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**Behavioral Problems in Schools:
Ways to Encourage Functional Behavior
Assessment (FBA) of Discipline-Evoking
Behavior of Students with Emotional
and/or Behavioral Disorders (EBD)**

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Abstract

Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) of aggressive and negative behaviors that lead to suspension and expulsion is mandated for students with disabilities in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997. This legal requirement is problematic for many school districts as well as teacher preparation programs in that numerous barriers to effective application of FBA exist within our educational institutions. The present article discusses some of the major challenges school districts personnel face in implementing FBAs. A school improvement initiative, *Success4*, is presented to illustrate an approach that the state of Iowa is taking to overcome these challenges. Finally, we present arguments for fundamental changes in educational policies and practices in order to enhance school district effectiveness and accountability in conducting functional behavioral assessments.



The 1997 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes a number of provisions that are likely to substantially alter public school practices. Prior federal legislation (i.e., Public Law 94-142) sought to ensure that students with disabilities receive a "free and appropriate public education" (FAPE) in the "least restrictive

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environment" (LRE) (Gable & Hendrickson, 1997). With the IDEA '97 comes a shift from accessibility of general education classroom placement to accountability of academic instruction (Gable, Quinn, Rutherford, & Howell, 1998a) and accountability for positive behavioral interventions, strategies and supports (Smith, 1999, January). Thus, a major goal is to assure that instruction of students with disabilities produces positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Other noteworthy changes include the expectation that IEP teams reference student objectives to the curriculum of the general education classroom, that general educators participate in the IEP process, and that once a student with a disability is 14 years old his individualized education program (IEP) must contain a transition plan.

For students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders (EBD), the most dramatic change in IDEA '97 may be the stipulation that schools address the relationship between problem behavior and the classroom learning environment. This is to be accomplished through functional behavioral assessment (FBA), behavioral planning as a component of the IEP process, and the establishment of positive behavioral intervention plans and supports. Accordingly, the expected competencies of IEP teams as specified in IDEA '97 span several areas: functional behavioral assessments, behavioral intervention planning, documentation of the appropriateness of programs, manifest determinations (of whether or not a behavior is linked to the student's disability), and the identification of alternative educational settings when needed (Smith, 1998, September). The focus of this article is primarily on one of these competencies: the design and provision of functional behavioral assessments.

With the requirement of FBA, education personnel can no longer simply attempt to suppress unacceptable student behavior. Now they are expected to determine "why" the student is motivated to engage in that behavior (Gable et al., 1998a; Van Acker, 1998). Based on knowledge of the function(s) of behavior, IEP teams must design programs to reduce future occurrences of the behavior while teaching the student more socially acceptable replacement behaviors--behaviors that in some way serve the same functions as the challenging behavior but do so in a more acceptable fashion (e.g., Fox et al., 1998; Van Acker, 1998).

According to IDEA '97, schools must introduce FBA to address serious and persistent student problems, behavior that involves drugs or weapons or that represents a physical danger to the student or others. In many cases, standard disciplinary practices may fail to eliminate the problem behavior or may even exacerbate it, substantiating the need for an FBA. Unfortunately, such assessment can be a complex and time-consuming proposition (e.g., Gable et al., 1998b; Mayer, 1995). Therein lies a challenge of significant proportions, namely, how to muster support for a mandated policy, FBA, that is antithetical to the current discipline practices (e.g., quick and efficient suspension, expulsion for serious or zero tolerance behaviors) of most local education agencies.

In the following discussion, we first examine the myriad challenges facing public school personnel in relation to IDEA '97 and its disciplinary provisions including FBA. Second, we introduce a recent school improvement plan initiated in Iowa and encourage education officials to consider its provisions as a basis for developing proactive disciplinary practices and the effective use of FBA. Finally, we propose ways that education agencies might surmount obstacles to implementing FBAs, beginning with a fundamental change in philosophy regarding student discipline.

Obstacles to the Use of Functional Behavioral Assessment

Public Education in Transition

The increased cultural and developmental diversity of students has had and continues to have a significant impact on public schools. This includes unprecedented diversity in terms of student ethnicity, religion, language, cultural background, and socio-economic status (Hodgkinson, 1996). Mounting fiscal constraints also affect educational systems forcing many LEAs, for example, to curtail construction of new schools and to increase student-teacher ratios. To date litigation and legislation have reinforced the least restrictive environment (LRE) doctrine of special education law (McEllistrem, Roth, & Cox, 1998) which in turn has led to a succession of progressive ideologies. A current ideology with widespread support is the full inclusion movement (Bullock & Gable, 1998). As a result, a burgeoning number of students with disabilities are being taught alongside students without disabilities in the regular education classrooms (e.g., Gable & Hendrickson, 1997). General education teachers now must provide positive behavioral supports for challenging students and collaborate in the collection of FBA data.

Lack of Philosophical and Conceptual Foundation for Successful Implementation of FBA

School districts have not yet embraced a proactive, preventative approach to discipline and this lack of proactivity is a further barrier to the successful implementation of FBA (Conroy, Clark, Gable, & Fox, 1998). Many school districts view FBA as a legal mandate with which to comply, rather than an instructional process to ameliorate problem behaviors and facilitate the development of appropriate academic and social skills. One pre-requisite of successful implementation of FBA is the commitment of school districts to make schools safe and effective for *all* children. This commitment requires school district personnel to shift their focus away from solving discipline problems through suspension and expulsion of students and concentrate their efforts on proactive strategies. A commitment to proactive behavior management will require school-

based teams to develop alternative disciplinary strategies to address the unique behaviors of individual students. Included in a safe schools commitment is the responsibility to provide school personnel (e.g., administrators, general and special educators, related service personnel, support staff) with training and technical assistance which includes FBAs.

Specialized Skills

The requirement to conduct functional behavioral assessments outlined in IDEA '97 stems from a long history and research base within the applied behavior analysis (ABA) literature. Applied behavior analytic approaches have demonstrated the utility of conducting FBAs for designing intervention plans for students who demonstrate behavior problems (Fox, Conroy, & Heckaman, 1998). Recent FBA techniques (e.g., analogue assessments, functional interviews, rating scales) have primarily been applied to individuals with developmental disabilities (Fox et al., 1998; Nelson, Roberts, Mathur, & Rutherford, 1999). Although these alternative FBA approaches often are effective in developing positive behavioral interventions for students with developmental disabilities, there have been relatively fewer studies that evaluate their utility with students who exhibit emotional and/or behavioral problems, particularly those behaviors leading to suspension and/or expulsion (e.g., smoking, weapons possession). Nelson and his colleagues (Nelson, et al., 1999) recently questioned the wisdom of requiring FBA for students who do not have developmental disabilities noting that public policy has exceeded the existing research base. Given that the research base of FBA techniques with students with EBD is in its early stage of development, it is no wonder that a majority of school districts' personnel lack the specific competencies and expertise to implement FBA. The lack of expertise and competence of IEP teams in conducting FBAs poses a major obstacle to successful implementation of FBA and related proactive, positive discipline policies in our schools. In addition to the lack of expertise in FBA and positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports, many educators lack the co-requisite skills such as teaming and collaboration abilities which are essential to the conduct of FBAs (Conroy et al., 1998).

For the most part, general educators are not adequately prepared to address the diverse academic and behavioral challenges characteristic of students with or at high risk for emotional and/or severe behavior problems (Gable et al., 1998b; Smith et al., 1999). Relatedly, few special educators or support services personnel receive sufficient preparation in the areas of collaboration and consultation to expertly serve their general education counterparts (e.g., Gable, Hendrickson, Young, & Shokoohi-Yekta, 1992). Recent graduates of personnel preparation programs rate skills in collaboration, diversity competence, and prosocial development expertise as critical to meeting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students (Smith et al., 1999). At the same time, teachers *and*

support services personnel indicate that they do not feel adequately prepared for this important responsibility (e.g., Iowa Department of Education, 1999).

Educational policies and procedures. Another barrier to satisfactorily meeting the diverse academic and behavioral needs of students with challenging behavior is the presence of conflicting educational policies and procedures (Heflin & Estes, 1998). For example, the "zero-tolerance" policy popular in many schools discourages exploration of classroom or building-level intervention options. Instead, students evidencing challenging behavior often are subjected to the practice of "refer-and-remove," a practice which has been common for decades. There is strong opposition to regular education classroom retention of students who engage in inappropriate, disruptive and/or threatening behavior (e.g., Gable, Hendrickson, & Rutherford, 1991; Lewis, 1994). When schools do address student problem behaviors, purely negative consequences account for the overwhelming majority of school building-level responses (Colvin, Sugai, & Kameenui, 1993). Unfortunately, accumulated evidence suggests that the use of punitive strategies in the absence of positive supports serves only to aggravate the situation (Gable et al., 1998b).

As we have noted, changes in student demographics, along with recent legislation and shifts in educational policies, impose new demands and greater responsibilities on education personnel than ever before. Changing educational practices reveal a growing chasm between the content and focus of pre-service and in-service preparation programs. The rapidly evolving demands of the workplace often are not translated into the course work at colleges and universities in a timely fashion. Consequently, graduates of undergraduate and master's degree programs are insufficiently prepared for the behavioral challenges and realities of today's classrooms. Even today, relatively few educational personnel have been trained to problem solve effectively in teams (Gable et al., 1998a), to assess challenging behavioral problems (Yell & Shriner, 1997), or to develop effective behavioral intervention plans and supports (e.g., Shellady et al., 1998). Issues facing schools are complex, and the problem of conducting effective FBAs as mandated by law will require a fundamental change in educational philosophy and practice.

Reconceptualizing the Problem and the Solution

Notwithstanding the federal mandate, it is doubtful that FBA will take hold as routine educational practice without significant, fundamental changes in our approach toward student behavioral planning and discipline. We would suggest that these changes must reflect the growing support needs of students and a greater shared responsibility among educators, community agencies, and families for addressing those needs (Smith et al., 1999). An example of the response of one state to these conditions is presented.

Beginning with an initiative known as the Iowa Behavioral Initiative in 1991 and progressing through a more broad-based effort known as *Success4*, Iowa has developed a comprehensive school improvement effort based on such principles as: (a) educational services should emphasize prevention and early intervention, (b) student discipline can best be accomplished through instruction rather than coercion, and (c) desirable student behavior should be taught in a proactive and systematic manner. Eschewing a "zero-tolerance" policy, the overarching assumption of this effort is that there are no social, emotional, or behavioral problems that the school, family, and community cannot address together (Iowa Behavioral Initiative [IBI], 1994).

The *Success4* Initiative has, as a primary mission, the mobilization of students, families, schools, and communities to enhance the social, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual development of students. This effort has many dimensions. During the 1998-99 school year, approximately 200 school sites throughout Iowa received funding to develop local efforts at improving the social, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual functioning of students. Each funded site had to demonstrate a recognition of the following parameters in their planning efforts: (a) recognition that skill development in each of the four areas—social, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral—is essential to students' success, (b) families and schools must work in partnership to support student growth, (c) school personnel must have training and resources to support and enhance these four development areas, and (d) community partnerships are essential to create better response to the social, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral needs of students.

In addition to these locally funded efforts, the *Success4* Initiative supports other efforts such as a Specialized Services Group which has, for the last five years, addressed the needs of those working with students with more moderate to severe behavioral needs, many of whom may be identified as behaviorally disordered. This group has designed specific training efforts needed for professionals working with these youth and has provided resource materials to each of Iowa's intermediate units on such behavioral and clinical conditions as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and Tourette's Syndrome. Another example of the related activities that have been generated through the Iowa Behavioral Initiative and *Success4* efforts is a Higher Education Network of university and college faculty from across Iowa who recently completed a study of recent graduates of training programs in the state regarding their perceptions of needs in the social, emotional, and behavioral areas and the extent to which their training programs prepared them to meet such challenges (see Smith et al., 1999).

We believe that it is within a conceptual model of such broad-based efforts that new efforts around such concepts as FBAs and positive behavioral interventions are most likely to succeed. When the amendments to the IDEA were signed by President Clinton in 1997, a statewide commit-

tee in Iowa composed of representatives of groups such as school administrators, school boards, advocacy groups, parents, state department personnel, and higher education representatives formed a committee on implementing the IDEA behavioral and discipline requirements. A series of training efforts have resulted from the work of this committee. In the Spring of 1998, three two-hour video conferences involving over 20 sites and 200 professionals and parents were conducted that provided an overview of the IDEA '97 behavioral and discipline expectations, a review of expectations regarding functional behavioral assessments and manifestation determinations, and a review of expectations regarding behavioral intervention programs. In the Summer of 1998, teams from each of Iowa's fifteen intermediate units (AEAs) attended a three-day intensive training session dealing with the IDEA '97 expectations. Case study examples were provided for conducting functional behavioral assessments and behavioral intervention plans. In the Spring of 1999, four regional two-day training sessions were provided for AEA teams focusing on a trainer of trainers model and providing updated information regarding the final regulations of IDEA '97. Further follow-up activities are planned for the Fall of 1999.

State initiatives. Recently, public education has seen a myriad school improvement initiatives (e.g., whole language instruction, portfolio assessment, professional collaboration). These initiatives often impose a tremendous additive burden on schools, hardly a climate conducive to acceptance of the various provisions of IDEA '97. Responses to the federal mandate to train school personnel to assume new roles and responsibilities regarding student discipline must be designed to meet the needs of local service providers. In addition, a reward system that is commensurate with the task is recommended. For example, teachers might receive stipends or pay supplements for increased responsibilities, perhaps similar to compensation offered athletic and/or forensic coaches.

Conclusion

For FBA to work, schools must give the highest priority to an organizational framework that encompasses a range of positive behavioral supports and disciplinary practices. Smith (1998) reports data indicating that IEP teams are experiencing significant problems in implementing the discipline and behavioral expectations of IDEA '97. In redefining goals, school personnel must be especially cautious to eliminate both the appearance and reality of conflicting priorities. Education personnel too often have been tugged in different directions, frustrated by competing, sometimes contradictory policies which exhaust available time, energy, and resources. Building-level teams can and must collaborate to design and deliver effective instruction for a diverse student population. School-wide collaboration in turn should create an environment in which IEP teams can conduct FBAs and deliver more effective behavioral inter-

ventions. We know that curricular reform is one strategy that lends itself to a range of prevention and early intervention programs and that curriculum can be used to integrate both academic and behavioral supports for students (see Korinek & Popp, 1997; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996).

School districts must find ways to not only provide potential IEP team members adequate training, but also to compensate them in that effort. One possible approach, for instance, would be for school districts to establish collaborative professional development programs with area colleges or universities, so that didactic training is combined with supervised building-level experiences that translate into graduate-level credits for participants. The responsibility for securing release time, paying tuition, and providing participants a modest stipend would rest with the school(s). Once trained, participants could be offered renewal and extension training on a routine basis (e.g., twice a year), according to a similar arrangement. Additionally, the school division must assure that teachers and support personnel have ready access to quality technical assistance and support, perhaps initially with a full time behavioral specialist (Yell & Shriner, 1997).

Finally, if IEP teams are to meet the letter and spirit of IDEA '97 with regard to its discipline provisions, there must be standards established so teams can make informed, valid decisions. Smith (1999, January) recently examined all of the court decisions and Office of Civil Rights (OCR) decisions related to the behavioral and discipline provisions of IDEA '97. Smith found that functional behavioral assessment (FBA) specifically accounted for approximately 10 of the 123 IEP team decisions which had been challenged. In 5 of the 10 instances in which FBAs were challenged, an FBA was not even conducted. In the other 5 instances an FBA was carried out, but only one of the 5 was considered adequate. Smith observed a pattern of judgments against school districts in court and OCR rulings. He found that schools are being held accountable for the conduct of appropriate FBAs.

Across the country, schools are struggling to better understand the exact conditions under which to implement the various positive behavioral supports and discipline provisions IDEA '97 (Gable et al., 1998a). A number of factors--singly and collectively--militate against eager acceptance of the potentially valuable practice of functional behavioral assessment. We appreciate that transforming a complex process of clinical worth into practices that can be realistically and effectively applied in classroom situations poses a tremendous challenge. The formal practice of functional behavioral assessment likely will apply to relatively few students--about 1-3% of the population evidencing chronic and intense misconduct and possibly another 7-9% who are at high risk (Nelson, 1998). Even so, some states have chosen to expand this practice beyond this limited scope to address broader behavioral concerns (e.g., Iowa Department of Education, 1998). Clearly, redefining both the structure and

the culture of schools to support FBA within a conceptual framework built upon positive behavioral supports is a daunting task.

According to Sugai (1994), the most important factor in developing a successful program for students with behavior problems is the establishment of an educational environment in which positive behavior is reinforced and where appropriate social skills are taught as forthrightly as academic skills. The systems change initiative underway in Iowa may serve as a model for school districts seeking to establish such a climate. As specified in the 1997 amendments to IDEA, states are required to address the inservice needs of education personnel (including professionals and paraprofessionals who provide special education, general education, related services, or early intervention services) as these relate to developing and implementing positive intervention strategies. Recently, Shella-dy et al. (1998, November) and Smith et al. (1999) reported that less-experienced educators in Michigan and Iowa preferred a workshop/college course format for training. These same teachers expressed partiality for ongoing technical assistance provided by experienced colleagues at the building level.

In summary, we suspect that those state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) that integrate FBA into larger policy initiatives (e.g., safe schools, *Success4*) will be the most successful. FBAs conducted as a natural component of proactive behavioral planning are likely to be easier to implement and yield better outcomes than crisis-oriented FBAs. We also anticipate that technical support, continuing education, and strategies for improving teacher compensation are more likely to succeed when placed within an umbrella, locally relevant educational initiative.

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