

Preparing Teacher Candidates to Better Understand Behavior: Three Essentials from Applied Behavior Analysis

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Abstract

Teachers are responsible for delivering high-quality instruction and designing individual systems of support that promote desirable behaviors while reducing challenging behaviors. One approach to enhancing teachers' instructional and behavioral expertise is to provide teacher candidates with a foundational understanding of applied behavior analysis (ABA). This paper describes three key concepts of behavior analysis that teacher educators can integrate in educator preparation programs (EPPs) to better prepare teacher candidates to support students effectively. In addition, the authors offer practical strategies for integrating ABA content within EPPs.

Keywords: *applied behavior analysis, behavioral strategies, teacher candidates*

According to the Texas Education Agency's Academic Performance Report, more than 846,000 students received special education services in Texas in the 2024-2025 academic school year (Texas Education Agency, 2025). Of those students, over 141,000 were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which is characterized by challenges in social communication and interaction, as well as the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Some students diagnosed with ASD require substantial supports, and special education teachers receive direct training to effectively provide those supports to students. Although Texas has a large teacher workforce of over 369,000 teachers, only 11.4% of those teachers work in special education settings (Texas Education Agency, 2025). Because students who receive special education services are not taught exclusively by special education teachers, these data underscore the need for a highly skilled workforce where all teachers are prepared to serve all types of learners. One approach to enhancing instructional practices is to provide teacher candidates enrolled in educational preparation programs (EPPs) with a foundational understanding of applied behavior analysis (ABA).

ABA is the "science in which tactics derived from the principles of behavior are applied systematically to improve socially significant behavior and experimentation is used to identify the variables responsible for behavior change" (Cooper et al., 2020, p. 19). Several defining

features characterize ABA, including an emphasis on objective measurement, the implementation of effective evidence-based interventions, the promotion of meaningful behavior change that generalizes across settings and maintains over time, and the identification of functional relations (Baer et al., 1968). Many school districts offer professional development (PD) in behavioral principles and strategies for their in-service teachers, but there are often limited opportunities for them to obtain formal training and supervised practical experience, especially within small and rural school districts.

To increase teachers' access to individuals with expertise in behavior support, some school districts employ Board Certified Behavior Analysts® (BCBAs®). BCBAs complete extensive training to become nationally credentialed, and they work collaboratively with teachers, related service providers, and caregivers to support students. To be eligible to take the certification exam, individuals must complete an approved graduate-level program with at least 315 hours of behavior analytic coursework as well as secure 2,000 hours of supervised fieldwork (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2026). At the close of 2025, there were more than 81,000 credentialed master's and doctoral level BCBAs; however, only 11% of BCBAs identified their primary area of professional emphasis as education (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, n.d.), which limits the number of highly qualified BCBAs available to support students in Texas schools. Therefore, expanding behavior-analytic

training opportunities to teacher candidates while they pursue their initial teacher certification may help address the gap in qualified professionals within school settings.

While the coursework and fieldwork requirements to become a BCBA differ extensively from those required for teacher certification in Texas, there remains significant overlap in the core tenets of each profession. For instance, the field of behavior analysis emphasizes the need to collaborate with related service providers (Light-Shriner et al., 2025), arrange positively reinforcing and supportive educational environments (Slocum & Vollmer, 2015), and commit to responsible and compassionate care (Contreras et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2018; Werntz et al., 2023), all of which align with the core values of certified teachers. In addition, both professions are guided by Ethics Codes that outline a commitment to serving others, doing no harm, and holding a high level of integrity (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2020; Texas Education Agency, 2026). Despite these commonalities, few EPPs provide formal training in behavioral principles and strategies to teacher candidates (McGuire et al., 2024). The remainder of this paper describes three core foundations of behavior analysis that EPPs can incorporate to better prepare teacher candidates to support all students in the classroom. This paper will also offer practical suggestions to teacher educators for embedding behavior analytic content within their EPP.

Behavior is learned through and influenced by the environment

A defining feature of behavior analysis is its focus on the environmental influences that shape behavior. The environment plays a key role in evoking and maintaining behavior and extends beyond the immediate physical setting. While behavior analysts acknowledge genetic and medical influences on behavior (Copeland & Buch, 2019), their primary focus is on how environmental variables can be modified to promote desirable behaviors and reduce challenging behaviors. In practice, this means that behavior analysts seek to identify specific aspects of the environment they can adjust to produce reliable and consistent changes in behavior that lead to positive outcomes for students. Teacher candidates who understand that behavior is lawful, context-specific, and predictable over time are better equipped to monitor student behavior and design the

learning environment to promote and maintain desirable behaviors.

To monitor behavior effectively and objectively, behavior analysts select behaviors that are observable and measurable. Objective measurement promotes reliability across observers and limits subjective interpretations. For example, a teacher may identify that a student has “low self-confidence” and could benefit from a formal intervention. Because self-confidence can be defined in several ways, a clear and concise definition in measurable and observable terms increases objective evaluation to measure progress over time. In contrast, if the teacher does not define the behavior in clear and observable terms, measurement will be inconsistent, limiting conclusions that can be drawn from the data. Further, when teachers recognize that behaviors (such as self-confidence) are not solely internal traits but rather patterns of behavior that are influenced by the environment, they can identify and implement behavioral strategies and monitor measurable progress over time.

Behavioral strategies derived from principles of behavior often produce predictable outcomes with students. Teacher candidates who have a strong foundation in behavioral principles are better prepared to select and design individualized behavior-change strategies that benefit their individual students. One fundamental principle of behavior is reinforcement, which occurs when a behavior is followed by a stimulus change (i.e., reinforcer), and as a result, that behavior is strengthened (or maintained) in the future under similar situations and contexts (Cooper et al., 2020). Strategies grounded in positive reinforcement (e.g., token economies, praise, shaping) are associated with favorable outcomes and may be more preferred by learners because of the delivery of highly preferred items or activities contingent on behavior. In contrast, the principle of punishment involves a stimulus change (i.e., punisher) following a behavior, and as a result, that behavior is weakened (or decreased) in the future under similar situations or contexts. Punishment underlies many commonly used behavior-change strategies (e.g., time out, reprimands, overcorrection) in schools and reliably produce short-term outcomes and unintended behaviors (e.g., negative emotional responses and avoidance; Cooper et al., 2020). Because many teachers may not realize they are

utilizing punishment-based procedures with their students (Vargo & Gushanas, 2024), it is critical for teacher candidates to learn early in their career how the environment (including programmed interventions) influences behavior.

Data drives decision-making

Behavior analysts are well-known for their emphasis on data collection and advocacy for data-based decision-making. The focus on data aligns closely with school district expectations for accountability and evidence-based practice, and it promotes transparency when teachers communicate with parents, school leaders, and other stakeholders. As a result, teacher candidates will benefit from formal instruction in data collection methods and structured coaching and practice in how to use data to make decisions.

Data collection methods vary in complexity, ranging from simple methods such as counting frequency (e.g., number of hand raises) and recording duration (e.g., length of time to complete an instructional task), to more intricate methods, such as measuring latency (e.g., time to respond following a request to complete a non-preferred task). When teachers are aware of the different options for data collection and understand their applications across different settings, they can select those that are feasible, practical, and not cumbersome to increase accuracy and reliability. Further, teachers who select manageable data collection methods may be able to monitor and record multiple behaviors simultaneously for a comprehensive assessment of the student's behavior that focuses on promotion of desirable behaviors in addition to reduction of challenging behaviors. Providing teacher candidates with hypothetical scenarios for selecting data methods along with opportunities to practice collecting data across contexts and over time will strengthen their ability to make informed decisions in the classroom.

A critical component of data-based decision-making is the assessment of social validity, which refers to the acceptability of an intervention's goals, procedures, and outcomes (Wolf, 1978). Social validity can be assessed in multiple ways (e.g., survey, interview) and should include input from the individuals most directly affected, such as caregivers, paraprofessionals, or students. For example,

when a teacher is implementing a token economy to increase on task engagement, social validity data can inform the design and implementation of the intervention. That is, if the student finds a procedure unacceptable or aversive, it can reduce its effectiveness and evoke challenging behaviors (e.g., avoidance of the learning environment). Conversely, if the student finds the procedure acceptable and enjoyable, they may be more likely to remain engaged with the content.

An additional consideration in data-based decision making is the need to monitor procedural fidelity. Procedural fidelity is the degree to which an intervention is implemented as designed, or how accurately the procedure is carried out (Falakfarsa et al., 2021). Procedural fidelity is often overlooked because it requires teachers to collect data on their own implementation of a strategy rather than focusing solely on the student's behavior. However, procedural fidelity is critical because when procedures are implemented correctly, they are more likely to be effective. In contrast, procedures implemented incorrectly may be less effective or even counterproductive in evoking or maintaining challenging behavior. Teacher candidates who assess social validity and monitor procedural fidelity throughout the decision-making process increase the likelihood of successful outcomes for their students.

Behavior analytic principles have wide-ranging applications

The prevalence of ASD continues to increase and is currently 1 in 31 (Shaw et al., 2025); as a result, teacher candidates will likely support students with ASD in the classroom and may find behavioral principles particularly useful. Over 75% of BCBAs identify ASD as their primary area of practice (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, n.d.), which may be influenced by access to insurance coverage, university training opportunities, and a strong demand from consumers for services. Although supporting students with ASD has been a hallmark of the science, the scope of ABA extends beyond a single population. For example, research supports the use of behavioral procedures to improve outcomes for children with tic disorders (Capriotti et al., 2017), sleep problems (Woodford et al., 2023), and trauma histories (Rees et al., 2024). Because teacher candidates will serve students with diverse needs and backgrounds, they will benefit from a

broad understanding of the educational applications of ABA aside from ASD.

Within educational contexts, behavior analytic principles and procedures are applied in a variety of ways to support students. One common example is the functional behavior assessment (FBA), which is the process used to identify the function (underlying reason) of a behavior (Dozier et al., 2022). FBAs may include indirect methods (e.g., questionnaires with caregivers), direct methods (e.g., observation in real time), and experimental assessments (e.g., functional analyses). While FBAs are typically conducted by school psychologists or other personnel with behavioral expertise and formal training in consultation with teacher input, some districts (especially in rural areas) rely heavily on teachers to conduct FBAs. Consequently, teacher candidates will benefit from a conceptual understanding of behavioral assessment procedures to promote collaborative, safe, and comprehensive experiences for all of their students.

Similarly, an overview of various behavior-change procedures that might be included in a behavior intervention plan can enhance teacher candidates' ability to support their students. When teachers aim to build new academic and social skills that promote independence, they can select from a variety of skill acquisition procedures, such as discrete trial teaching (Leaf et al., 2024) and the verbal behavior approach (Barbera & Rasmussen, 2007). In contrast, when behaviors are challenging because they are dangerous or interfere with the learning environment, teachers can select a behavior reduction procedure, such as differential reinforcement and noncontingent reinforcement (Cooper et al., 2020). Regrettably, teachers may sometimes neglect to consider behavioral strategies due to the misconception that these interventions are only effective when implemented in one-on-one, tightly controlled settings. Fortunately, many behavioral strategies can be carried out in group settings with multiple students simultaneously. For instance, the good behavior game involves organizing students into teams and establishing collaborative goals to reduce challenging behaviors and promote desirable behaviors while earning reinforcers (Aiono-Conradi et al., 2026). Relatedly, group-wide preference assessments have been used to identify preferred behavior-change procedures for multiple students

simultaneously (Vargo & Becknell, 2018; Vargo & Brown, 2020).

Further, the application of ABA within school settings extends beyond the behavior of students to include targeting the behavior of educational personnel. Behavioral Skills Training (BST) is a commonly-used systematic, multi-step training procedure used to teach specific performance-based skills. BST generally includes four components (i.e., instructions, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback; Miltenberger, 2024) and has been used to train teachers in many skills including preference assessments, discrete trial teaching, and prompting (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). Further, BST has been effective in training pre-service teachers to perform various skills including data collection (Samudre et al., 2022), implementation of communication interventions (Ampuero et al., 2025), and implementation of a token economy during group instruction (Kirkpatrick et al., 2021).

Next Steps for EPPs and Teacher Educators

Knowledge and application of behavioral principles and procedures can provide teacher candidates with tools for effective behavior management. However, because behavior analytic training programs and EPPs are often housed in different university departments or colleges, teacher educators will need to intentionally integrate behavior analytic content into their programs to better prepare teacher candidates for a diverse and increasingly complex classroom. There are specific requirements to become a certified teacher in Texas, and while adding supplemental content that is not required by accreditation agencies may feel overwhelming, teacher educators should take reasonable, proactive steps within their existing program structure to integrate behavior analytic content and increase success in the classroom.

Coursework Integration

Teacher educators can review existing coursework to identify whether inclusion of one or more behavior analytic courses can be added to the degree plan. The addition of a stand-alone course will allow for in-depth exploration of behavioral principles and procedures while highlighting the importance of the content within school settings. Incorporating field experience opportunities in the course can strengthen skill development and provide avenues for

application and performance-based assessment. If adding a stand-alone course is not practical or possible, teacher educators might instead embed behavior analytic content across already-existing courses. EPPs in Texas require coursework in related topics, such as classroom management, evidence-based strategies, assessment practices, and the learning environment structure, as outlined in the Texas Classroom Teacher Pedagogy Standards, Early Childhood-Grade 12 (Texas Education Agency, 2024). Although courses targeting these topics are not exclusively behavioral, teacher educators can systematically integrate behavior analytic topics through structured readings, in-class activities, and learning outcomes. Embedding behavior analytic content across multiple courses throughout the program can allow for concepts to be introduced, applied, and mastered over time. Further, faculty can consider developing a certificate or minor in ABA that can be paired with an education degree by offering more specialized content. The creation of stackable micro-credentials with fewer credits may also help to expand access for education majors as well as college students in related fields (e.g., psychology, social work). For example, a micro-credential that leads to certification as a Registered Behavior Technician® (paraprofessional certification in behavior analysis) could enhance teacher candidates' marketability without competing with existing coursework requirements.

Field-based Experience

Teacher educators may consider integrating ABA into field-based experience requirements within school settings. Field-based experience occurs across pre-clinical and clinical settings and includes structured observations in classrooms as well as direct interaction with students. Incorporating opportunities for teacher candidates to identify behavioral principles, demonstrate behavioral skills, and engage in reflective tasks allows direct engagement with data collection techniques and development and implementation of behavioral interventions. This approach promotes assessment of performance and recognizes that describing behavioral principles and procedures differs significantly from applying those principles and procedures with students.

The Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) is the current teacher appraisal framework in Texas

(Texas Education Agency, n.d.). The T-TESS rubric is used with in-service teachers and teacher candidates to promote continuous improvement with a focus on evidence-based feedback. Several evaluative items align with behavior analytic principles, and teacher educators can design lessons to intentionally teach and assess these dimensions to build a strong behavior-analytic repertoire with their students in applied contexts. For instance, Domain 2 focuses on the importance of differentiating instruction to serve diverse student needs as well as monitoring and adjusting instruction based on formally and informally-collected data. Similarly, Domain 3 places a strong emphasis on managing student behavior and creating a possibility classroom culture of engaged learners. Teacher educators who systematically integrate ABA content and its alignment with the T-TESS throughout the curriculum provide candidates with multiple opportunities to review, practice, and apply their knowledge and skills.

Establish Partnerships

Teacher educators might consider expanding partnerships to support coaching and feedback opportunities in urban and rural Texas communities. EPPs can collaborate with district-level behavior support staff to share resources, extend invitations for district-level PD, and provide on-campus support when challenging behaviors arise. Teacher candidates should not be expected to design and implement behavior-change procedures on their own; however, under the supervision of a mentor teacher or behavioral support staff member, they could gain valuable practical experience. In addition, EPPs can partner with local BCBAs within their communities to enhance training opportunities and access to community resources.

Faculty Investment

EPPs and university leaders can invest in faculty to ensure high-quality, evidence-based instruction over ABA content. While higher salaries may not always be possible, EPPs can provide support for faculty who integrate ABA content through additional travel funds (e.g., conference registrations), reassigned time for curriculum design, structured PD opportunities, and graduate student support. EPPs can also prioritize hiring faculty with direct ABA experience and BCBA credentials who are well positioned to design relevant coursework and create meaningful learning opportunities for teacher candidates.

Conclusion

The national landscape of education continues to evolve, and expectations for teachers in Texas continue to rise. Teacher educators have the responsibility to ensure that teacher candidates are adequately prepared to manage behavior ethically and effectively to support their students. Integrating behavior analytic content into EPPs provides valuable coursework and fieldwork opportunities necessary for skill development, application, and content mastery. Teacher educators are encouraged to provide all teacher candidates with a foundational understanding of behavior

analysis to better prepare them to serve all types of students in Texas schools.

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