Standards (19 Texas Administrative Code, §149.1001, 2014) represent the performance standards that serve as a guide for training, professional development, and assessment across all certification areas. While there is no specific reference to behavior assessment, Standard 4C(i) refers generally to teachers being able to implement behavior management systems that promote learning in the classroom environment (19 Texas Administrative Code, §149.1001, 2014). A review of the Texas educator standards across certification areas yields language similar to what is found in the Teacher Standards with regard to behavior management systems. The exception is the Special Education Certificate Standards (EC-6), which specifically references teachers' knowledge of FBA to collect and analyze data to create behavior interventions (19 Texas Administrative Code §235.131, 2020). Knowledge of FBA is included in special education certificate standards as formal FBA is mandated by IDEA for students who engage in behavior that interferes with learning. However, knowledge of FBA is not a standard found across other certification areas, potentially leaving teachers unprepared to assess challenging behavior in the classroom.

Texas educator preparation programs would do well to evaluate whether they are offering pre-service teachers instruction in functional behavior assessment and function based intervention as a component of classroom management across all certifications. While Texas teacher certification standards do not specifically require all teachers to have knowledge of FBA, all teachers are required to implement behavior management systems that foster a positive learning environment. Classroom behavior management systems include promoting positive behaviors; maintaining student engagement; establishing and maintaining expectations; creating a predictable and structured classroom environment; and addressing challenging behavior (Flower et al. 2017). FBA is an essential tool for teachers to draw on as part of their classroom behavior management repertoire when faced with challenging behavior. Teachers who conduct an FBA can identify stimuli that evoke and maintain challenging

behavior and create function-based behavior supports that encourage positive behavior. Teachers who are not familiar with FBA may respond to challenging behavior by drawing on consequences that are built into the classroom behavioral expectations for all the students. The latter approach will likely prove ineffective. For example, a teacher may have established a classroom rule that students who are off task lose points after two verbal prompts to return to task. The teacher continually prompts a student to get back on task and verbally engages with the student when points are deducted. Over time, the teacher finds the off-task behavior continues to occur despite the consequences imposed. An FBA would most likely reveal the function of the behavior to be access to attention. The teacher, without the aid of an FBA inadvertently reinforces the behavior because the student is getting attention for being off task. The FBA results would lead to a very different approach, as the teacher would stop giving attention for off task behavior and only provide attention when the student was on task and engaging in other positive classroom behaviors.

When teachers are not prepared to address challenging behavior in their classrooms, behavior may escalate and result in a learning environment detrimental to all students in the classroom. Additionally, teachers who are ill equipped to assess and manage challenging behavior may experience job dissatisfaction and leave the profession prematurely (Flower et al. 2017). The outcomes of this study suggest that it would be beneficial for pre-service teachers to be exposed to functional behavior assessment and function-based behavior supports as required training. Having a tool to assess behavior is as important for teachers as having tools to assess academic skills. A teacher does not attempt to help a struggling student in an academic subject without first assessing the problem and determining what type of academic support the student needs. The

same should hold true for challenging behavior. A functional behavior assessment is a tool teachers can use to assess mild challenging behavior in the classroom. When teachers assess the function of behavior through formal or informal means, they are better able to find solutions to the challenging behavior before it becomes unmanageable and interrupts instructional time. Teachers with FBA skills can support students who may have a tendency toward challenging behavior, both behaviorally and academically and potentially reduce referrals to special education services.

Limitations and Future Research

The results, though encouraging, must be viewed through the lens of a small sample with limited demographic information. The study did not include information about respondents' routes to certification and how long they have been teaching. Additionally, of the 19 respondents only one was a general education teacher. Given the small sample and limited demographic information, an analysis of demographic factors associated with teachers' adoption of FBA was not conducted. Future research will be conducted on larger samples of general and special education teachers to further identify if and how teachers apply FBA in the classroom and, to identify if there are any differences among teachers based on demographics such as route to certification, years teaching and gender. Furthermore, to assess and promote teacher training in functional behavior assessment and function-based supports researchers must continue to show evidence that teachers and their students benefit from teachers' having knowledge of FBA and function-based behavior supports. Toward that end, student behavioral outcomes as well as the social validity of FBA for teachers will be measured.

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