

Mind the gap:
Addressing the need for post-graduate training in
behavioral assessment and intervention

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Abstract

School psychologists play a critical role in the provision of functional, student-centered and data-driven behavioral assessments and intervention. However, research examining their procedural knowledge and comfort conducting these assessments is minimal. In this presentation, we will review the results of a study whose data indicate that school psychologists perceive a gap between their knowledge of behavioral assessment and intervention and what they are expected to perform in the educational environment. Workshop participants will have the opportunity to explore the implications of the study, compare current practitioner training models and experience a sample of technology-assisted learning the area of behavioral assessment.

Background

School psychologists play a critical role in the provision of functional, student-centered and data-driven behavioral assessment and intervention. In addition to maximizing least restrictive learning environments for students and supporting their academic and social success, well-constructed behavior assessments help school districts retain critical resources otherwise lost in litigation including settlement monies and lost instructional time for teachers and other staff members.

Researchers have surveyed School Psychologist on comprehensive psychoeducational assessment practices. Benson, Floyd, Kranzler, Eckert, Fefer and Morgan (2018) recently surveyed 1317 school psychologist's on psychoeducational assessment practices. Previous studies have also surveyed School Psychologist's on psychoeducational assessment practices (Hutton et al., 1992; Reschly et al., 1987; Stinnett et al, 1994; Wilson & Reschly, 1996). Researchers have surveyed applied behavior analysis professionals on functional behavior assessment procedures. Oliver, Pratt, & Normand, (2015) surveyed 731 behavior analysts certified by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board on functional assessment practices.

To date, research examining school psychologist's procedural knowledge and comfort level conducting functional behavior assessments is minimal. Current studies on educational behavioral assessment tend to focus on efficacy of using FBAs in schools (Borgmeier, Loman, & Rodriguez, 2015; Dunlap & Kern, 2018); efficacy of training programs in FBA procedures for school staff (Scott & Alter, 2017; Strickland-Cohen, Kennedy, Berg, Bateman, Horner, 2016) and delineating disparate elements of the FBA document (Anderson, Rodriguez, & Campbell, 2015). While these areas are critical to further our understanding of best practices in the provision of behavioral support to students, a gap remains regarding school psychologist's self-evaluation of their confidence in behavioral assessment and intervention implementation.

Method

In an effort to better understand school psychologist's personal perception of behavioral assessment, a fixed response online survey was created.

Participants.

223 practicing school psychologists completed the survey. Early analysis identified 13 participants were Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA) and their data were removed from the overall findings. Of the included respondents, 60% lived in California. 22% lived in the southwest United States, 11% in the northwest, 29% in the Midwest, 22% in the northeast, and 12% in the southeast. 13% had earned their doctorate in education or school psychology, and 87% had earned a Ed.S or M.A. in School Psychology. Nearly half had worked in the field for 8 or more years, 11% worked in the field 5-7 years, 19% worked in the field 3-5 year and 23% had worked in the field less than 2 years. 60% worked at the elementary school level, and 89% worked in a public K-5 setting. 81% of participants identified their primary role as a school psychologist as assessment.

Survey Design, Recruitment, and Administration.

Sections in the survey include identifying information, behavior change knowledge, current assessment practices, comfort level with FBAs/BIPs and willingness to participate in future training opportunities. The survey was administered through *LimeSurvey*. School psychologists were asked to participate through the California Association of School Psychologist email service and through school psychology specific Facebook groups.

Data Analysis.

Seven likert questions (very strong, strong, adequate, weak, very weak) were asked on behavior change knowledge.

- 1.) How strong is your knowledge of the legal requirements of FBAs/BIPs?
- 2.) How strong is your knowledge of measurement (durations, frequency, IRT, interval recording, etc).
- 3.) How strong is your knowledge of indirect and direct functional assessment procedures?
- 4.) How strong is your knowledge of functional analysis procedures (environment manipulations) in a school setting?
- 5.) How strong is your knowledge of IEP process of adding a FBA/BIP? How strong is your knowledge of BIP
- 6.) How strong is your knowledge unique FBA/BIP situations (Manifestation Determination becomes a FBA for drug use, severe behaviors, self-injury, etc) procedures?

Three likert questions (I am uncomfortable and require more training, I am somewhat uncomfortable, I am somewhat comfortable, I am comfortable, I am very comfortable.)

- 1.) What is your overall comfort level conducting and writing a FBA?
- 2.) What is your overall comfort level conducting and writing a BIP?
- 3.) What is your overall comfort level implementing a BIP?

These categories of questions were added up to create a total knowledge score and a total comfort score. The total knowledge score and total comfort score was compared to *How many years have you been working in the field* (8+, 5-7 year, 3-5 year, and 1-2 years), *How many classes did you have in Behavior change* (1, 2, 3, 4+), And *Were you required to complete FBAs and BIPs during internship* (yes, no). The purpose of this analysis was to identify if years of experience or behavior change coursework could predict knowledge and comfort level conducting FBAs and BIPs. A one-way Kruskal-Wallis One-Way ANOVA was calculated (Salkind, 2007).

Results

Descriptive of Behavior Change Practice.

When asked about procedures used conducting an FBA (e.g. *Do you utilize a 4 or 5 function model when conducting an FBA/BIP?*), 60% of participants responded no or did not answer. When asked *How many FBAs to you complete a year*, 62% responded 0-5, and 23% responded 6-10. Participants were asked what the most common behavior concern for a FBA/BIP and 55% responded non-compliance, while 31% responded aggression.

Descriptive of Behavior Change Knowledge.

The majority of participants responded that they had taken just one class in behavior assessment/intervention during their graduate training (41%). 62% responded they were required to complete FBAs and BIPs during their internship. When asked *how strong is your knowledge of measurement* 36% responded very weak, weak or adequate. When looking at a participant's level of confidence conducting indirect and direct behavioral assessments 50% responded very weak, weak or adequate. In assessing participant's level of confidence in completing behavioral assessments (e.g. *How strong is your knowledge of functional analysis procedures- environment manipulations- in a school setting?*), 52% responded very weak, weak or adequate, while 48% responded strong or very strong.

Descriptive of comfort level conducting FBAs and BIPs.

In assessing participant's level of comfort conducting behavioral assessments (e.g. *What is your overall comfort level conducting and writing a FBA*), 64% responded *I am uncomfortable and require more training, I am somewhat uncomfortable, or I am somewhat comfortable*, while 36% responded *I am comfortable or I am very comfortable*.

Descriptive of Training Opportunities.

And given the education and field experience of participants, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they were eager to pursue additional training in behavior assessment and intervention (e.g. *Would you be interested in obtaining additional training in Behavior Change?*). Participants were also asked to share their primary goal in obtaining additional training in behavior change and responses fell within two primary categories: *design more legally defensible FBAs/BIPs*, and *expedite a student's rate of behavior change*. 44% of participants responded they would prefer training opportunities to be presented Online, 27% responded in person and 22% responded they would prefer a hybrid training program.

Statistical Analysis.

The total knowledge score had a mean of 23.7 and median of 25. There was a maximum of 35 points in the total knowledge score. The total comfort score had a mean of 9.8 and median of 10. There was 15 maximum points in the total comfort level score. When comparing total knowledge score and total comfort score to years of experience and whether an individual conducted FBAs during their fieldwork, no statistical significance was found. This indicates that knowledge and comfort conducting FBAs, and BIPs cannot be predicted by School Psychologists' years of experience or having practiced FBAs during their fieldwork. When comparing total knowledge score and total comfort score to how many courses an individual had in behavior change both were found to be statistically significant, total knowledge score ($X^2=46.9$, $p<0.001$), total comfort score ($X^2=46.3$, $p<0.001$). This indicates that knowledge and comfort level with FBAs and BIPs can be predicted by with more training and coursework.

Discussion

The results of this survey indicate that school psychologists perceive a gap between their current body of knowledge in the area of behavioral assessment and intervention and what they are expected to perform in the educational setting. This gap is further exacerbated by a lack of research in this area, making it difficult to track the longitudinal impact of the gap over the course of a school psychologist's career.

While behavioral intervention is heavily emphasized in the domains of practice set forth by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), graduate programs vary widely in what behavior change courses provided, the content embedded and practice opportunities in organic settings. Post graduate training is available and most widely pursued through the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BABC) and the BCBA designation ("Behavior Analyst Certification Board", n.d). however that process can be time intensive, cost prohibitive and/or not directly applicable to the school psychologist in the educational setting (Kazemi & Shapiro, 2017)

Data suggest that a training curriculum in behavioral assessment and intervention specific to school psychologists would address a need not currently being met elsewhere. These trainings could be delivered through interactive, online modules on topics suggested by study participants such as a) legal requirements; b) measurement (duration, frequency, interval, IRT, latency), c) Assessment (indirect, direct); d) FAA (experimental manipulations); e) Behavior reduction plans (BIPs) and; f) IEP process and difficult and unique cases. In an effort to fully recognize the need within the school psychology community and maximize impact, the next steps of this project would include gathering additional self-report data from school psychologist's as well as school psychologist trainers and school-based supervisors.

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