

Using Course Assessments to Train Teachers in Functional Behavior Assessment and Behavioral Intervention Plan Techniques

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Abstract

As the need to train more teachers to work in inclusive classrooms increases, college instructors should identify and implement course assessments measuring their effectiveness in training practices. Skills in managing the challenging behaviors of students with disabilities, such as autism and emotional disturbances are important for teachers worldwide. The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of a course assessment to develop Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). The course assessment used in this study was developed, revised, and then implemented to evaluate participants' knowledge to identify, assess and develop plans to improve challenging behaviors of students with behavior disabilities. The course assessment was used in training teachers who currently hold general education certification in obtaining special education training. All participants were new teachers, previously certified in childhood education, and seeking additional certification in special education. Results show there were significant differences across the years of implementation of the study. The paper includes recommendations for other institutions of higher education to utilize similar course assessments into their teacher training programs.

Introduction

The need is becoming even more critical for all teachers entering the field of education to manage the challenging behaviors of their students, including students with disabilities. By 1999, almost 80% of American students with special needs spent the majority of their time in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) emphasized ensuring access for students with disabilities to the general education curriculum in the inclusive classroom, to the maximum extent possible, to meet their developmental goals (IDEIA, 2004). Since then, there has been a steady increase in the number of students with disabilities educated in inclusive classrooms. This trend is not limited to the United States (US) alone. Many students served in classrooms worldwide are in less restrictive learning environments (Vaughn & Bos, 2009). With the inclusion of these students, teachers are challenged to provide appropriate instruction and services.

The richness of various cultural groups adds tremendously to the educational experiences of all, teachers and students alike. Yet this richness also poses a huge challenge to teachers who are increasingly discovering that traditional methods of teaching and learning do not work well for all students in the diverse populations (Fallon & Brown, 2010). To better serve students with disabilities in inclusive settings, teachers need a variety of skills. Regardless of country of origin or ethnicity,

teachers need to assess learning differences, plan and implement research-based instructional strategies, carry on professional and ethical practice, and collaborate with families and other professionals (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009). In addition, teachers need to address a wider range of behavior challenges in the classrooms (Katsiyannis, Ellenburg, & Acton, 2000). Since a teacher's effectiveness to deal with students' behavior challenges affects students' achievement as well as their aptitude for learning, academic success is found intrinsically linked to behavioral success (Doolittle, Horner, Bradley, Sugai, & Vincent, 2007; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997). However, both general education teachers and novice special education teachers indicated concerns about their lack of preparation to meet the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Baker & Zigmond, 1990; Kilgore & Griffin, 1998; Lesar, Benner, Habel, & Coleman, 1997; Welch, 1996).

Garriott, Miller, and Snyder (2003) examined teacher candidates' beliefs in inclusive settings for students with mild disabilities and found that half of the teacher candidates shared concerns regarding lack of preparation for providing individualized instructions and learning environments in inclusive classrooms while attempting to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. Teacher education programs need to take responsibility for preparing educators for inclusive classrooms (Hinders, 1995). Blanton (1992) pointed out that the goal of teacher preparation programs is to provide experiences to facilitate teacher candidates' transforming

knowledge into personal knowledge structures and using it in a flexible way during teaching. Through the use of a performance-based case study (Arthaud, Aram, Breck, Doelling, & Bushrow, 2007), teacher candidates practice what they have learned and demonstrate their proficiency of the knowledge and skills by testing and reflecting on them (Berry, Montgomery, Curtis, Hernandez, Wurtzel, & Snyder, 2008).

Developing Teacher Quality

A major transition occurs as the teacher candidate exits the teacher education program and prepares to enter the field. Many teacher candidates exit an education program feeling confident in their ability to teach, but they also feel challenged by the ever evolving needs of their students and families (Fallon, 2004; Fallon & Brown, 2002). Teachers throughout the world must acquire new skills and knowledge. In the US recent legislation such as the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and the 2001 No Children Left Behind Act (NCLB) require teachers to be highly qualified.

Research tells us that teacher quality is the single most powerful influence on student achievement, not class size or facilities (Brownell, et al., 2009; New York State Professional Standards and Practices Board for Teaching, 2009). The American Federation for Teachers (2006) stated that teacher preparation should be reformed to ensure that each child in American schools can be taught by a competent and qualified teacher. It is essential, therefore, to ensure that teachers are provided with ongoing, high quality educational training and professional development to develop and sustain their practice. It is important that colleges and universities support school districts in their efforts to provide high quality professional development that addresses these needs because it is critical for teachers in inclusive classrooms to be knowledgeable and effective in the appropriate procedures to reduce challenging behaviors that interfere with learning.

Assessing the quality or impact of a teacher education program is often difficult and unreliable, yet necessary. In the past, university students in traditional teacher education programs who struggled academically (Fallon & Brown, 2010) were too often considered poor students and were expected or even encouraged to leave school. Today, with increasing competition for students, retention rates are closely analyzed and programs implemented to minimize student drop-outs (Fallon & Brown, 2010). In a market driven environment, teacher education programs should train teacher candidates to be highly qualified in the inclusive classroom.

Using Course Assessments

The use of course assessments has been increasingly more commonplace in the field of teacher education worldwide (Fallon & Watts, 2001). Course assessments have developed out of a demand for evidence-based documentation of academic performance and are often used in the US for the purposes of accreditation or teacher evaluation (Rutledge, Smith, Watson, & Davis, 2003). The National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE) set guidelines for the use of course assessments that consistently "...collect

and analyze data on...candidate and graduate performance and unit operations to evaluate and improve the unit and its programs" (NCATE, 2008, pg 12). According to NCATE (2008), candidates preparing to work in schools should know and demonstrate the content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and skills, pedagogical and professional knowledge and skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; 2009) also pointed out the importance of special education professionals working within the standards and policies of their profession. The intent of the course assessments is to develop a tool for measuring the candidate's performance in a consistent manner across sections of the same course and different instructors.

Unfortunately, there is little research available on developing course assessments in managing the behavior of students with disabilities. The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (2004) stated that "behavior analysts rely on scientifically and professionally derived knowledge when making scientific or professional judgments in human service provisions or when engaging in scholarly or professional endeavors" (pg. 1). Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is one data-driven and evidence-based strategy for learning the function of behavior(s) and thus to plan and implement intervention in order to decrease inappropriate behavior and increase appropriate behavior. The CEC stated that special educators should conduct formal and informal assessment of behavior to design learning experiences that support the growth of effective special educators (CEC, 2009). In the US, the NCATE also points out that the unit should have an assessment system that collects and analyzes data on applicant qualifications and candidate and graduate performance (NCATE, 2008). Currently, however, the level and consistency of FBA training for pre-service teachers is scientifically unclear (Stichter, Shellady, Sealander, & Eigenberger, 2000).

Course assessments have been fairly common across teacher education programs in many countries within the last decade. Course assessments are often non-standardized, informal assessments that are directly related to course content. They include performance based tasks and portfolio entries. They have grown more common out of a need to demonstrate that pre-service level teachers are qualified to perform to teaching standards (Zions, Shellady & Zions, 2006). However, most course assessments are developed by a single individual, the course instructor. They are often not subject to field testing for either reliability or validity. Further, many course assessments differ when implemented by instructors in other sections of the same course in order to meet the individual needs of that instructor and his/her students. With many colleges and universities relying upon part time instructors to teach sections of courses, these course assessments should be investigated for their effectiveness in training teacher candidates in meeting teaching standards.

Managing Challenging Behaviors

One important training gap for pre-service level classroom teachers is in the area of assessment and treatment of students' aggressive, disruptive, emotional, and other severe behaviors

(Desrochers & Fallon, 2007). Students with challenging behaviors are increasingly being served in the inclusive classroom setting. Students with intellectual disabilities, behavioral and emotional disorders, and autism often display poor social skills in addition to difficulties in academic performance and challenging classroom behaviors. About 11.4% of students in the US are identified with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), among which 54% of whom spend most of their school day in a general education classroom (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2010). With the increasing number of students being served in the general classroom, one of the biggest concerns for teachers is students' behavior (Zionts, Shellady, & Zionts, 2006). Pindiprolu, Peterson, and Bergloff (2007) stated that intervention for behavior problems was the most frequently cited area of need for teachers.

The 1991, 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations of IDEA mandated the use of FBA with persons with disabilities as a means of gathering information about the cause of problematic behaviors. These behaviors often keep students with disabilities from performing appropriately in general education classrooms; thus, placement in a more restrictive environment is often a likely outcome. FBA, which identifies the relationships between behavior and environment, is considered an efficient and effective classroom management

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of a course assessment in teacher education programs to train teacher candidates. This study was a four year investigation on developing effective FBA and BIP skills in students in a one year, full time graduate program in special education. This study focused on developing the dispositions, knowledge and skills necessary to the field of special education for beginning teachers. The research question to be explored was: As new, pre-service level teachers enter the field of education with training in both special and general education, can teacher candidates and general educators be taught effective FBA and BIP practices using such a course assessment?

Method

Participants

Participants of this study were new teachers to the profession of special education who varied in their demographics. Each was previously certified in childhood education and was seeking additional certification in special education. They were all participants in one-year, full time programs in graduate special education in the northeastern part of the US. All were volunteers in a graduate class in managing and assessing behaviors of students with disabilities. Convenience sampling was used in this study as participants who had chosen to take a course on developing FBA and BIP volunteered to participate in the study. Of the total participants ($N=59$), six were male (10.2%) and 53 were female (89.8%). Two participants did not complete the program, but did participate in the course and study on FBA and BIPs. One teacher candidate did not complete the course and the FBA/BIP training. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 45 years. Ten percent of the participants were of an ethnic minority ($n=6$), while 90% were Caucasian ($n=53$).

strategy (Iwata, Kahng, Wallace, & Lindberg, 2000). FBA can also be an approach to treating problem behaviors in the setting in which they occur, thus allowing a greater chance of success for the student.

There is a growing body of evidence that states that teachers can be appropriately trained to use FBA in order to derive a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and that this training is both practical and worthwhile. The direct observation of students in authentic settings can provide valuable information to the observer on the quality and mastery of his/her professional skills. Research has shown that teachers can effectively conduct FBA procedures in their classrooms (Grey, Honan, McClean, & Daily, 2005). However, some research (e.g. Van Acker, Boreson, Gable, & Potterton, 2005) shows that teachers receive inadequate training in this area in defining target behaviors and operational definitions of challenging behaviors. Some researchers (Bulik, Frye, Callaway, Romero, & Walters, 2002; Maag & Larson, 2004) believe that for teachers who are being trained to acquire new skills, direct observation is a critical component. It is therefore assumed that greater active teacher participation in development and use of FBA and BIP must be learned in a college setting or over a longer period of time rather than short term professional development sessions (e.g. several hours).

Procedure

Course assessment. The course assessment used in this study was developed based on professional standards for special educators developed by the CEC. The course assessment is found in Appendix A. The course assessment was developed by a panel of three experts in special education. Each of the three experts had doctoral degrees in special education, as well as advanced training in applied behavior analysis (ABA). The course assessment was initially developed by an instructor in an ABA course. It was revised by the panel of experts for accuracy and appropriateness for use in this study and was pilot tested with a group of volunteers ($n=9$) and revised for editing and clarity of word usage and conventions. The course assessment was then implemented in an ABA course designed to train special educators to identify, assess, and develop plans to improve challenging behaviors of students with disabilities.

The purpose of the ABA course was "...to provide the knowledge and skills required in the assessment and evaluation, instructional planning, management of behaviors....appropriate for students with behavioral disabilities..." (excerpt from course syllabus, *EDI 653, College at Brockport*, 2006). The scoring guide for the course assessment is found in Appendix B.

During the first three weeks of the ABA course, knowledge of FBA and BIP techniques was shared with the participants by the course instructor. Examples and written case studies were used to illustrate aspects of the FBA and BIP. In the fourth week of the course, the course assessment was distributed to participants and timelines were established. Each participant identified a student with challenging behavior in his or her classroom as the focus of the FBA and BIP. By the sixth week of the course, participants had a final version of

the FBA and BIP written and approved by the panel of experts. The FBAs and BIPs were then implemented in the classroom setting by the participants with the students with behavior disorders under the supervision of school based mentors who provided feedback to the participants. The FBA and BIP course assessment was due in the fourteenth week of the course and was graded and evaluated by a panel of three experts. Inter-rater reliability among the three experts was 93.4%.

Results

Descriptive data were analyzed by calculating both the frequency and percentage of the participants' gender and ethnicity across years. Fifty-nine students participated in this study across four years. Fifty-three were female (89.8%) and six were male (10.2%). Similarly, a majority were Caucasian ($n = 53$, 89.8%) while only six were not (10.2%). Among the six non-Caucasian students, two were African-American (3.4%), one Hispanic, one Indian, one Caucasian/Jewish, and one Caucasian/American.

In addition, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test whether there were any significant differences in students' performance across the four years. Due to the limited number of male participants and non-Caucasian participants, the ANOVAs were conducted using (i) all students, (ii) female students only, and (iii) Caucasian students only. When comparing the performance of the entire sample by year, there was a significant difference across the years ($F=3.076$, $p=.035$). Significant differences were found in Years Two and Three despite the same instructor and same panel of three evaluators for the course assessments. Furthermore, significant difference was also found using only female students' scores ($F=3.805$, $p=.016$) as well as when using only Caucasian students' scores ($F=3.712$, $p=.017$). See Table 1 for these results.

The results of the multiple comparisons using Tukey's HSD are found in Table 2.

Participants ($N=58$) were asked to make an open ended comment about their ability to assess and manage challenging behavior using the FBA and BIP course assessments. Two patterns or themes occurred in reviewing their answers. One pattern is that a majority of the participants felt they were better able to understand their own skills and areas for growth by completing the course assessment. Another pattern discerned was that the teacher candidates felt their FBA raised more questions in their minds about their students and the reasons those behaviors continued. These results are found in Table 3.

Discussion

The current study was a four year investigation exploring the following research question: As new, pre-service level teachers enter the field of education with training in both special and general education, can teacher candidates and general educators be taught FBA and BIP practices using course assessments? There are a number of limitations associated with this study. The first limitation pertains to the use of volunteers who were participating in a graduate

Table 1

One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of Students' Scores by Year

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Everyone					
Between Groups	166.105	3	55.368	3.076*	.035
Within Groups	972.050	54	18.001		
Total	1138.155	57			
Female Only					
Between Groups	197.906	3	65.969	3.805*	.016
Within Groups	832.094	48	17.335		
Total	1030.000	51			
Caucasian Only					
Between Groups	202.728	3	67.576	3.712*	.017
Within Groups	892.065	49	18.205		
Total	1094.792	52			

program. All were pre-service level teachers. Despite the assurances of researchers, some potential participants may have felt compelled to participate. Another limitation was the small sample size. Also, the majority of participants were Caucasian (89.8%), female (89.8%) teacher candidates. There were a limited number of participants from culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse populations. Because of these limitations, findings of this study should be interpreted with caution.

In spite of these limitations, it is clear that understanding and identifying the challenging behaviors of students is a necessary skill for teachers who work with students with disabilities. Increasing training of FBA and BIP skills in pre-service programs may help teachers prepare for behavioral challenges more adequately (Pindiprolu, Peterson, & Bergloff, 2007). The results of this study found significant differences in the FBA and BIP scores between years of the program for all participants and for female Caucasian participants. One reason for these differences may be due to differences in the FBA and BIP course content. Another reason for the difference may be found with the subjects of the FBA and BIP. As the students with disabilities changed, perhaps the impact to the FBA and BIP was different. Future research should focus on the impact of the FBA and BIP on the students with disabilities and how teachers must adapt the FBA and BIP in response. One training gap for pre-service level teachers has been in the area of assessment and treatment of students' aggressive, disruptive, emotional, and severe behaviors. This study demonstrated that effective FBA and BIP skills can be taught to pre-service level teachers using a course assessment.

The researchers in this study recommend that this FBA and BIP course assessment may be used or adapted by other college instructors teaching similar college courses. However, the following recommendations should be considered by those

Table 2

Tukey's HSD of Students' Scores by Year

(I) Year	(J) Year	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Everyone						
1	2	3.050	1.525	.201	-.99	7.09
	3	-1.667	1.620	.733	-5.96	2.63
	4	-.283	1.525	.998	-4.33	3.76
2	3	-4.717*	1.643	.029	-9.07	-.36
	4	-3.333	1.549	.150	-7.44	.77
3	4	1.383	1.643	.834	-2.97	5.74
Female Only						
1	2	4.451*	1.604	.038	.18	8.72
	3	-.584	1.678	.985	-5.05	3.88
	4	.571	1.574	.983	-3.62	4.76
2	3	-5.035*	1.706	.024	-9.57	-.50
	4	-3.879	1.604	.087	-8.15	.39
3	4	1.156	1.678	.901	-3.31	5.62
Caucasian Only						
1	2	3.500	1.613	.146	-.79	7.79
	3	-1.896	1.719	.689	-6.47	2.68
	4	-.357	1.613	.996	-4.65	3.93
2	3	-5.396*	1.719	.015	-9.97	-.82
	4	-3.857	1.613	.092	-8.15	.43
3	4	1.539	1.719	.807	-3.03	6.11

Note: * indicates there was a significant difference at the 0.05 level.

instructors. Course assessments can and should be shared among teacher educational professionals. Clarity, language, and appropriateness of tasks can be improved with input from other professionals. Care must be taken to ensure that differences in language, ethnicity, and culture be carefully considered and adapted as needed. In order to achieve this, future research should focus on the issue of diversity among teacher candidates and among their students. However, many teachers have received inadequate training on issues of diversity in conducting FBA and interpreting the results appropriately to aid in decision-making. Campbell (2007) pointed out that knowledge and skills are essential variables to successfully deal with challenging behaviors. If teachers were better trained their students would have a greater chance for success. Professionals in the field of teacher education need to develop course assessments based on professional standards by an appropriate accreditation body. The course assessments need to be carefully field tested for reliability and validity. Assessments of this type need to be implemented within a college setting as opposed to a short-term professional development workshop.

Summary and Conclusion

Producing high quality special education teachers who have proper knowledge and skills is of international interest (Martinez & Hallahan, 2000). FBA and BIP course assessment

would provide teacher education programs worldwide a unified tool to measure pre-service teachers' proper acquisition of behavior management skills. However, cross-cultural investigation of the appropriateness of the use of FBA and BIP course assessment throughout countries should take place to meet their own national standards of special education teacher preparation programs. Also, culturally appropriate format and procedure of FBA and BIP course assessments need to be identified internationally.

Table 3

Open Ended Comments on the FBA and BIP

	<i>n</i>	Sample Comments
Better understanding own skills and areas for growth	38	Inclusion, rules for classroom, standards, characteristics of disability, understand behaviors, socialization, strategies for managing skills
Raising more questions about students' behaviors and the reasons of the occurrence of the behaviors	54	Changes in behavior, understanding why students behave, collaborate with parents, writing behavior goals in IEP, paying early attention to students' needs.

As teacher education programs attempt to implement course assessments, a number of significant evaluation issues have arisen such as reliability and validity of these assessments. Issues such as instructor's teaching styles, content knowledge, and amount of teaching time can impact the effectiveness of the course assessments in accurately measuring the candidate's performance on the task. Using a course assessment to train teachers in developing FBA and BIP has been an underexplored area for developing teacher quality. However, course assessments may be a valuable tool for improving teacher quality. The researchers in this study suggest that it is worth the effort to continue research efforts on course assessments. Such a path may lead to improvements in both teacher and student quality and performance.

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APPENDIX A

FBA CORE ASSIGNMENT

TASK:

Create and present a functional behavior assessment student who exhibits characteristics associated with learners described as demonstrating “emotional-behavioral disorders”. The FBA demonstrates fundamental understanding of the purpose and organization of an FBA and is clearly related to case study behaviors described.

Describe specific academic, social-emotional, behavioral antecedents, consequences and characteristics that present significant obstacles in school environments and social success for the specific student. Include hypothesis for the behavior(s) selected.

Design and present a preliminary Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) for the individual student based upon their significant social, emotional and behavioral needs. This should include a complete system of behavior management that could be implemented into the classroom setting. The BIP demonstrates fundamental understanding of the purpose and organization of a BIP and is clearly related to Functional Behavior Assessment. Your BIP should comply with all legal and ethical standards, specific strategies or tactics to be used, explanations for implementation of the system, and be able to be directly attached into the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP).

PURPOSE:

The purpose of the case study is to demonstrate a foundational understanding of the cases, characteristics, and developmental, instructional, behavioral and social-emotional implications of a specific disability.

This assignment addresses core standards (NCATE, CEC, ABA) for special educators including:

1. Educational implications of characteristics of various exceptionalities
2. Psychological and social-emotional characteristics of individuals with disabilities.
3. Effects of an exceptional condition on an individual’s life.
4. Basic classroom management strategies and theories.
5. Strategies for crisis prevention and intervention.
6. Ways to modify the learning environment to manage behaviors.
7. Use the least intensive behavior management strategy consistent with the needs of the exceptional individual.
8. Use functional assessments to develop intervention plans.
9. Similarities and differences among individuals with exceptional learning needs.
10. Reflect on one’s practice to improve instruction and guide professional growth.

APPENDIX B

FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

AREA OR SKILL	UNSATISFACTORY	SATISFACTORY	PROFICIENT	DISTINGUISHED
<p>Communication: Style, mechanics, spelling, grammar</p>	<p>Writing, style, vocabulary, organization and mechanics create an unclear, disjointed or incomplete document.</p>	<p>Occasional errors of construction, style or mechanics, yet content is generally coherent.</p>	<p>Writing is consistently correct and acceptable for level of course. Clear, easy to understand and organized.</p>	<p>Writing is powerful and imaginative. Clear, succinct and well-presented language and well-presented ideas vividly.</p>
<p>CONTENTS: FBA Problem verification Refine definition Collect information Data analysis Hypothesis and test of hypothesis statement</p>	<p>Required step is incomplete, vague, or inaccurate.</p>	<p>Required step is usually relevant, accurate and complete for the FBA.</p>	<p>Required step is relevant, accurate and complete for stated purposes.</p>	<p>Required step fully address all essential needs of the FBA process.</p>
<p>Behavioral Descriptions</p>	<p>Behavioral descriptions are vague, general and/or non-measurable; observable.</p>	<p>Behavioral descriptions typically are clear, and measurable; observable.</p>	<p>Behavioral descriptions exhibit clarity and specificity.</p>	<p>Behavioral descriptions demonstrate exemplary clarity, specificity and objectivity.</p>
<p>Data Sources</p>	<p>Interview and observational data for assessment are sparse or lacking.</p>	<p>Interview and observational data are provided although limited in scope and relevance.</p>	<p>Interview and observational data are thorough and relevant to FBA process.</p>	<p>Interview and observational data are comprehensive, detailed, clear and highly relevant to FBA process.</p>
<p>Overall Impression, Originality and Presentation</p>	<p>More than one area where improvement is needed. Does not sufficiently demonstrate knowledge and skills of the nature and purposes of FBA.</p>	<p>Meets acceptable standards for course. Demonstrates rudimentary knowledge and skill of the nature and purposes of FBA.</p>	<p>Consistently high quality in nearly all areas. Meets the assignment objectives fully.</p>	<p>Strikingly impressive in nearly all areas. Ideas and analysis are original, creative or resourceful. Exceeds expectations.</p>