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**Putting Quality Functional
Assessment into Practice in Schools:
A Research Agenda on Behalf of E/BD Students**

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Abstract

The discipline provisions of the IDEA place emphasis on gaining an understanding of why the student is motivated to engage in problem behavior and to consider, when appropriate, positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports to address the behavior. These legislative mandates bring center stage a range of new duties and responsibilities for the IEP team. This article discusses the problems that school divisions across the country are encountering when implementing these requirements and recommends a course of research to address these issues

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Dealing with student behavior that disrupts the learning environment, interferes with the student's learning, or poses a risk to others has long been a concern of public school personnel (Rutherford & Nelson, 1995). In the past, students who acted out or engaged in disruptive, or challenging behavior, usually were subjected to some kind of disciplinary sanction (e.g., office referrals, suspension, or expulsion). However, a more efficacious resolution of student misconduct has taken on increased significance because of the disciplinary provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its related regulations. Among the most significant provisions, the IDEA stipulates that schools must conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) for students with disabilities who have been suspended for more than 10 days because of their challenging behavior (Yell & Shiner, 1997). Furthermore, if a behavior plan already exists for that student, then that FBA and its associated behavior intervention plan must be modified, where appropriate.

With regard to both the legal requirements relating to student discipline and FBA and emerging standards of best practice within the field, there are a number of issues facing school personnel. These issues include: (a) the need for a team-based approach to FBA and the behavior intervention plan (BIP), (b) the requirement that general educators be a part of that team and to implement the BIP within the regular classroom; (c) the need to use multiple, different methods and sources of information in conducting the FBA and development of the BIP; (d) the need to have the FBA and BIP tailored to the particular needs of the student and his/her behavior, (e) the requirement that personnel be trained and be competent in the application of FBA methods and instruments; and (f) the need for schools to proactively address the behavioral needs of students with disabilities rather than simply waiting until they are legally required to deal with the behavior (Conroy, Clark, Gable, & Fox, 1999). Together, these overlapping and interrelated issues pose enormous challenges to schools.

In what follows, we examine critically a range of issues that relate to functional behavioral assessment in schools. Drawing upon the accumulated research, we develop a table by which to identify gaps in that research and professional literature. We propose a modest research agenda for transforming FBA from successful clinical research to classroom practice for students with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) and delineate possible areas for further investigation. Before proceeding, we offer several caveats. The process of functional behavioral assessment has been rightly characterized as a "work in progress" (Conroy et al., 1999); accordingly, both our critical review of the literature and delineation of possible studies stemming from that analysis are incomplete. Given the rapid rate at which new information emerges on FBA, we trust that readers will incorporate it into both research and practice.

The Challenge to Implement FBA for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders

Beyond the legal imperative to conduct a functional behavioral assessment, there is an increasing body of empirical research that supports its use to effectively resolve challenging behaviors. Indeed, there have been a modest number of experimental investigations, most of which have been conducted with students with developmental disabilities in clinical settings (Sasso, Conroy, Sticher, & Fox, in press). These studies substantiate that it is possible to identify the antecedent triggers, maintaining consequences and, in some cases, the setting events for various challenging behaviors using FBA. Furthermore, the interventions that resulted from that analysis were shown to reduce or eliminate specific behavior challenges (see Carr et al., 1999). Several large-scale studies also have validated the effectiveness of FBA in analyzing and intervening on challenging behaviors (e.g., Carr et al., 1999; Chandler, Dahlquist, & Repp & Feltz, 1999; Derby et al., 1992). Notwithstanding evidence of the successful applications of the FBA process, there are a number of obstacles that confront those responsible for translating these FBA research findings into effective, school-based practices. These obstacles include (a) significant "holes" in the applied research base regarding best practices for FBA, (b) pragmatic issues in school-based applications of FBA, and (c) the training needs of school personnel who are to implement FBA. Although we support the legislative imperative that education personnel address student behavior that impedes the teaching/learning process, our enthusiasm is tempered somewhat by the dearth of information to guide quality FBA in schools.

FBA and High Incidence Student Populations

As we know, there have been various experimental validations of FBA and FBA-based interventions for challenging behaviors. Much of this research, as well as the development of instruments, techniques and procedures, is rooted in investigations of the chronic aberrant behavior of persons with moderate to severe developmental disabilities. By comparison, there is a relatively modest database that focuses on FBA and intervention for students with higher incidence disabilities—students with emotional/behavioral disorders, attention deficit disorder, or learning disabilities (Fox, Conroy, & Heckaman, 1998; Heckaman, Conroy, Fox, & Chait, 2000; Nelson, Roberts, Mathur, & Rutherford, 1999; Sasso et al., in press). Furthermore, the majority of available studies have been conducted under carefully controlled clinical or experimental conditions in which the assessment and intervention usually have been controlled by the investigators rather than classroom personnel (Fox et al., 1998; Heckaman et al., 2000; Nelson et al., 1999; Sasso et al., in press). While this research shows that FBA can be

applied successfully to the analysis of and intervention for the behavior challenges of these students, there are a number of limitations in this literature. Absent is an effort to draw upon the available research to determine the extent to which FBA procedures and interventions can be modified and/or replicated under more naturalistic conditions by school personnel (Chandler et al., 1999; Schill, Kratochwill, & Elliot, 1998).

Technical Adequacy of FBA Instruments and Procedures

A related issue concerns the technical adequacy of the component instruments and procedures of the current FBA process. Typically, the FBA process includes a variety of assessment instruments/procedures, some of which rely on informant reports (e.g., interviews, behavior-situation rating scales) and others that involve direct assessment (e.g., scatterplots, ABC observations) and analysis (analog or naturalistic behavior analyses) of the challenging behaviors. A few of these instruments, such as the *Motivation Assessment Scale* (Durand & Crimmins, 1988), have been subject to relatively extensive empirical evaluation (e.g., Conroy, Fox, Bucklin, & Good, 1996). Unfortunately, the majority of instruments that appear to be important to the FBA process, including various interview schedules or direct observation schema, have received little or no evaluation as to their reliability or validity. Furthermore, evaluation of instrument technical adequacy has been conducted largely within populations with developmental disabilities, which does not answer questions about their applicability to other populations. Finally, given the multi-method nature of FBA, there is a need to establish a combination of instruments/procedures to accomplish an accurate, effective, and efficient analysis of student challenging behavior; unfortunately, no such empirical consensus yet exists (Scott, Meers, & Nelson, 2000).

Pragmatic Issues of FBA in Schools

Beyond the myriad of research issues, there is a number of equally pressing pragmatic issues facing those who would apply FBA in schools. These issues will be affected by the answers that emerge from the research questions previously noted. One such issue is how and by whom FBA is to be accomplished within a school district. There are a number of conceivable models for implementation. They include the use of individual FBA specialists from within a system, contacts with FBA experts from outside a system, or the use of within-system multidisciplinary teams. While the individual diagnostician or expert consultant approach has some potential advantages (e.g., expertise of the assessor, potential consistency in the application of FBA procedures), this approach poses a number of problems as well. First, the IDEA strongly encourages, if not requires, that FBA

be a team problem-solving process. Second, the number of potential referrals of students under IDEA is likely to exceed the capacity of any individual diagnostician or expert consultant.

The dramatic increase in referrals also must be considered in terms of the time that it takes to complete the FBA process. There is no agreed-upon length of time to complete the FBA process; however, based on standard practices, minimum estimates range anywhere from a week to 30 days. Given the potential barriers to conducting an FBA (e.g., delays in securing parent permission for assessment, student absences or suspensions), some authorities estimate that the FBA may take considerably longer—up to 60 days (Jack, Lindeman, Conroy, & Fox, 2000). Finally, the expert diagnostician or external consultant models would seem to transfer the “ownership” of the problem from the setting in which it occurs and increase the likelihood of separating the solution from the people who will need to implement it.

If, given the increasing number of student referrals and the time-intensive nature of the FBA process, the expert diagnostician or consultant models are inappropriate and inefficient, a logical alternative is to train multidisciplinary teams of school personnel to successfully implement FBA. Such teams could overlap with and/or work collaboratively with the IEP team. There is some preliminary evidence in support of the latter team approach (e.g., Fox et al., 1998; Vaughn, Hales, Bush, & Fox, 1998). Even so, too little is known to offer a definitive statement on what constitutes best training practices in FBA.

Issues of Training and Preparation of Education Personnel in FBA

According to the literature, one of the most pressing issues regarding FBA relates to the preparation of and standards for school-based teams (Scott, Nelson, Meers, & Liaupsin, 1999). This issue is manifest in several ways. First, there is no clear consensus among FBA “experts” as to the knowledge and competencies needed by personnel who would conduct such assessments (Scott et al., 1999; Stichter, Shellady, Sealander, & Eigenberger, 2000). Given the research-to-practice gap, it was predictable that in a recent survey of State Departments of Education more than two-thirds of the states reported they had no specific criteria for those who conducted FBAs (i.e., no required level of training in FBA, no specific certification requirements) (Conroy et al., 2000). Furthermore, there is not enough applied research to indicate how and to what standard school personnel training in FBA should be conducted. Not surprisingly, it has been our experience, as well as that of others in the field, that didactic training of pre-service and inservice personnel in FBA may be necessary but not sufficient. It appears that didactic training *must* be accompanied by some type of “hands-on” experience and ongoing guidance and support in the

application of FBA procedures (Chandler et al., 1999; Fox et al., 1998; Stichter et al., 2000; Vaughn et al., 1998).

In attempting to delineate the content of FBA training, we conducted critical and integrative review of the accumulated literature. Drawing upon that review, we developed a 10 step model for conducting FBA and for writing and implementing the Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) (see Gable, Quinn, Rutherford, Howell, & Hoffman, 2000). In putting this model into practice, we have found that the most pressing challenges include:

- the definitions of behavior that school personnel develop often are inadequate to reliably and accurately assess the student and the causes for his/her challenging behavior;
- IEP teams often attempt to address multiple and varied behaviors as single problems rather than distinct classes of behavior;
- there is a failure to clearly identify and link particular functional assessment data to hypotheses statements regarding triggering and maintaining conditions;
- the BIPs often are not individualized and more closely resemble a list of behavior change methods rather than a specific plan linked to the function of the student behavior; little attention is paid to the classroom context in which problem behaviors occur so that situational differences in the function of challenging behaviors are not addressed and, consequently, inappropriate BIPs are implemented,
- behavior plans focus primarily on eliminating inappropriate behaviors with little attention given to systemically teaching replacement behavior; and finally,
- IEP teams rarely monitor the fidelity of the implementation of the intervention.

Assuming these observations are reasonably representative, a significant need exists for high quality, research-based information on how school personnel can efficiently conduct effective FBAs that will, in turn, produce quality BIPs.

A School-Based Research Agenda in the Area of FBA

Across the country, schools are attempting to respond to the Federal mandate for appropriate and effective discipline procedures for students with disabilities who exhibit challenging behaviors, procedures that include the use of FBA. Given the magnitude of the challenge to prepare IEP teams to conduct FBA and implement effective BIPs and supports, we feel there is a need to focus research activities on the identification of empirically validated "best practices" related to FBA and the development and implementation of BIPS. It seems logical that these investigations be designed to address the various "methodological holes or gaps" that exist in the FBA/BIP process. Moreover, experience suggests that we would do

well to systematically introduce experiments (using both between and within group designs) to field test and validate instructional materials designed to promote the effective and efficient use of FBA in the development of BIPs by local educational agency personnel.

Gaps Between Research on and the Practice of FBA

In attempting to close methodological gaps in our knowledge of FBA, information derived from both a review of the extant research literature and an examination of current FBA/BIP practices should be subjected to careful analysis. That analysis should consist of qualitative methods of inquiry and/or simple descriptive statistics and experimental analysis. When qualitative methods are used, we might rely primarily on data triangulation. We have summarized our initial review in the form of a discrepancy table. We offer it to readers for critical review. The table also serves as the basis for classifying existing knowledge and for designing a series of empirical studies to fill in the identified gaps, including those described in succeeding discussion.

Investigation of Current FBA Practice

One strategy for reviewing current FBA practices would be to collect actual FBA summary forms and their accompanying positive BIPs and subject each to a critical review that includes systematic coding using a coding scheme based on our discrepancy table. With that coding scheme, we should be able to determine common strengths, weaknesses, and omissions. The information derived from these analyses would enable researchers to identify common pitfalls experienced by IEP teams and other school personnel responsible for conducting FBAs and developing BIPs. Ideally, trained observers would systematically collect direct observation data and conduct focus group discussions with a reasonable number of these FBA teams to gather further information on current FBA practices. Drawing upon these measures, a series of integrated studies designed to address the "methodological gaps" or "holes in the knowledge base" might be initiated, the outcomes of which could serve as an empirical blueprint for the development of a field-validated effective training program in FBA.

As shown in Table 1, there is scant research on hypothesis testing in natural environments or on the criterion level at which behavior changes are socially or functionally valid and reliable. There are other areas in which a significant body of literature has accumulated, but has failed to inform current practices. For example, much has been written about defining target behavior in observable, measurable, and repeatable terms. Yet school personnel struggle to accomplish that essential task, perhaps signaling that significant changes in training are warranted. Other research-to-practice

Table 1: *FBA Discrepancy Table*

Steps to FBA	Gaps in Research	Gaps in Practice
1. Verify the seriousness of the problem behavior.	Social validation studies on students with mild disabilities in special and general education settings are lacking.	IEP team members have difficulty selecting and applying objective standards with which to judge student behavior.
2. Define the problem behavior.	A substantial body of literature exists on writing observable, measurable, and repeatable behavioral definitions.	IEP team members lack both training and experience in reliably and validly defining problem behaviors.
3. Collect information on possible function(s) of the problem behavior.	The psychometric properties of many available indirect and direct FBA measures are unknown or inadequately studied.	IEP team members have limited skill in selecting measures or compensating for their technical flaws.
4. Analyze the information using data triangulation and/or problem pathway analysis.	Research has not been conducted to evaluate the efficiency and efficacy of these techniques that lead to the development of effective BIPs.	IEP team members have problems developing a BIP linked to the information collected on the behavior and its context(s).
5. Generate an hypothesis statement regarding the probable function(s) of the problem behavior.	Research has not investigated the practitioner's abilities to generate valid and reliable hypotheses of behavior without the assistance of researchers.	Practitioners often lack the skills to critically analyze information that assist them in developing valid and reliable hypotheses.
6. Test the hypothesis statement regarding the problem behavior.	Existing clinical strategies for testing hypotheses are not always feasible or socially valid in applied settings.	IEP team members lack skill in hypothesis testing.
7. Develop and implement behavioral intervention plan.	Research has focused primarily on the functional assessment techniques and much of the research does not evaluate the development of BIPs that are directly linked to the FBA.	IEP team members often do not implement BIPs consistently.
8. Monitor fidelity of implementation of the behavioral intervention plan.	Research on the fidelity necessary to assure a positive outcome with FBA interventions is limited.	There are no mechanisms in schools to assist teachers in the implementation and monitoring of the BIP.
9. Evaluate effectiveness of the behavioral intervention plan.	Research on the criterion level for behavior changes to be socially and functionally valid is limited.	There are no mechanisms in schools to assist teachers in the implementation and monitoring of the BIP.
10. Modify the behavioral intervention plan, as necessary.	There is a lack of research on exactly how to prepare practitioners to develop BIPs that are directly related to the results of FBA.	There are no mechanisms in schools to assist teachers in the implementation and monitoring of the BIP.

gaps include strategies whereby school personnel can compensate for the technical inadequacies of available FBA instruments, as well as ways to solidify linkage of behavioral intervention plans with the function of the challenging behavior. In all, given the recent federal legislation that addresses discipline in schools, there are a number of holes to be filled in both the research literature and how that knowledge is incorporated into high quality FBAs. In the following discussion, we describe several studies that are representative of a series of possible investigations designed to systematically “fill in the gaps” in research-to-practice of FBA in schools.

Investigation of the Training of School Personnel to Analyze FBA Data and Develop Behavior

Function Hypotheses

Functional behavioral assessment generally is viewed in practice as a team-based decision-making process in which a variety of methods, instruments, and data sources are analyzed to develop an hypothesis statement (“best guess”) about the function(s) of a student’s behavior (Gable et al., 2000). Typically, the assessment proceeds from the application of wide-ranging, indirect (informant) methods (e.g., semi-structured interviews, behavior rating scales) to increasingly more focused, direct methods (e.g., systematic direct observations, modifying and manipulating classroom variables to evaluate changes in behavior). This introduces complexity into the FBA process not only in terms of the application of instruments/procedures, but also the analysis of multiple sources of data to develop the hypothesis or hypotheses of behavior function. Thus, those who engage in FBA must know how to apply various instruments and how to analyze and synthesize data from the assessment into a coherent hypothesis regarding the targeted behavior.

One particular approach to analyzing diverse FBA data has been referred to as “data triangulation” (Gable et al., 1998). This approach involves charting and visually comparing behavior-environment information—drawn from three or more sources—to identify common sequences of triggering and maintaining consequences for challenging (as well as appropriate) behavior. These specific patterns may then be entered into a problem behavior pathway chart (e.g. Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Hagan, 1998), which describes the temporal and sequential distribution of classroom events—setting events, antecedents, challenging behavior, and maintaining consequences.

Notwithstanding the usefulness of these strategies, few studies have been reported on teaching FBA teams the complex analytic skills necessary to put these strategies into practice to generate a hypothesis regarding the motivation behind a student’s behavior. Currently, most FBA infor-

mation and training resources reflect primarily a didactic, descriptive approach, although some do incorporate brief descriptive examples (Conroy et al., 2000). We feel that a more direct and systematic approach must be established to successfully instruct school personnel in the analysis and synthesis of FBA data.

Investigation of the Identification, Definition, and Social Validation of Targeted Behaviors

One of key initial steps in the FBA process is the specification of the challenging behavior(s) of students referred for assessment. Indeed, the accurate specification of the target behavior may be the "sine qua non" of FBA. Without a clear, concrete, and reliable description of the behavior and its social/environmental context, one literally cannot conduct a functional assessment of that behavior.

According to our review, the primary mechanism for compiling information on the behavior and its environmental context is some form of structured or semi-structured functional assessment interview. The informants usually consist of the target student's teacher and one or more other school personnel who work with the student and/or the student's parents. There are several published and/or commercially available interview protocols (e.g., Railey & Pyles, 1989; Lawry, Storey, & Danko, 1993; O'Neill et al., 1997), each of which shares various common characteristics. Generally, the informant is asked for;

- specification of the challenging behavior(s) in terms of specific classes of student actions toward other people or objects within the environment (i.e., "action-object" definitions);
- estimation of the frequency, intensity, and/or duration of the challenging behavior in the natural setting;
- specification of the school/classroom contexts or situations in which the challenging behavior typically occurs and those in which the behavior typically does not occur;
- specification of any events that appear to precede or trigger the challenging behavior;
- specification of the way or ways in which the informant typically responds to the behavior when it occurs, and finally,
- specification of other consequences, intended or unintended, that may reinforce the behavior.

Despite the availability and growing use of these instruments for the specification of the behavior and its context, relatively little is known about their psychometric qualities, namely, reliability or validity. For example, we have scant knowledge regarding whether or not referring teachers would describe the same challenging behaviors if the FBA interview process were repeated over a short interval, such as 1 or 2 weeks following the

initial interview (test-retest reliability). Nor do we know if the referring teacher's listing and description of the challenging behaviors would agree with that of other school personnel (his/her teaching assistant, other teachers or related service personnel) or the student's parents (i.e., inter-informant reliability). The concept of reliable, consistent assessment instruments is of scientific, pragmatic, as well as legal significance. In a scientific sense, one cannot assess a phenomenon (e.g., a challenging behavior and its environmental causes) unless one can measure that phenomenon consistently.

Practitioners are rightly loath to be involved in assessment activities, either as assessors or as informants, that do not provide them with dependable (consistent) information. Not only does the IDEA require FBA in certain cases, but it also requires that *any* assessment of a student must be reliable and valid for the specific purposes of its use.

The usefulness of the functional behavior interview is another area of tension between research and practice (see Table 1). Accordingly, research should assess the test-retest as well as the inter-informant reliability of the specification of student challenging behavior as well as its social/environmental context(s), as assessed through the FBA interview. In addition, it would be useful to evaluate the validity of this information by comparing it to direct observational data collected by trained observers on the targeted challenging behavior(s) and their environmental contexts, antecedents and consequences.

Our literature review underscores the fact that more studies are needed that address the technical adequacy of the component instruments/procedures of FBA. Consonant with the views of our colleagues, to close the research-to-practice gap, we feel it is essential to conduct further studies on the reliability and validity of other FBA instruments, such as the *Student Assisted Interview* (Kern, Dunlap, Clarke, & Childs, 1993), *Motivation Assessment Scale* (Durand & Crimmins, 1992), the *Problem Behavior Questionnaire* (Lewis, Scott, & Sugai, 1994), and scatterplots (Touchette, MacDonald, & Langer, 1985).

Investigation of the Predictive Validity of Analog Probes and Hypothesis Validation

According to the literature, the FBA process usually has three major stages: indirect informant assessment (interviews and behavior-situation ratings scales), direct assessment (direct observations by trained observers), and functional analysis manipulation to validate hypotheses about the causes of the challenging behavior (O'Neill et al., 1997). The first two stages of informant assessment and direct observations are descriptive in nature, essentially providing a listing of variables that appear to correlate with the occurrence of challenging behavior. At this point, one typically generates one or more hypotheses about the specific triggers and main-

taining consequences of the targeted behavior (Gable et al., 2000).

At the third and final stage, the IEP team seeks to determine the accuracy of the hypothesis statement(s) regarding the student's challenging behavior. That determination involves the systematic manipulation of one or more components (i.e., setting events, antecedents, maintaining consequences) of the hypothesis to discover whether that event will in fact produce changes in the behavior. There are two basic ways in which this functional analysis or hypothesis validation has been and can be conducted: analog probes and naturalistic classroom environmental manipulations. Analog probes (e.g., Day et al., 1988; Iwata et al., 1982) consist of specially created trials in which the suspected environmental event is presented in a highly controlled format. Often, this process occurs in a clinic or clinic-type setting—a setting different from but arranged to be similar to the classroom in terms of suspected critical conditions (e.g., task difficulty level, the amount of feedback or attention given to the student). A specially trained clinician or assistant usually administers these trials, while data collectors collect precise observational data on the occurrence of the challenging behavior under different levels of the suspected event (e.g., high- and low-difficulty academic tasks) repeatedly over short periods of time. Such analogs have been reported frequently in the research literature and typically are quite useful in analyzing whether different variables affect a student's behavior. In fact, some investigators have reported relatively brief versions of this analog approach that can be accomplished in approximately 90 minutes (e.g., Derby et al., 1992). Unfortunately, use of analog probes is extremely demanding in terms of technical skill, time, and control over conditions under which to apply it, and until recently, it has not been conducted in natural settings. However, there is a limited body of evidence that supports the feasibility of conducting analog assessment within natural settings with the teachers manipulating naturally occurring antecedents and consequences (see Peck, Sasso, & Jolivette, 1997). The development of this technology is in the early stages and further investigation needs to be conducted to explore the practicality in school-based FBAs.

In recognition of the demands associated with an analog probe, an alternative is to conduct naturalistic versions of functional analysis within the classroom setting, drawing as much as possible on persons indigenous to the natural environment (e.g., teachers, classroom assistants) to conduct those analyses. Indeed, there is a modest amount of research to support naturalistic applications (e.g., Northup et al., 1994), although most naturalistic "environmental manipulations" have been conducted either by or with the guidance of researchers and experts in behavior analysis (Fox et al., 1998; Heckaman et al., 2000). Also, there are equivocal findings regarding the degree to which analog assessments conducted outside of the classroom environment and more naturalistic assessments of challenging behavior will yield the same results (Anderson, Freeman, & Scotti, 1999;

Conroy et al., 1996).

Lacking the tools with which IEP teams can validate a hypothesis, further research should be conducted to assess the degree to which analog probe and systematic environmental manipulations yield similar results regarding the function of the challenging behaviors. One way to investigate this issue would be to compare indirect and direct descriptive components of the FBA process. This might be followed by the specification of hypotheses concerning the function(s) of the challenging behavior(s), followed by both an analog and a natural classroom environmental manipulation on each student.

The preceding discussion is by no means an exhaustive account of our research-to-practice needs; like the FBA process itself, we anticipate that one body of research will inform the next. Further study in this area will enable researchers to better serve students with disabilities and provide the skills and supports necessary for special and general educators to do likewise.

Conclusion

Nationwide, education administrators, classroom teachers, and support personnel are struggling to learn how best to address the various provisions of the IDEA. For most school divisions, that task is especially formidable in the area of student discipline and the use of functional behavioral assessment. As we have discussed, the mandate to translate strategies and procedures of proven clinical efficacy into technically sound and practical tools for school-based application poses some enormous problems. These problems are exacerbated by the myriad of gaps in the research-to-practice research literature. Not surprisingly, schools are exploring ways to respond to the growing academic and behavioral challenges of students with disabilities—especially students with emotional / behavioral disorders. Our fear is that if we are unable to define in realistic and manageable terms the practices that comprise the FBA process (e.g., assessment of learning and behavior problems, emphasis on skill-building rather than punishment) it might become nothing more than a corrupt paper trail. Furthermore, students who disrupt daily instruction, engage in negative verbal behavior or physical / aggressive behavior, or otherwise defy conventional norms, are likely to suffer disproportionately from its flawed application. For that reason, we have attempted to identify a modest research agenda that consists of a series of overlapping investigations designed to enlarge upon our knowledge base and contribute to the quality preparation of IEP teams in the process of functional behavioral assessment.

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