Addressing "Behavior That Impedes Learning" As Mandated by IDEA Reauthorization

Diana Browning Wright[1]

School psychologists are increasingly being called upon to "do something!" when disciplinary proceedings are underway to assure legal compliance has occurred prior to a school district's implementation of expulsion, involuntary transfer and lengthy suspensions. That "something" so in demand now, gives us a long-awaited opportunity to institute wide-sweeping changes in how school environments' support our students with fragile coping system. The reasoning goes like this:

> IDEA requires the IEP team to address "behavior that impedes his or her learning or that of others" (IDEA Section 614(d)(2)(B)), and the Federal Regulations further point out that "positive behavior interventions, strategies and supports" are to be considered supplementary aids and supports. Therefore, if the student had these "impeding behaviors" clearly in evidence, and yet no IEP team had developed a plan to address these behaviors, it can be concluded during a "manifestation determination" meeting that must occur in a disciplinary context, that the IEP did not have all necessary supplementary aids and supports in place. Therefore, proceeding to expulsion or other further disciplinary action would not be warranted. Rather, the IEP team will now need to develop the missing necessary supplementary aids and supports and conduct a functional behavioral assessment of the behavior that has resulted in the disciplinary action, (in addition to review of the appropriateness of the rest of the IEP and the placement.) At the conclusion of the "functional behavioral assessment," a plan will undoubtedly need to be developed as well, since the student clearly is exhibiting "behaviors impeding learning" because the school system is considering its highest sanctions for the violation. The inescapable conclusion is this: Whenever a student receiving special education services exhibits difficult behaviors, whether early or late in an escalating behavior pattern, the IEP team must address the situation in a behavior plan.

School psychologists around the nation often now find themselves in the position of explaining the logic described above, to the consternation of the consultation-seeking educators charged with assuring "safe schools" as well as the honoring of all "safeguards" for students with disabilities. The necessity to delicately balance "Zero Tolerance" with "Zero Rejection" requires the entire education community to reexamine district, schoolwide, classwide and individual behavior support systems to prevent difficult behaviors from escalating.

IEP Content Shift

The primary content of IEP's prior to IDEA Reauthorization has been student goals and objectives. With the advent of behavior support planning, a revolutionary change has occurred in the IEP content of those students with behaviors impeding learning. Their IEPs will now contain a behavior plan, and a well-designed behavior support plan specifies not just what the student will do, but what educators will do to alter environments and/or teach new behaviors necessary for that student's success. Thus, higher accountability for success is placed on implementors, because **a behavior support plan is essentially a teaching plan.**

---

[1]The author is a practicing school psychologist/trainer and behavior analyst for the California Department of Education's Diagnostic Center and adjunct assistant professor, California State University, Long Beach. She also conducts seminars for NASP affiliates and school district consortiums on a wide variety of topics related to behavior interventions, positive school climate, preventative functional behavioral assessment and handicapping conditions. She can be reached at dwright@dcs-cde.ca.gov

IDEA Conceptual Underpinnings Shift Our Understanding of Behavior

Does this situation mean that we should now develop lengthy behavior contracts with our students, specifying exactly what punisher we will apply if the students violate the code of conduct again? The answer is an emphatic "No!". To understand what is now called for, consider the difference between the current methodology, "behavior support" and the previous terminology, "behavior management".[2] (See chart)

"Behavior support" requires us to address antecedents, what we can do in terms of altering the environmental conditions to support positive behavior, using more effective teaching strategies and if necessary, teaching the student a replacement behavior that meets his/her needs. In contrast, "behavior management" as it came to be practiced in most schools, focused on either elaborately specified punishers if the behavior occurred again, or reinforcers if the student did NOT exhibit the problem behavior in the future. A behavior plan which grows out of "behavior support" will attempt to understand "why" the behavior was occurring, i.e., what "function" does it serve for the individual? It then will go on to identify how the environment be altered to eliminate the student's need to use that behavior, and how educators can support the student using an identified positive replacement behavior that meets his/her need. A behavior plan which grew out of "behavior management" typically ignored "why" the student used that behavior, and simply tried to select powerful, often individualized, punishers to prevent behavior from reoccurring or, alternatively, powerful reinforcers the student could earn for suppressing the problem behavior. Thus, the philosophical basis of the two approaches differs dramatically:

> **Behavior Support Philosophy**: Positive behaviors need to be taught: modeled, shaped, and cued in conducive environments

> **Behavior Management Philosophy**: Problem behaviors require suppressing/controlling; positive behaviors are expected in all environments

In order to effectively eliminate a problem behavior, one must understand why it was occurring in the first place. In order to determine this "function", it is imperative that one consider various reasons the behavior could be occurring. (See chart) Remember, the consultant is "assigning" communicative intent. The student may or may not be aware of the "function" of the behavior.

First, gather data to determine whether it is believed that the student was trying to "get" something with his/her behavior, or to "protest, escape or avoid" something with the behavior. This hypothesis is often easy to arrive at based on a review of records, talking with the student and educators and examining the environmental context. Consider these examples:

Case Studies of Two Students Whose Behavior Impedes Learning

Colin:
Colin has autism, is six years old and essentially nonverbal, using gestures and behavior to communicate needs and wants. His mental age is estimated to be approximately age two. He becomes upset if routines are changed, screaming and hiding under a chair to demonstrate his feelings. Currently, Colin is in an inclusion setting and he follows the routines of the other Kindergartners. He has one-on-one aide support, services of an inclusion specialist, and a teacher who is anxious to improve his skills.

*Ralph***:**

---

[2]The author wishes to acknowledge that although many educators implementing "behavior management" in the past have focused on eliminating problem behaviors in the manner described, others, especially those with a more thorough behavior analysis training, have attempted to identify replacement behaviors as a part of the "behavior management"

Ralph is an 8th grader with a reading disability who has been in a pull-out special education program since 4th grade. His parents are non-English speaking immigrants. Ralph has had 17 office referrals in 2 years and was suspended 10 times last year. Offenses have been task refusals, improper clothing, swearing at teachers, failing to suit out for P.E., physical fighting (2x) and sexual harassment of a 6th grade girl. These offenses have increased in intensity since entering middle school as a 6th grader. There were no offenses prior to middle school and he has been in the same district since 2nd grade. His grades in elementary school were "B"s and "C"s. In 6th and 7th grade, his grades averaged D+. There had been no behavior plan for Ralph, though he did participate in a bi-weekly "motivation" group with the counselor.

Last week, Ralph made a physical threat to "have my homeboys kill you". The police have become involved due to the victim's parents' testimony. Expulsion was recommended, but the manifestation determination concluded that no supplementary aids and services had been in place and that a behavior plan was warranted due to "behaviors impeding learning" as well as from results of the functional behavioral assessment that concluded Ralph's behaviors were attempts to gain attention from his gang member peers. Ralph's parents were very upset because of the lack of school attention to his problems and the appointment of a probation officer. They were pleased to note that the alternative setting they had adamantly requested in the past would now be available as a setting in which to implement the behavior plan.

Student's Problem Behavior	If Trying to Get/Obtain Something	If Trying to Protest/Escape/Avoid Something
Ralph has a learning disability, belongs to a gang, is belligerent to teachers, has a pattern of rule-breaking behaviors culminating in threatens to kill a peer	Ralph may be actively attempting to gain gang members' attention in the form of social status in the group for his behavior	Ralph may have been threatened for lack of "acting tough enough" and may fear his peers will harm him if he doesn't demonstrate his allegiance, which he does reluctantly.
Colin has autism, is non-verbal and often screams and hides under tables when his routines are disrupted	Colin may be seeking attention from the teacher in the form of interaction he remembers will occur when he begins to scream	Colin may be "protesting" the absence of an activity he desires, or he may be trying to "escape" the interaction with the teacher he remembers will occur in this new activity

In both cases, effective behavior support planning will require determination of what is supporting problem behavior as well as what is present, or absent, in the environment that is preventing the student gaining desired attention in positive ways, or protesting or escaping in acceptable ways.

Ralph's behavior support:
The attached plan for Ralph has hypothesized that Ralph engages in these behaviors to earn status (attention). Ralph will receive instruction in conflict resolution skills to assure that he does possess alternative replacement behaviors to use in the future. He also will receive support from former gang members through a police "juvenile diversion" project. It is hoped that this intervention will allow him to gain the attention and social status he so desperately desires from a different group of peers. The environment will be altered, in terms of time, space, materials and interactions to support Ralph, and communication between all agencies and parties

will be assured. Ralph will receive reinforcement for using replacement behaviors, as well as for a myriad of behaviors identified by the former gang member mentor. If Ralph engages in minor behaviors, therapeutic debriefing will occur. If serious behavior occurs again, further police and district procedures, including more restrictive settings will be utilized.

Colin's behavior support:
The attached plan for Colin has hypothesized that he engages in these behaviors because his is protesting a change in routine which he does not understand and for which he does not have verbal negotiation skills. An underlying skill deficit, the lack of an effective communication system to use to "protest" has been identified. Colin will receive training in "Picture Exchange Communication System" whereby he learns to exchange an icon for a desired activity, and to protest using these symbols. Additionally, the environment will require alterations to help him cope with frustration and to teach him to follow a picture sequence. The following of a picture sequence thus becomes the "routine", and the individual activities can more readily be shifted within the routine, eliminating Colin's need to protest. Effective methods of calming Colin are noted on the plan, specifically, singing "Itsy, Bitsy Spider" and redirecting him. Communication between home and school is specified to allow all parties a better understanding of Colin and his needs.

Establishing Behavior Support For Students
As school psychologists attempt to respond to increasing requests for our assistance in designing effective interventions on our school sites, key concepts should be kept in mind:

C   School psychologists need to assist the IEP teams in effective behavior support by training teachers and other personnel. We CAN NOT write every behavior support plan

C   A behavior support plan is a teaching plan. Behavior support plan forms should be very brief (or they won't be read!), collaboratively developed (or there will be no buy-in and no implementation), and should lead those developing them to the paradigm of behavior support, not inadvertently to the paradigm of behavior management. Beware the "blank forms" that do not lead the authors to focus on antecedents, but rather allow the uninformed to write an elaborated "consequence-based" plan (See attached blank form, "Support Plan for Behavior Interfering with Learning")

C   Behavior plans, whether in a disciplinary context in which a functional behavioral assessment is mandated, or in initial stages, should be based on identifying the function of the behavior, then seek to alter the environment and assure the student has an alternative replacement behavior to use (See attached "Communicative Function of Behavior")

C   In looking at the environmental context in which a behavior is occurring, consider the teacher's current classroom management skills and the organizational structure in the classroom. Assisting educators in altering the environment to support all learners is an integral part of behavior support planning. (See attached, "What Every Teacher Should Know In Order To Positively Impact Student Behavior" and "Classwide Systems That Help A Teacher Cue, Shape and Model Behavior")

C   Many school districts in California have begun utilizing the attached one page Behavior Support Plan for all students at the student study team, pre-referral to special education stage. Additionally, many districts have elected to institute a Behavior Support Plan whenever a student begins to approach ten commutative suspension days in a school year. This proactive attempt to address all students' support needs is a direct outcome of the shift in understanding behavior embodied in IDEA Reauthorization. The wisdom of instituting a behavior support process prior to reaching a disciplinary "crisis" whereby emergency, and often woefully late interventions are considered, can not be over emphasized.

As our profession becomes more adept at designing effective behavior plans, our value to the education community at large increases and our role as effective advocates for children with and without disabilities becomes more readily apparent.