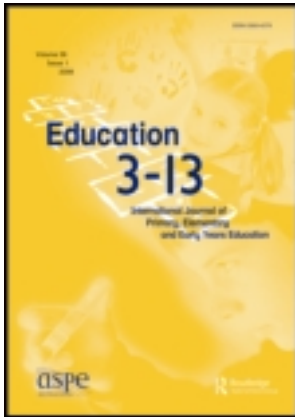


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Addressing challenging behaviours in the general education setting: conducting a teacher-based Functional Behavioural Assessment (FBA)

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When a student demonstrates a challenging or problematic behaviour in the classroom, the climate and the instructional experience can change dramatically for both the students and the classroom teacher. Before resorting to sanctions and punitive consequences, there is a series of steps a classroom teacher can conduct to reduce and replace the challenging behaviour with desired and positive behaviours. The Functional Behavioural Assessment (FBA) is a systematic data collection process used to ascertain information about a student demonstrating a challenging behaviour(s). Typically reserved for students receiving special education services, the FBA can assist students in the general education curriculum as well. More importantly, the FBA process can be of great use in helping the classroom teacher better understand the challenging behaviour, the triggers for the behaviour and the reinforcing consequences of the behaviour. This paper will review the fundamentals of the FBA process, advantages of the process, and practical steps the classroom teacher can use to conduct an FBA.

Keywords: behaviour; classroom management; Functional Behavioural Assessment

When one student begins to present challenging behaviours in a classroom, the climate of the classroom can begin to change dramatically. Often the teacher will spend a considerable amount of time and energy on the student with the challenging behaviours, which in turn begins to have a deleterious impact on the quality of the educational experience for all students. Additionally, the student demonstrating the challenging behaviour is often signalling a distinct unmet need, which may be indicative of a necessary behavioural intervention. Unfortunately, common practice often leads the teacher to fall into a pattern of passing the student with challenging behaviours through the disciplinary process, ultimately resulting in a number of disciplinary infractions or even a referral to special education personnel (Sterling-Turner, Robinson, and Wilczynski 2001; van Acker et al. 2005). However, one behavioural approach, which is often reserved for students with disabilities, can offer the classroom teacher a positive alternative prior to the disciplinary process and reduce the likelihood of the challenging behaviour becoming progressively worse. The Functional Behavioural Assessment (FBA) is a data collection process that can

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yield significant information that can be incorporated into a Behavioural Intervention Plan (BIP).

‘Challenging behaviours’ is a term reserved for the set of disruptive or dangerous behaviours that are chronic, resistant to common interventions, and dramatically reduce the instructional experience for all students in the classroom. One of the guiding principles in addressing challenging behaviours is delivering an early intervention. Challenging behaviours are much more responsive to interventions and positive change if they are addressed at early onset (Scott et al. 2003; Scott, Nelson, and Zabala 2003). With an understanding of foundational knowledge of the FBA process, basic principles of the design of a BIP, and learning to avoid being reactive, the classroom teacher can become the positive change agent for the student with challenging behaviours before the situation worsens (Obenchain and Taylor 2005). This paper will review the fundamentals of the FBA process, advantages of the process, and practical steps the classroom teacher can use to conduct an FBA.

Brief explanation of the FBA process

Gresham, Watson, and Skinner (2001) described the FBA as a gathering process of critical data and information on antecedents and consequences in order to determine the reason (i.e., the function) of the challenging behaviour. Possible functions for the use of the challenging behaviour can include attention, obtaining a desired item or activity, escape from an unwanted task or distressing environment, and meeting a sensory need (Barnhill 2005; Frey and Wilhite 2005). Once the function of the challenging behaviour has been established through a behavioural hypothesis and proven accurate, education professionals (e.g., classroom teacher, counsellor, administrator) can then take steps to create a BIP to address the challenging behaviour and introduce a more appropriate behaviour as a replacement.

The behavioural hypothesis is more specifically a behavioural statement that is comprised of three components: Antecedent, Behaviour, and Consequence (A-B-C). The behavioural statement should be written in clear and concise terms that identify the A-B-C components (e.g., Johnny [5th grade student] reads at a 1st grade level. When Johnny is presented with an academic task that is above his performance level, he becomes physically defiant, such as throwing materials off his desk and yelling at the teacher, to avoid the task. Johnny is either placed in time-out or sent to the principal’s office). The determination of the A-B-C relationship is performed through the FBA process. Several authors (e.g., Barnhill 2005; Burke, Hagan-Burke, and Sugai 2003; Crimmins and Farrell 2006; Davis and Conroy 2004; Fox and Gable 2004; Gresham, Watson, and Skinner 2001; Hoff, Ervin, and Friman 2005; Ingram, Lewis-Palmer, and Sugai 2005; Kinch et al. 2001; Mueller, Sterling-Turner, and Moore 2005; Murdock, O’Neill, and Cunningham 2005; Olypmia et al. 2002; Packenham, Shute, and Reid 2004; Ryan, Halsey, and Matthews 2003) described the FBA process in slightly different ways, although they remained in agreement with the FBA process itself consisting of three fundamental stages.

Fox and Gable (2004) detailed three stages – indirect assessment, direct assessment and hypothesis testing. Each stage successively builds upon the data and information from the previous stage. Indirect assessment involves the collection of data and information from existing databases and soliciting reports through interviews from school professionals, parents, peers, and the student. The data accrued during the indirect stage allow education professionals to clearly identify

and define the challenging behaviour in operational terms, thus establishing the target behaviour for change. For example, a teacher who is collecting data on a student with defiant behaviours would include observable and measurable actions such as throwing materials off the desk, folding of arms, and using inappropriate language with the teacher to verbalise anger thus establishing a defiant tantrum.

The direct stage takes the data accrued from the indirect stage and provides an observable basis by which to analyse the target behaviour. The target behaviour can then be measured in terms of frequency (how often the behaviour occurs), duration (how long the behaviour lasts), topography (what the behaviour looks like) and the environment of its occurrence (such as the classroom or home; Umbreit et al. 2007). Additionally, the direct assessment stage allows different individuals to observe, rate, and reach an inter-observer agreement about the target behaviour using a behaviour-rating scale (e.g., the number of occurrences Observer A records versus the number of occurrences Observer B records during a similar timeframe; Olypmia et al. 2002).

In the third stage, hypothesis testing, education personnel evaluate the data collected from the previous stages (indirect assessment and direct assessment) and develop a hypothesis in the form of an A-B-C statement regarding the function of the target behaviour (e.g., When Angie is teased by her peers, she becomes violent, throwing nearby items directly at students, thus having her removed from the setting and sent home). With this hypothesis, professionals can then evaluate the possible consequences that reinforce the continued utilisation of the target behaviour by the student, thus predicting the likelihood of the same behaviour in the future. With the A-B-C statement confirmed, education personnel can proceed to design and implement a BIP to address the target behaviour and teach a replacement behaviour (Barnhill 2005; Fox and Gable 2004; Frey and Wilhite 2005; Gresham, Watson, and Skinner 2001; Olypmia et al. 2002).

Finally, one common misconceived notion of the FBA is that the process is exclusively reserved for students with identified disabilities and can only be conducted by members of an Individual Education Planning (IEP) committee. Current research has demonstrated that the use of the FBA process is advantageous with any student demonstrating challenging behaviours and has, consequently, become part of the pre-referral assistance team, commonly known as Student Support Teams (SST), in a variety of educational organisations. Several authors (Fesmire et al. 2003; Lee and Jamison 2003; Scott et al. 2005; Scott et al. 2003; Sterling-Turner, Robinson, and Wilczynski 2001) discussed the use of the FBA as an approach to assist non-disabled students who are experiencing challenging behaviours in the general education classroom. The applicability of the FBA allows itself to assist students from all backgrounds and needs, who are often demonstrating challenging behaviours in the class as the result of situational stressors. The FBA process, when used by an SST, has been shown to effectively and systematically assist the student by addressing the challenging behaviours through the collaborative efforts of educators, parents, and the student (Scott et al. 2003). As Scott et al. (2003, 17) described, 'The FBA can be an effective assessment technique for dealing with students whose behaviours do not yet warrant suspension or referral to special education'.

The three stages of the FBA process are indicative of dedicated time and effort by any classroom teacher to address a challenging behaviour. However, when compared to the time and effort spent on punitive consequences, the classroom teacher can utilise specific steps to identify, address, and reduce a challenging

behaviour at the initial onset rather than wait for the situation to become progressively worse. In the next section, we discuss five steps a classroom teacher can undertake with genuine effort in order to properly identify challenging behaviour at its onset and gather valuable information that can be used to develop an implementable BIP.

Five steps in a teacher-based FBA

Ideally, the FBA process is a team effort built upon the strengths of involvement and collaboration by key education personnel, a dedication of time and resources, and a systematic analysis of derived quantitative and qualitative data. However, a classroom teacher through genuine effort and a basic understanding of the FBA process can conduct a teacher-based FBA.

Thinking in specifics

When addressing challenging behaviours, it is recommended to operationally define the challenging behaviour of greatest concern into a specific statement that captures the behaviour as both observable, measurable and able to be repeated thus becoming the *target behaviour* of the FBA process and in the eventual BIP (Barnhill 2005; Ryan, Halsey, and Matthews 2003; Umbreit et al. 2007; Wheeler and Richey 2010). For example, a classroom teacher might operationally define a student being 'aggressive' as using inappropriate language with adults, physically pushing other students, and/or physically threatening others with sharp objects, such as scissors. By describing the target behaviour into a specific set of parameters, the behaviour becomes easily identifiable to the casual observer and easier to measure in quantifiable terms, such as frequency and duration. Umbreit et al. (2007) recommended the operational definition of the target behaviour be written as a general descriptor, a word or short phrase that succinctly communicates the behaviour (e.g., destruction of property). The target behaviour should not include an event or action that is the result of the behaviour (e.g., earning a 'B' in reading class). Rather, they emphasised that the specificity of the target behaviour provides the teacher with the ability to communicate to others in a common language (e.g., parents, collaborating school personnel).

Collaboration

One of the most critical components of the FBA process is the collaboration and communication between FBA team members. While a teacher-based FBA is not a full-scale implementation such as an FBA being conducted by an SST or an IEP committee, collaboration and communication between the teacher and other individuals is just as significant. Communicating with other individuals who have contact and quality relationships with the student can provide key information as to the possible function of the behaviour. Often information derived through informal interviews, such as with the parent of the student, other teachers who have the student in another class, and additional school personnel who have daily contact with the student (e.g., school monitors, school counsellor) can assist the classroom teacher in developing a better understanding as to the time and

places (e.g., other classrooms, cafeteria, recess, school bus) where the target behaviour may occur (Lee and Jamison 2003; Peterson et al. 2002; Wheeler and Richey 2005).

As Wheeler and Richey (2005) discussed, information derived from informal interviews can assist in identifying patterns of occurrence/non-occurrence of the behaviour, antecedents and consequences, and life events that may have established a relationship to the behaviour. The interviews with these individuals need not be scripted; however, having a set of three to five questions specifically addressing the target behaviour can provide the teacher with qualitative information that may lead to a better understanding of the function of the target behaviour. Questions in the interview can refer to descriptions of the target behaviour, predictability of the behaviour, a behavioural history, and ideas on the possible function of the behaviour. Additionally, if the same questions are posed to all persons interviewed, a more comprehensive view of the student's behaviour will become evident.

Often the classroom teacher may have a limited understanding of contributing events and factors related to the target behaviour. Information from the parents (e.g., sleep patterns, life events, or medication) may have a definitive effect on the demonstration of challenging behaviours. Information gleaned from the parents through the informal interview can provide valuable information on the student and the target behaviour and better equip the classroom teacher to deal with the behaviours upon their occurrence (Bartz 2003; Wheeler and Richey 2005). Additionally, speaking to key individuals about the target behaviour will help promote an awareness of the behavioural concern and may substantiate a more concerted effort in the future if the situation warrants additional assistance.

Collecting data

After the target behaviour has been defined and information has been gathered from key individuals, the classroom teacher can proceed with quantitative data collection. However, quantitative data can consist of a number of varied types of recordings and still remain practical to collect. With the target behaviour defined in observable and measurable terms, the classroom teacher can decide which method of data collection is the most appropriate. For example, if the classroom teacher would like to measure the frequency of the target behaviour within a given timeframe (e.g., number of occurrences within a 15-minute interval), the teacher can use an informal scatter-plot chart to covertly write tally marks in a given day/time interval for each occurrence as well as write short notes on the antecedent events prior to each occurrence and the consequence events which immediately follow (Alberto and Troutman 2009; Barnhill 2005; Ryan, Halsey, and Matthews 2003; Wheeler and Richey 2005).

Frequency counts need not be written on a clipboard. The classroom teacher can perform the movement of tangible items, such as paper clips, from one pocket to the other in a covert manner with each paper clip signalling an occurrence of the behaviour resulting in an equivalent tally count. While there are a variety of ways in which to record quantitative data, the classroom teacher can utilise a number of methods to collect data, whichever provides an accurate yet practical implementation.

In addition to the use of frequency counts, direct observation performed by a third person in the classroom can assist the teacher to better understand the circumstances in which the target behaviour occurs. The use of an A-B-C observation analysis is a three-columned form, which allows an observer to take brief but concise notes on the antecedents and the consequences that occur prior and immediately after the demonstration of the target behaviour. The observer can take notes on the events and settings that serve as the antecedents (e.g., the classroom teacher asks a question), the target behaviour when it occurs (e.g., Johnny blurts out an answer without being recognised) and the immediate consequence (e.g., the other students in the class laugh). The data collected from one or multiple observations can allow the classroom teacher to analyse all the interactions and incorporate the collected data into a continuous narrative (Umbreit et al. 2007).

Manipulating antecedents and consequences

Once the classroom teacher has collected both qualitative data (from informal interviews) and quantitative data (from classroom observation/measurement), the teacher should have a better understanding as to the times and circumstances in which the target behaviour occurs. These data contribute to the development of a behavioural hypothesis or a definitive A-B-C statement (Alberto and Troutman 2009; Barnhill 2005; Umbreit et al. 2007; Wheeler and Richey 2005, 2010). The A-B-C statement should support the hypothesised function of the target behaviour (i.e., attention, attain desired item or activity, escape, or sensory reinforcement). With consideration to the antecedents (that occur prior to the target behaviour) and the consequences (that reinforce the behaviour) the classroom teacher can begin to manipulate these events and evaluate the effects on the target behaviour (Ryan, Halsey, and Matthews 2003).

Ryan, Halsey, and Matthews (2003) discussed the impact environmental and instructional conditions can have on the demonstration of challenging behaviours. Once the classroom teacher has developed a working A-B-C statement describing the circumstances of the target behaviour, the teacher can now manipulate possible influencing factors and evaluate the impact on the behaviour. For instance, regarding instructional conditions, a classroom teacher who has recorded a dramatic increase in the frequency of a student arguing with peers immediately after the beginning of independent work with the reinforcing consequence of attention from peers can then evaluate which events or circumstances can be altered to determine a change in the frequency of the target behaviour. In this example, changes in the antecedents prior to the target behaviour can include altering the type of instruction, changing the seating arrangement or varying the daily schedule to provide additional teacher assistance. Additionally, the specific attention of the classroom teacher on the actual circumstances of when and where the target behaviour occurs can provide the opportunity for the teacher to re-evaluate the student's skill competency and understanding of the academic task at hand, which may also be a contributing factor to the function of the behaviour.

Planning the BIP

With the collection and evaluation of all the information and data, the classroom teacher can then decide on the best approach for teaching positive behaviours to

replace (i.e., replacement behaviour) the target behaviour. When considering the teaching of a replacement behaviour, Wheeler and Richey (2005) emphasised the importance of selecting a behaviour that will replace the target behaviour and serve the same function for the student. Ideally, the replacement behaviour must reflect what is expected of the student, be a behaviour that the student can perform (or learn to perform), and be supported by the natural environment (Umbreit et al. 2007). Rather than resorting to a series of sanctions, the classroom teacher will be able to address the student's behavioural needs by providing the opportunity to meet a problem with a solution, namely teaching new appropriate behaviours (Winter and Preston 2006).

For example, if a classroom teacher has concluded that a student's target behaviour is 'getting out of his seat to avoid independent work' (i.e., escape from the task), the teacher might consider teaching the student to raise his hand for teacher assistance and to allow for a short break once completing a previously agreed upon benchmark of independent seatwork. The target behaviour (i.e., 'getting out of seat') is being systematically discouraged by the reinforcement of the replacement behaviour (i.e., raising hand and completing seatwork). Additionally, not only does the replacement behaviour prevent the target behaviour from occurring but also serves to increase the quality of life for the student by providing an appropriate social skill which may be utilised in the long term (Wheeler and Richey 2005; Winter and Preston 2006).

Additionally, Gresham, Watson, and Skinner (2001) provided a series of brief descriptions for the design of a BIP that systematically provided opportunities for the reinforcement of a replacement behaviour. The authors recommended six steps when designing a plan with a replacement behaviour: writing the A-B-C statement, selecting a replacement behaviour, identifying alternative reinforcing conditions, ensuring the target behaviour no longer has opportunities for reinforcement, ensuring the replacement behaviour is explicitly and positively reinforced, and making a list of changes that will strengthen the likelihood of the replacement behaviour over the target behaviour. The authors also suggested flexibility and adjusting the plan according to the level of positive response.

Conclusion

Many educators are finding the FBA an effective intervention tool to ascertain information and data to assist students in the general population. The FBA can provide a collaborative opportunity for educators, parents, and the student to meet, collect valuable data and develop an appropriate intervention plan in varying degrees of implementation. As several of the aforementioned authors emphasised, the FBA can be of great support to those students in need of assistance before their challenging behaviours worsen and the situation becomes dire.

A basic understanding of behaviours and the FBA process can provide classroom teachers with another valuable tool to incorporate into their pre-existing classroom management style. The FBA process underlines the significance of early intervention and provides the classroom teacher with the opportunity to introduce, teach, and maintain new positive behaviours for the student. The addition of a positive behaviour for the student who demonstrates an unwanted challenging behaviour is not only beneficial for the classroom environment in the short term but actually enhances the quality of life for the student in the long term.

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