Investigation on the Practice of the Functional Behavioral Assessment: Survey of Educators and Their Experiences in the Field

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The functional behavioral assessment (FBA) has been a hallmark practice amongst educators working with students demonstrating challenging behaviors. Although the process has been mandated in special education since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997, the FBA varies in form and implementation across the United States of America (USA). Using a survey format, educators from Midwestern USA were asked to share their experiences as to how FBAs are conducted. Results indicated educators were strongly assured on FBA form and implementation but indicated reservations on culture as a factor on behavior. Discussion on results and suggestions for future research are offered.

Keywords: behavioral hypotheses; behavioral interventions; data collection; functional behavioral assessment; student support

Introduction

In 1997, the President of the United States of America (USA), William Jefferson Clinton, signed the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; U.S. Department of Education, 2015) that included new standards to elevate the quality of education for students with disabilities, particularly those individuals with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD). Prior to this legislation, for many students with EBD demonstrating chronic challenging behaviors, the permanent removal from campus (i.e., expulsion) was often an eventuality as educators quickly exhausted disciplinary options (Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). In an effort to better serve students with EBD, the new legislation mandated educators to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) prior to any permanent removal of the student from a campus program based on persistent and repetitive challenging behaviors (e.g., verbal outbursts, physical aggression,

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deliberate property damage) that were disruptive to instruction and resistant to typical classroom management (Wheeler & Richey, 2010). More importantly, the mandate provided educators the opportunity to implement a methodical investigation to better understand contributing factors and develop a more informed behavior support plan (BSP) that assists a student rather than continuously deliver punitive consequences (Harrison & Harrison, 2009; Wheeler & Richey, 2010).

The FBA is an investigative process that allows educators to both evaluate behavioral influences and identify the function (i.e., reason) for a student's use of the challenging behavior (Wheeler & Richey, 2010). During the FBA process, educators collect and analyze qualitative (e.g., interviews, attendance records) and quantitative data (e.g., scatterplot, frequency count) to develop a hypothesis that effectively predicts the circumstances of the behavioral demonstration. With this understanding, educators can then craft a more effective BSP that accurately reinforces the demonstration of new replacement behaviors (Blood & Neel, 2007; Ingram, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 2005).

In spite of the wide use of the FBA throughout the field of special education, several barriers limit the effectiveness of its practice, particularly scope and implementation (May, Sheng, Chiyito, Brandt, & Howe, 2014; Quinn et al., 2001; Strickland-Cohen & Horner, 2015). While IDEA requires educators to consider the FBA for students with disabilities (e.g., autism, intellectual disabilities) demonstrating chronic challenging behaviors, the process is often reserved exclusively for students with EBD across many schools, which significantly limits the scope of intended assistance (Quinn et al., 2001). As well, despite the knowledge of the FBA, there is not a universal implementation model of the process, nor is one outlined in IDEA (McCahill, Healy, Lydon, & Ramey, 2014). FBA implementations vary in focus and quality and lacks the consistency of a standardized practice across geographic regions (Losinski, Katsiyannis, & Ryan, 2013; Waguespack, Vaccaro, & Continere, 2006). The lack of a universal model also has allowed many schools serving diverse student populations to utilize the FBA without examination of possible cultural factors (e.g., acculturation of recent immigrant students, English language acquisition) that may be inadvertently contributing to the challenging behavior (Durán, Bloom, & Samaha, 2013; Hoover, 2009; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013; Salend & Taylor, 2002).

Although the FBA is universally regarded as the encapsulation of positive behavioral practices, the limitations in scope and implementation are worthy of closer examination (Borgmeier, Loman, Hara, & Rodriguez, 2015; Christensen, Renshaw, Calderella, & Young, 2012; May et al., 2014; Quinn et al., 2001; Weber, Killu, Derby, & Barretto, 2005). In this paper, we will review literature on the theoretical implementation of the FBA, then discuss the investigative study of educators' experience in implementing the process to assist students demonstrating chronic challenging behaviors across the field. Finally, we will offer recommendations to assist educators in addressing the aforementioned barriers to FBA implementation, all of which may potentially increase the quality of behavioral assistance for all students.

Overview of the FBA Process

Based on over fifty years of clinical research in applied behavior analysis (e.g., Carr, 1994; Gable, Park, & Scott, 2014; Wahler, 1969), the FBA objectively examines circumstances surrounding the demonstration of a challenging behavior by a student (Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane, 2007; Wheeler & Richey, 2010). While

there is not a uniform delivery of the FBA, the process is ideally delivered by a team comprised of school personnel (e.g., special educator, school psychologist) in cooperation with the parent through three interdependent stages, indirect data collection, direct data collection, and behavioral analysis. Once completed, the FBA team deduces a behavioral statement that explains and predicts the circumstances for the challenging behavior, followed by the development of an effective BSP to assist the student through positive behavioral change (Harrison & Harrison, 2009; Waguespack et al., 2006).

Indirect Data Collection Stage

As part of the holistic examination of the student, the indirect data collection stage requires the FBA team to collect and review qualitative data from archival sources (e.g., attendance records, disciplinary referrals). Information gleaned from such sources is used to identify patterns that may indicate progressive changes in behavior over time (Harrison & Harrison, 2009). For example, a student with successive school absences within a short period of time might be easier to notice as opposed to absences that occur periodically over months (e.g., one absence every other Thursday). As well, in cases where the student has accrued a significant behavior history, disciplinary referrals can offer critical information on circumstances, involved parties, and events that can be used to underscore behavioral patterns (Wheeler & Richey, 2010).

In addition to record reviews, the indirect data collection stage offers the FBA team an opportunity to understand the context of challenging behaviors by conducting functional interviews with individuals who are the most knowledgeable of the student (e.g., parent, homeroom educator, para-educator) and the student him or herself, when appropriate. Using objectively framed questions, the FBA team conducts interviews with these key individuals to gain insight on experiences with the student and circumstances of the challenging behavior. Further, these individuals oftentimes provide insight on behavioral triggers, interpersonal dynamics between the student and others, or distressing life conditions (Harrison & Harrison, 2009; Umbreit et al., 2007).

Additionally, functional interviews with parents/guardians of the student can be advantageous to better meet the needs of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Educators can glean understanding on interpersonal relationships among family members, behavioral expectations at home, typical parenting practices, and awareness on how social perceptions may differ among different racial/cultural backgrounds (Durán et al., 2013; Hoover, 2009; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). More importantly, the functional interview offers educators an opportunity to strengthen positive rapport and increase the likelihood of parental involvement in the FBA process (Moreno, Wong-Lo, & Bullock, 2014).

Based on the information gleaned from the indirect data collection stage, the FBA team then operationalizes the challenging behavior into a target behavior, expressed as a behavioral definition. The behavioral definition succinctly describes the target behavior in terms that are both observable and measurable to the casual eye (Wheeler & Richey, 2010). Such an approach ensures that all FBA team members are targeting the same behavioral phenomena throughout the remainder of the intervention. For example, aggression, is a term open to interpretation but operationalizing the phenomenon into a behavioral definition (e.g., purposeful destruction of personal or school property) offers a singular action that can be identified by any team member, regardless of the setting.

Direct Data Collection Stage

After analyzing the ascertained data from the previous stage, the FBA team identifies specific settings (e.g., classroom, playground, cafeteria) where the target behavior has previously occurred (Wheeler & Richey, 2010). Using the behavioral definition, team members select appropriate metrics (e.g., frequency count, scatterplot, interval recording) to measure occurrences and plan a schedule that supports naturalistic observation of the student during the school day. Once the observation schedule has been set, team members observe the student until a behavioral pattern has been established. To ensure validity and reliability of the FBA process, the period of behavioral observation typically lasts two to three school weeks, often with special circumstances in consideration (e.g., holidays, early dismissal, inclement weather).

Once direct observation has concluded, team members then analyze the collected data to identify contributing events that occurred immediately prior to and after the target behavior. Events occurring immediately before the target behavior are marked as antecedents while events occurring immediately after the behavior are marked as consequences. Both components are critical to understanding the target behavior as antecedents trigger the demonstration and consequences reinforce the likelihood the student will continue to employ the behavior (Wheeler & Richey, 2010). Based on the aforementioned stages, the FBA team proceeds to construct possible scenarios that effectively predict the demonstration of the target behavior as well as explain the function of the behavior in daily life of the student.

Behavioral Hypothesis Stage

Following the theoretical framework of behaviorism, the FBA team drafts a behavioral hypothesis comprised of three components: antecedent (A), target behavior (B), consequence (C), which succinctly communicates the dynamics of the target behavior. Formulated as a single statement, the behavioral hypothesis explains the target behavior through the context of a trigger event and immediate resulting consequences. Additionally, the behavioral hypothesis identifies the function of the target behavior and its utility to the student. While there are varying numbers of function categories, researchers generally agree on three, obtain, escape, and sensory fulfillment (Harrison & Harrison, 2009; Wheeler & Richey, 2010).

Once drafted, the behavioral hypothesis communicates the core circumstances in which the target behavior is likely to occur and explain its continued use by the student (Umbreit et al., 2007). For example, a behavioral hypothesis communicating the circumstances of a student demonstrating aggression defined as purposeful destruction of personal or school property, can be written: when asked to independently complete class work that is above performance level (A), Joaquin will tear pages out of his textbook in view of the teacher (B), and is then sent to the principal's office (C), thus escaping the requested task. This behavioral hypothesis offers a concise description of the target behavior, the conditions of demonstration, and identification of function, all of which are clearly evident to the casual observer.

Once the behavioral hypothesis has been developed, the FBA team confirms its accuracy through subsequent observations of the student. Team members may refine the behavioral hypothesis to ensure all three components (i.e., antecedent, behavior, and consequences) are precisely identified and accurately predict the circumstances of the target behavior. In cases where the behavioral hypothesis does not accurately predict the demonstration of the target behavior, team members revisit collected data and revise the

hypothesis as necessary. Ensuring the accuracy of the behavioral hypothesis is critical as the purported function of the target behavior will be addressed in the resulting BSP. Behavioral interventions based on inaccurate or non-FBA sources are less effective and more likely to fail in assisting the student in developing positive behavior change (Blood & Neel, 2007; Hansen, Wills, & Kamps, 2014; Ingram et al., 2005; Strickland-Cohen & Horner, 2015).

Concerns with FBA Implementation

When implemented with fidelity, the FBA yields numerous advantages to assist students demonstrating chronic challenging behaviors (Strickland-Cohen & Horner, 2015). As Ingram and associates (2005) discussed, the FBA delivers significant behavioral data which should be incorporated to design more effective BSPs. As well, the process can offer insight on culture and background to better understand a student's behavioral needs (Durán et al., 2013; Hoover, 2009; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013; Moreno, Wong-Lo, & Bullock, 2014; Salend & Taylor, 2002). Unfortunately, the lack of specific guidelines in delivery and scope in the IDEA mandate have resulted in FBA deliveries that vary in quality and depth across the USA (McCahill et al., 2014; Rooker, DeLeon, Borrero, Frank-Crawford, & Roscoe, 2015; Weber et al., 2005).

Although the FBA stipulation attempted to stem unnecessary removals from campus, the open language regarding implementation offers little guidance to educators on a delivery timeline (Christensen et al., 2012; Losinski, et al., 2013; May et al., 2014; Rooker et al., 2015; Waguespack et al., 2006; Weber et al., 2005). According to IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), a student nearing the tenth day of suspension due to the demonstration of chronic challenging behaviors, a formal behavioral intervention must be conducted to assist the student (Nelson, Roberts, Rutherford, Mathur, & Aaroe, 1999). However, across many geographic regions, the delivery of such interventions are often late reactions to students already within proximity of their tenth day of suspension (e.g., after the eight day of suspension), which severely impedes the offering of a quality BSP (May et al., 2014).

In order to offer effective behavioral assistance, the delivery of the FBA and its resulting BSP are critical. Several researchers (e.g., Gable et al., 2001; Kauffman & Landrum, 2012; Losinski et al., 2013; Park, 2007; Yell, Meadows, Drasgow, & Shriner, 2013) concluded the inherent benefits of early intervention at the first signs of challenging behaviors is often highly effective in the reduction of the behaviors and facilitates teaching the student new replacement behaviors. Although the open language in IDEA may appear purposeful by allowing educators to scale FBA implementations to individual cases, it is the lack of suggested timelines that potentially undermines FBA effectiveness and the resulting BSP to assist students at early behavioral onset (Losinski et al., 2013; Rooker et al., 2015).

In addition to the open language regarding FBA implementation, the scope of the process is likewise limited. Despite the strong foundation of scientific principles, documented effectiveness, and universal applicability to any student demonstrating chronic challenging behaviors, educators have historically relegated the FBA mostly to students with EBD (Hansen et al., 2014; Hendley, 2007; Quinn et al., 2001; Scott, Liaupsin, Nelson, & Jolivette, 2003). This relegation effectively limits assistance options for students with other disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities) and non-disabled students considered at risk, many of whom

would benefit from early intervention and stem unnecessary special education referrals (Moreno & Gaytán, 2013).

With the consideration many educators currently struggle to address any student demonstrating chronic challenging behaviors, the delivery of punitive disciplinary actions (e.g., suspension, expulsion) is often the default response, which is particularly true for students from diverse backgrounds (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Moreno & Segurra-Herrara, 2014; Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011). Rather than offering evidence-based behavioral assistance to students, educators are historically limited to the delivery of punitive disciplinary practices and policies (e.g., zero tolerance), which sets students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., African American, Latino) on the pathway to school disassociation and failure (Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2010; Skiba, 2014). Punitive actions are a critical concern that presents long-term detrimental effects on society as the student population in the USA continues to grow and become increasingly diverse (Moreno & Gaytán, 2013).

Investigation of Educator Experiences in FBA Implementation

Despite the extensive literature (e.g., Borgmeier et al., 2015; Christensen et al., 2012; May et al., 2014; Quinn et al., 2001; Weber et al., 2005) on the theory and practice of the FBA, the aforementioned limitations on its delivery are worthy of further investigation (Rooker et al., 2015). Considering that states retain the right to interpret and implement IDEA, understanding the experiences of educators conducting the FBA vary significantly across geographic boundaries is critical. Additionally, this variance in FBA implementation further extends into the independently managed school districts/organizations within each geographic region.

It is important to note various factors can affect and limit the participant sample size. Beginning with overall size of the USA's education field, it presents an immense challenge in ascertaining a comprehensive evaluation of educator experiences in any research investigation. Even key geographic regions (i.e., Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, South, West) of the USA are considerable with varying populations. Finally, the number of educators who actively work with students receiving special education services to address behavior are small in comparison to the ranks of general educators, presents an additional challenge in participant sampling. Therefore, the present study targeted K-12 special education professionals (e.g., special educators, interventionists, school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists) based in the North Central Midwest of the USA (i.e., Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri) as a representative sample of urban, suburban, and rural/agricultural education settings. Participants were invited through email to complete an online survey ascertaining their knowledge and history with the FBA process. Additionally, the quantitative data collected were supplemented with qualitative data ascertained from telephone/video interviews with participants who volunteered to conference with the principal investigator.

Methods

Participants

Various education personnel across the North Central Midwest who were recent attendees from three professional conferences focused on educational programming and behavioral supports for students with behavioral disorders participated in this study. The target population focused on special education personnel

(e.g., special educators, administrators), para-educators (i.e., classroom teacher aides) and ancillary personnel (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, social workers) who have worked with students demonstrating challenging behaviors within the last five academic years, September 2010 – June 2015. A total of 47 participants (38 females, 9 males) completed the survey representing special educators (N=20, 43%), para-educators (N=8, 17%), ancillary personnel (N=16, 34%), and general educators (N=3, 6%). Over 60% of the participants worked in diverse suburban settings (i.e., over 50% of school enrollment was comprised of non-white students) followed by 18% of participants working in diverse urban settings and 5% working in minimally diverse (i.e., less than 25% of school enrollment was comprised of non-white students). At the conclusion of the survey, three participants were contacted and interviewed for additional insight on their professional experiences with the FBA within their school organizations.

Instrument

An independent online survey was developed to examine participant FBA experiences in the field. Survey items were constructed to ascertain educator experience with various stages in the FBA process including conditions for its selection (e.g., implementation as pre-referral assistance, demographic information of FBA-recipient students), points of implementation (e.g., conducting functional interviews, in-person student observation), and composition of FBA team (e.g., special educator, school counselor, parent). The instrument consisted of 30 content items, 10 demographic items, and a concluding item allowing participants to volunteer in a confidential telephone/video follow-up interview on their FBA experiences. Upon survey closure, results were examined by (a) the responses by participants on the individuals involved in the FBA process, (b) the likelihood of the FBA used as an early intervention at the onset of challenging behaviors, (c) the extent of tailoring the FBA process to better understand students from diverse backgrounds, and (d) the source and extent of professional/formal training on the FBA process.

Results

Personnel and Decision-Making

Results from the survey aligned with FBA practices historically noted in the literature review in several of the aforementioned analyses. As noted in Table I, a significant majority of participants (N=24, 51%) indicated they were actively involved in delivering between two to four FBAs within the last five academic years (i.e., September 2010 to June 2015). FBA teams are comprised of personnel typically aligned with special education services (e.g., special educators) and other professionals with behavioral specialty (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors) to lead the process (see Table II). The majority of participants indicated the school psychologist led the FBA team during implementation.

Inherently, there is valuable insight in determining where educators decide to conduct the FBA as an assistive process. As mentioned in the literature review, educators are beginning to incorporate the FBA in assistive measures designed to help students across settings. However, more than half of participant responses indicated their decision to implement the FBA was made in IEP meetings (N=30, 64%; see Table III). With this in consideration, it can be deduced the process continues to be mostly relegated as an assistive practice reserved for students with disabilities.

Table I. Number of FBAs Delivered by Participants within Last Five Academic Years
(September 2010 - June 2015)

Number of FBA Cases	Number of Participants (N=47)	Percentage of Responses
One (1)	5	11%
Two to Four (2-4)	24	51%
Five to Ten (5-10)	7	15%
More than ten (>10)	11	23%

Table II. Leadership of FBA Teams by Position as Reported by Participants

Position	Number of Participants (N=47)	Percentage of Responses
School Administrator	1	1%
Special Educator	7	15%
School Psychologist	30	64%
Social Worker/Counselor	4	9%
Behavioral Specialist	5	11%

Table III. Setting Where Decision to Conduct FBA was Determined

Setting	Number of Participants (N=47)	Percentage of Responses
IEP Meeting	30	64%
Student Support Team	13	28%
Other setting	4	8 %

FBA Practice

Participant responses offered expected results on the implementation of the FBA as an assistive practice. FBA implementation was typically conducted over the five-day school week with 70% (N=32) of participants indicating that most of the student cases yielded an identified function (i.e., counseling services; see Table

IV). As well, all participants indicated some type of assistance practice (e.g., counseling, behavior contract) was delivered prior to selecting to implement the FBA. While the FBA process remained mostly relegated for students with disabilities, participant responses indicated the FBA process was not necessarily reserved as a last resort prior to student removal from campus.

Table IV. Type of Assistive Measure Offered Prior to FBA

Assistive Measure	Number of Participants (N=47)	Percentage of Responses
Adult, peer mentoring	5	11%
Counseling service	33	70%
Behavior contract	4	9%
Community-based service	4	9%
Faith-based service	1	1%

Meeting the Needs of Diverse Student Populations

While the majority of participant responses indicated their school settings were urban (N=20, 42%) or suburban (N=25, 53%), both settings were estimated to serve diverse student populations (e.g., African American, Latino, Asian American). Two participants indicated they worked in a rural setting (5%). As listed in Table V, approximately 38% of responses indicated parents were involved in the FBA but mostly to offering limited input (i.e., participating only in functional interview). Further, participants perceived that 26% (N=12) of parents were considerably involved. Regarding oral/written communication on the FBA process, nearly half of participants (N=22, 47%) indicated that all FBA communication was offered in the parent's first language (see Table VI). In addition, 21% (N=10) of participants thought that oral/written language was presented in some FBA cases. Finally, when delivering the FBA for a student from a diverse background, 85% of participants indicated the FBA team perceived language and/or culture as some factor in behavioral demonstration, ranging from not very likely to very likely (See Table VII).

Participant Interviews

Upon conclusion of the online survey, all participants were offered an opportunity to identify themselves as a person of contact for a follow-up interview to elaborate upon their responses in the survey. Fifteen individuals volunteered as willing to participate in the interview. However, of the 15 participants, only three self-rated as either having a working knowledge of the FBA process or very knowledgeable of the FBA process and having implemented five to ten FBAs over the past five academic years.

Table V. Level of Parent (From Diverse Background) Involvement in FBA Process as Perceived by Participants

Degree	Number of Participants (N=47)	Percentage of Responses
No engagement	7	15
Limited input	18	38
Considerable input	12	26
Active membership role	2	4
No basis for judgment	8	17

Table VI. Oral/Written Communication on FBA Offered in Parent's First Language

Responses	Number of Participants (N=47)	Percentage of Responses
In all FBA cases	22	47
In some FBA cases	10	21
Not sure	8	17
None (All English)	7	15

Table VII. Perceived Likelihood Culture/Language Affected Student's Behavioral Demonstration

Response	Number of Participants (N=47)	Percentage of Responses
Not at all likely	3	6
Not very likely	9	19
Most likely	19	40
Very likely	12	26
Not sure	4	9

Three participants (i.e., Interviewees A, B, and C) who met the criteria were selected based on their professional roles (i.e., special educator, school counselor), recent experience with the FBA process (i.e.,

within past five academic years), and availability. Each of the interviewees was contacted with a preliminary e-mail message informing them of their selection, list of possible dates/times for the interview, and their preference for telephone or video conference interface (e.g., FaceTime, Skype). Upon agreement to participate, each interview was conducted using a standard script with the identification of the investigator, purpose of the study, confidentiality clause, and three questions on their professional experience with the FBA process. Each interviewee was informed the interview would last approximately seven to ten minutes but each exceeded the estimated time by an average of 40 minutes. All three interviewees were asked to respond to the following prompts with the opportunity to expand on their experiences:

1. Please describe your role in your organization (e.g., type of instructional or support contact with students, parents, professionals).

2. Please describe your experience in selecting the FBA as a measure to assist students with challenging behaviors.

3. What do you perceive as barriers or challenges to implementing the FBA? If you feel there aren't any barriers or inhibitors to consider, what are the conditions that allow your organization to implement a quality FBA?

Interviewee A

Interviewee A, a female special educator, worked primarily as a high school teacher in a cross-category resource classroom for students identified with disabilities. She served an average of 75 students in grades 10, 11, and 12 and was charged as IEP case manager for each student. In the discussion, Interviewee A had some experience with the FBA process as an early intervention for challenging behaviors. However, she described the typical FBA process as, "...something that is starting to get remembered. Now, that schools cannot automatically suspend a student for disciplinary infractions, we're left scrambling to find alternatives."

Interviewee A also mentioned many of the resulting BSPs often "unfairly" designated the special education teacher as the sole implementer. Although BSPs are developed in IEP meetings with the majority of committee present, many of the replacement behavioral instructions fell upon the special educator. Interviewee A further elaborated accurate data collection for each BSP was difficult to accomplish as such obligations were in addition to instruction and other special education paperwork.

Interviewee B

Interviewee B, a male special educator, has served in many roles within his school, including behavioral specialist, case manager, and professional development trainer for behavioral support planning. Interviewee B indicated he has participated in a number of IEP committee teams that conducted a FBA. In the discussion, Interviewee B described his school organization as a "large school district consisting mostly of African American and Hispanic [Latino] families." Interviewee B also described the progressive movement of many school administrators and special education teachers in selecting positive-based behavior approaches as a problem-solving approach to address the onset of challenging behaviors.

However, despite such promising signs, Interviewee B described one specific barrier to best practices of the FBA, the lack of parental involvement in addressing challenging behaviors. He described the disposition of some parents as "... an indifference and a feeling of defensiveness" when being contacted for functional interviews. In some instances, where it was difficult to schedule a functional interview with a reluctant parent, a letter written in English was sent home informing the parent of their child's behavioral concerns and presented questions focused on behavior at home. Interviewee B reported many of these letters home were not returned.

Interviewee C

Interviewee C, a male school counselor, has served his school organization for approximately eight years. In addition to working with students in the general education curriculum, he sometimes delivered individual services to students with mandated counseling minutes on their IEP. In discussing his professional experience with the FBA, Interviewee C described his role as "one man of a two-person FBA team" with the assigned school psychologist who planned and delivered the FBA process as well as the resulting BSP. Interviewee C elaborated, "We really are the individuals who the school counts on to help the students who simply aren't responding to positive behavior supports." As the school counselor, Interviewee C indicated his visible presence in the school helped to establish trust with students, families, and faculty, which can be advantageous in situations where challenging behaviors have escalated negative emotions.

Regarding barriers to FBA best practice, Interviewee C mentioned the lack of time and involvement by professionals associated with the referred student, such as the general education classroom teacher. "There's so much focus on teacher accountability in learning that the teacher simply cannot spend the individual time on each student that he/she deserves. I know good teachers who are stretched so thin, they simply can't attend to students in quality ways." Interviewee C emphasized the good intentions of faculty and administration were often conflicted with overwhelming professional obligations (e.g., instructional planning, progress monitoring, addressing individual student issues).

Although the interviewees worked in three different settings and held different roles within their organizations, there were points of commonality among their responses regarding the delivery of the FBA in schools. While all three interviewees had a general positive view on the FBA process and felt comfortable in suggesting and using the process when working with students demonstrating challenging behaviors, there was general agreement regarding barriers which often inhibited FBA best practices. The barriers mentioned included a lack of professional training on the use of FBA, lack of time to coordinate classroom observations, and misperceptions by educators which suggests that the FBA process can only be delivered by ancillary personnel knowledgeable of mental health and behavior (e.g., school psychologist, school counselor, social worker).

Discussion

Findings from the present study included a preliminary evaluation of the current practices involved in FBA planning and delivery. The study detailed results from a total of 47 representative samples among K-12 education professionals based in the North Central Midwest of the USA. Although the responses revealed

consistent information concerning the FBA protocol within existing literature, a notable indicator emerged in the area of diversity that warrants consideration.

Researchers have acknowledged the significance of cultural factors in behavioral assessment processes that ensure holistic evaluations of students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Harry & Klinger, 2014; Krezimen, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Moreno, Wong-Lo, Short, & Bullock, 2013,). The practice of cultural considerations in the FBA protocol was one of the qualifying factors embedded within the current study. Our findings revealed a disconnection between cultural awareness and the application of cultural entities in the FBA procedures. A reported 95% of participants worked professionally in educational settings that serve diverse populations (e.g., African American, Latino, Asian American), but only 47% of those schools always offered oral/written communications in the parent's first language when necessary. Subsequently, limited parental participation may have influenced the distribution of responses (see Table VII), as participants were asked to consider the likelihood that culture and/or language could contribute to behavioral incidents of students. As briefly outlined, the awareness of cultural existence does not automatically transfer into culturally attuned practices. The notion of infusing cultural variables as a part of the FBA process must be completed with intention.

Reflecting on the aforementioned findings, cultural factors such as language may be potential barriers to completely understanding student needs as participants were not sure (9%) when asked if language/culture affected student's behavioral demonstration. While limited, this uncertainty, can hinder the fidelity of the FBA for any individual student. Moreover, the separation of cultural considerations from behavioral evaluation may add barriers to the home-school partnership with families from diverse backgrounds. For example, if parents from diverse backgrounds do not fully comprehend the importance of the FBA and do not possess the language to communicate their confusions, those parents may reluctantly agree to continue with the process with reservations in their involvement. Thus, the availability of resources (e.g., educator training in cultural reciprocity, increased involvement of social services) that are culturally responsive for families from diverse backgrounds can be perceived as first step towards dissolving barriers, which in turn, promote respectable home-school partnerships.

Further Research and Limitations

The FBA process has been well documented by researchers as a viable problem-solving option for educational and clinical settings (e.g., Borgmeier et al., 2015; Ingram et al., 2005; Moreno, Wong-Lo et al., 2013). Data from the present study provided further evidence about how important it is that practitioners demonstrate comprehensive understanding and application of the FBA. Nonetheless, given the results within the context of the study, several limitations were delineated.

In conjunction with the demographic limitation of this study (i.e., USA North Central Midwest), additional research that includes larger sample populations (e.g., regional, national, or international) will increase the generalizability of the results. Secondly, future expansions of the study would benefit from the involvement of parents from diverse backgrounds, who could provide qualitative insights to personal experiences in the FBA process. Finally, the inclusion of survey items that focus on the perceptions of behavior and culture among practitioners would broaden the objectives of the study.

Findings from our study provided a small glimpse into current practices of the FBA. Limitations and recommendations mentioned should be carefully considered in recognizing the discrepancy between the acknowledgement of cultural differences and the immersion of cultural practices in a FBA process. Our preliminary findings should alert researchers and practitioners that critical work must be continued to ensure educational practices continue to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

As the USA population continues to become diverse, schools will undoubtedly reflect this shift in demographics and students, regardless of background, will continue to need guidance and support. However, educators should recognize even evidence-based practices require re-examination and tailoring to appropriately meet the needs of a twenty-first century student population. This is particularly true when attempting to assist students from diverse backgrounds demonstrating challenging behaviors. While conventional practice often reserves assistance endeavors, such as the FBA, to students identified with EBD, educators should examine opportunities to assist all students regardless of placement.

In regard to assisting students from diverse backgrounds, evidence-based practices, such as the FBA, can assist educators in reducing subjective views and focus on the problematic behaviors. By following a set of prescribed steps to investigate challenging behaviors rather than reacting, educators can come to better understand the student and his or her life conditions. Such practices can also allow educators to move away from suppressive punitive measures and better identify solutions for long-term behavior change and increase the quality of life for the student.

Although the present investigation was limited in scale, the results highlighted numerous perceptions by educators in the availability of behavioral supports to students from diverse backgrounds. Numerous concerns regarding the need for early intervention and greater access to behavioral assistance were clearly present among educators. It would certainly serve the best interest of all students that behavioral supports be implemented in general education as well as special education settings. Such implementation would ensure students demonstrating early indicators of challenging behaviors are offered meaningful and effective assistance at onset as opposed to allowing the concerns to become increasingly worse. It is with clear understanding such systematic change is easier said than done, it then becomes the charge of the twenty-first century educator to ensure their school and ultimately profession, is prepared to meet the needs of an ever changing student population.

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