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## Functional behavioral assessment : school based practice and perception

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FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT:  
SCHOOL BASED PRACTICE AND PERCEPTION

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Educational Specialist

Clint Henning  
University of Northern Iowa  
December 2010

## ABSTRACT

Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is a process that attempts to uncover specific causes and reinforcement of inappropriate behavior in order to design and implement interventions that more accurately addressing these behaviors. According to the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, functional assessments are now a required in working with students struggling with inappropriate behavior. Despite these requirements there is still ambiguity about how these assessments are carried out in school settings (Gartin and Murdick, 2001). This study consisted of a survey of school psychologists in the state of Iowa to understand how the process looks currently, ten years after law required it. This survey assessed the comfort level professionals have with the FBA process as well as how the perceive the utility and value of functional behavioral assessments.

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A Thesis

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Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is one of many tools that are available for professionals in education to help address students with inappropriate behaviors. The 1997 revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mandate the use of this procedure. It outlines its required uses as follows:

Either before or not later than 10 days after taking a disciplinary action... if the local educational agency did not conduct a functional behavioral assessment and implement a behavioral intervention plan for such child before the behavior that resulted in the suspension ... the agency shall convene an IEP meeting to develop an assessment plan to address that behavior; or if the child already has a behavioral intervention plan, the IEP Team shall review the plan and modify it, as necessary, to address the behavior. (S 615 [j] [B] [i-ii])

Quality behavioral interventions are implemented when specific and meaningful causes and reinforcement of a behavior are uncovered (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). Functional assessments are effective methods for identifying causes within the classroom setting. Interventions using functional behavioral assessment results are more likely to be effective in addressing the antecedents and reinforcement of inappropriate behaviors (Ingram, Lewis & Sugai, 2005; Payne, Scott & Conroy, 2007). Functional assessments allow educators to move past labels and focus more on solutions. The purpose of functional behavioral assessments is to allow for concrete and specific commentary on causality. FBA results allow professionals to make statements that go beyond broad diagnoses and move towards a focus on individual behaviors and their causes. Once specific causes are identified, the interventions that are developed may be more efficient and effective (Carr, Langdon & Yarbrough, 1999).

Despite evidence of FBA's effectiveness, there is still a lack of knowledge on its role in school settings with educational professionals. Much of the research in this area has been done either in controlled clinical settings or by non-school based researchers completing research in school settings (Payne et al., 2007). There is evidence that these procedures are effective, but it does not tell us how the procedures look for professionals in the schools on a daily basis. It is largely unknown how the professionals who operate in school settings carry out the process. In those situations, they are dealing with specific cases and not completing assessments for research purposes. Factors such as time constraints, lack of knowledge about FBA, failure to collect appropriate baseline data and lack of faculty cooperation may make FBA procedures more difficult in a typical school setting (Reid & Nelson, 2002; Carr et al., 1999). There are also concerns about the level of training and understanding of the professionals who are asked to complete functional assessments (Scott, Bucalos, et al., 2004). The process of conducting an FBA works well with highly trained professionals, but more needs to be known about how these procedures are being carried out by school-based practitioners.

It has been shown that teachers and school psychologists have largely been supportive and positive concerning the results of functional assessments, but they do not always have a sufficient knowledge base in these procedures to conduct or utilize them effectively (Ellingson, Miltenberger, & Long, 1999; Weigle & Scotti, 2000; Ervin et al., 2001). The other ambiguous aspect of FBAs is what aspects people are actually carrying out when they complete their assessments. Scott, Meers, and Nelson (2000) found that experts in the field were unable to reach a consensus as to what is necessary and most

valuable when conducting functional assessments. This suggests a gap between knowledge and practice. It is vital that professionals have a solid understanding of the processes of functional assessments if they are going to see them as a valuable tool. It is important to know what is actually being done in schools and the reasons behind those decisions. With this knowledge, better education and understanding of practitioners' needs may lead to more effective practices.

### Study Goals

The goal of this study is to identify how the knowledge base and perceptions of school psychologists affects the process and results of conducting functional behavioral assessments. This study aims to better understand the perceptions and acceptability of practitioners and how that affects the concrete processes and outcomes of functional assessments in school settings.

### Limitations

This study employs survey techniques to understand how FBA is being used in schools. There are limitations when utilizing surveys for research. There is the possibility that participants will not accurately self-report their preferences and behaviors in the field. Another potential limitation is the ability to generalize the findings. The population being studied is school psychologists in the state of Iowa. These results may not be appropriate to extend to school psychologists in different areas of the country.

### Key Definitions

The literature on identifying the underlying the causes of problem has often used functional analysis and functional behavior assessment interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper the terms can be defined as follows:

-Functional Behavior Assessment- Process of gathering information through formal observations, interviews and reviews of information in an attempt to identify contextual and environmental factors that influence problem behavior (Scott & Kamps, 2007).

-Functional Analysis- Functional analysis also seeks information about causes of behavior, but it employs experimental hypothesis testing to look for the causes.

In functional analysis a hypothesis for the behavior is formed and the environment is systematically manipulated to test this hypothesis (Horner, 1994).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The backdrop for this study is that behavior is learned and shaped by the environment that the child inhabits. The formation of habits can be both positive and negative with regard to a student's behavior. Habits are formed based on the student's environment and their interaction with others. A greater understanding of how that is happening and what in the environment is causing behaviors can give educators a greater understanding of how problem behaviors are being created and reinforced. This understanding is critical to their ability to design and implement effective interventions that address inappropriate behavior in an efficient and effective manner. Functional behavioral assessment is one process that seeks to meet this goal (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002).

#### Required FBA Uses

Revisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1990 brought functional behavioral assessment to the forefront in dealing with problem behavior. The 1997 revision dealt with inappropriate student behavior for the first time (Gartin & Murdick, 2001). It explained the use of FBA in response to severe disciplinary action in the following manner;

Either before or not later than 10 days after taking a disciplinary action... if the local educational agency did not conduct a functional behavioral assessment and implement a behavioral intervention plan for such child before the behavior that resulted in the suspension ... the agency shall convene an IEP meeting to develop an assessment plan to address that behavior; or if the child already has a behavioral intervention plan, the IEP Team shall review the plan and modify it, as necessary, to address the behavior. (S 615 [j] [B] [i-ii])

The new amendments made it mandatory that the faculty or personnel handling these issues implement FBA procedures when it becomes necessary. It allowed for the fact that some people may need additional training to become more capable with these procedures to meet their requirements in the IEP process (Gartin & Murdick, 2001).

IDEA 1997 states the following:

The plan must include a description of how the state will enhance the ability of teachers and others to use strategies, such as behavioral interventions, to address the conduct of children with disabilities that impedes the learning of the children with disabilities and others. (S. 300.382 [f])

This statement points to the impending need of professionals to enhance their knowledge base to deal with inappropriate behavior. The important piece for this study is whether that knowledge base has developed in the decade since the legislation passed.

Behavioral interventions are now a required part of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process when they become necessary and the management procedures in place are no longer effective. Functional assessment of these behaviors is mandated in an effort to more accurately design and implement effective interventions (Gartin & Murdick, 2001). Designing effective interventions will only become more prevalent as many states are considering or are in the process of moving towards the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. This model makes decisions about qualifications for services based on how well students respond when quality interventions are implemented. Students who make insufficient progress in the general education settings with the interventions in place may then be determined to qualify for special education (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). The FBA is a critical piece in the framework of designing effective interventions to keep children in general education classrooms or their least restrictive environment.

Quality behavioral interventions focus on specific causes and reinforcement of problem behaviors (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). In Section 614 (b) (2) (A), IDEA 1997 states the following in reference to evaluating an individual who potentially has a disability: “The local education agency shall use a variety of assessment tools to gather relevant functional and developmental information.” The functional piece here does not necessarily point directly to FBA, but it does lead to gathering all relevant information to meet the student’s needs. IDEA 1997 goes on to state in S 614 (b) (2) (A) that “each local agency shall ensure assessment tools and strategies that provide relevant information that directly assist persons in determining the educational needs of the child are provided.” When there is an inappropriate behavior, the most critical piece in designing effective interventions is the knowledge of specific causes and reinforcement. This means that it is not necessary to wait to use FBA until after significant disciplinary actions have already become necessary (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). Functional behavioral assessment should be used whenever and wherever the IEP committee, problem solving team or any group who seeks to solve problems in general or special education deems behavior as a significant concern. Therefore, functional behavioral assessments are tools that help understand a behavioral problem in the same way that a literacy test would help to better identify a reading disability.

The difficulty with the IDEA regulations is the ambiguity that remains in the amendments. Functional behavioral assessment is mentioned by name, but there is no explanation for what that process must entail (Bartlett, Etscheidt, & Wisentstein, 2007; Gresham, Watson, & Skinner, 2001). This ambiguity has caused confusion as to whose



role it is to complete these procedures, when they should be used and what they should encompass. This lack of consistency across settings could potentially lead to ineffective assessments and interventions. These poor results could negatively impact their perceived usefulness and validity amongst educators (Scott & Kamps, 2007).

Another one of the tenants of IDEA 1997 is that students who are experiencing behavior difficulties be given positive behavioral supports whenever possible as part of their behavioral intervention plan (Ingram et al., 2005). Functional behavioral assessment can play an integral role in the process of choosing these appropriate and positive interventions. Functional assessment can also be used in the process of analyzing the data that are received from these positive supports. If functional behavioral assessment is applied in more situations than what is specifically outlined in IDEA, it will provide educators with a useful tool in the prevention of problem behaviors. It can also provide assistance in implementing positive supports (Ingram et al., 2005).

#### Need for Functional Behavioral Assessment

Inappropriate behavior continues to be a concern for educators. While students with chronic behavior problems are about 1-5% of the student population, they account for more than half of the problems that require referring students to the office or require significant amounts of time to address (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). If the needs of this relatively small group of students were more appropriately addressed, it could significantly reduce the occurrence of these difficult behaviors. This potential decrease in problem behaviors could open up time for both administrators and teachers to focus on academics.

With the growing need for effective behavior interventions, it is important to consider and utilize assessment-based data. In the past, data derived from systematic assessments was only occasionally considered in the development of interventions. Interventions that were utilized often failed to consider the specific needs of the individual or the context in which the behavior occurred (Kern & Dunlap, 1999). Despite its proven effectiveness and the mandates in IDEA, functional assessments do not appear to be making much headway in public schools (Gartin & Murdick, 2001). The real question to be considered is why some educators seem reluctant to implement the procedure despite the evidence of its effectiveness.

An explicit explanation of what constitutes an appropriate functional behavioral assessment is not laid out in IDEA 1997 (Gresham et al., 2001). As stated earlier, the use is required, but no further explanation is provided as to what that may include. This has created a level of ambiguity as to what procedures are specifically required and when they are appropriate. School psychologists are well positioned to help schools meet these somewhat ambiguous requirements due to their consultative role (Gresham et al., 2001). This role allows school psychologists to see situations from a broader perspective that allows them to ideally pick what is necessary for each individual situation.

Functional behavioral assessment has been shown numerous times to be an effective method for coming to a more thorough and complete understanding of problem behaviors. Despite this evidence, its implementation and perceived utility are inconsistent at best (Hanley, Iwata, & McCord, 2003; Ingram et al., 2005). Functional behavioral assessment still has some distance to go before it is as useful and practical in

everyday practice as indicated through research. Education needs to come to a more complete understanding with the issues of implementation that face professionals in the field (Payne et al., 2007). Functional behavioral assessments are now required by IDEA, but that does not guarantee their success in addressing these behaviors (Gartin & Murdick, 2001). If the process is going to be effective, it is critical that the different stakeholders see FBA as playing a useful role in the process of addressing problem behaviors. It is also important that there is consistency and common understanding of what an FBA entails and how they are most effectively implemented.

#### Defining Functional Behavioral Assessment and Functional Analysis

The process of functional behavioral assessment has been available to educators for over thirty years. This same process is also sometimes referred to as FAB, or functional assessment of behavior. These two terms are one and the same. However FBA and functional analysis are terms have often been intertwined and used interchangeably. They may coincide with one another and be used at the same time to solve problems, but there are important distinctions between the two (Scott et al., 2000). These distinctions need to be made clear as the discussion on their effectiveness and utility in the classroom is examined. This study is focused on functional behavior assessments as the process that is required under the Individuals with Disabilities Act. It is also the procedure most likely to be completed in the school settings to identify causes and solutions for problem behaviors (Scott et al., 2000).

Functional analysis and functional behavioral assessment are primarily used to accomplish the same types of goals concerning problem behaviors. The goal of

functional behavioral assessment is to accurately describe and understand behavior through the use of observations and interviews (Ervin et al., 2001). This description is predominately focused on contextual and environmental factors that influence an individual's behavior. This understanding is then used to identify and isolate the environmental variables that are most closely aligned with the targeted behavior so that interventions can be appropriately selected to address the findings (Scott & Kamps, 2007). Functional behavioral assessment seeks to go beyond blaming the student by analyzing the environment and contextual factors that influence a student's learned behaviors. When and where the behavior originally began is of secondary importance to understanding what is supporting and sustaining it in the present time (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2002). These environmental factors are the aspects that educators can control, and potentially alter in an effort to meet a student's needs and effect some measure of meaningful change.

Functional analysis is working towards the same end goal of identifying very specific causes and reinforcement of problem behavior. The difference is that functional analysis involves the actual manipulation of the events surrounding the behavior. A hypothesis for a behavior is formed and a situation is created in which it is possible to systematically expose the student to the hypothesized antecedent of the problem behavior (Horner, 1994). The real key difference from functional behavioral assessment is that functional analysis includes the systematic manipulations that target the specific causes in an attempt to isolate and analyze the different outcomes. Functional analysis employs predictions and subsequent manipulations of the student's environment to better

understand why a behavior is occurring. Functional analysis requires the collection of baseline data that is directly related to the behavior of concern. This data is then compared to the data that is gathered from later manipulations in order to test the proposed hypotheses (O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Storey, & Sprague, 1990).

Functional analysis has been primarily used in clinical settings, but recent research has focused on exploring its transferability to the regular education classroom (Chafouleas, Riley-Tillman, & Eckert, 2003). A functional analysis may be conducted as part of a larger functional behavioral assessment process. The systematic interviews and observations completed during an FBA may be used to generate the hypotheses that are to be tested using a functional analysis framework (Ellingson et al., 1999). A functional analysis may be done as the culmination of a functional behavioral assessment, but it can exist alone as you can do hypothesis testing without rigorous observation beforehand.

Functional behavioral assessment and functional analysis are terms with distinct differences. Some situations allow for employing them in conjunction with one another. Functional analysis may play a role in the overall assessment process of FBA. However, functional analysis has other applications outside this process and outside the field of analyzing behavior. Functional analysis can be used to systematically test for things such as appropriate reading instruction (Daly, Martens, Dool, & Hintze 1998). For this reason, it is important that the true meaning of these words are understood and differentiated so that understanding in the field of analyzing behavior are not clouded and the focus can be put on to how to most effectively design and implement interventions.

### Assumptions and Goals of FBAs

The ultimate goal in conducting a functional behavioral assessment is to define the target behavior in such a way that it is possible to design an effective intervention. Ideally, the end result of this intervention is that the target behavior is no longer needed for the student to achieve reinforcement. A suitable alternative behavior is taught and the problem behavior is extinguished (Bartlett et al., 2007). Replacement behaviors may result in the same reinforcement as the target behavior (i.e. avoidance), but they are achieved in a more acceptable manner. The key is the direct and effective connection between the function of the behavior and the intervention. If the relationship to the function is absent, there is no point in conducting the assessment in the first place (Scott & Kamps, 2007).

In order for successful solutions and interventions to be identified, it is important to understand the assumptions underlying functional assessment. The first assumption is that a student's environment supports both appropriate and challenging behaviors. This means that behaviors are learned and they are caused by contextual factors. These behaviors are then either strengthened or weakened by the consequences that follow (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2002). This is an important tenant of FBA because it was designed to analyze the factors that go beyond the characteristics of the individual student. It examines the factors in the environment that can be observed and subsequently changed and manipulated.

The second assumption is that behavior serves a function. If behaviors were random, there would be no patterns and nothing to observe. This tenant is concerned

with why a behavior occurs and is based on a theory known as functionalism (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2002). Functionalism differs from behaviorism in that behaviorism is focused more on the understanding of the behavior from an outside cause and effect understanding. Functionalism explains why a behavior occurs, not just where and when the behavior happens (Gresham et al., 2001). Understanding why a behavior occurs is important because it is the information that educators can then take in to consideration when designing targeted interventions.

### FBA Types and Procedures

Functional behavioral assessments can be completed for students who are struggling in both general and special education. Functional behavioral assessments may be conducted by classroom teachers or by other school personnel, such as counselors. While teachers are capable of performing efficient and useful assessments with training, there are concerns about the practicality of training general education teachers (Scott, McIntyre, Liaupsin, Nelson, & Conroy, 2004). Thusly, most of the responsibility for conducting FBAs falls to specialists like school psychologists. It may be difficult to get teachers the adequate time or motivation to take over the primary responsibilities of conducting a functional assessment unless the process is simplified (Scott, McIntyre et al., 2004). School psychologists are well positioned to be able to have this understanding and apply it to many situations.

Functional behavioral assessment is a blanket term under which there are different ways of completing the same process. There are three methods of functional assessment that can be seen on a continuum of intensity. The least time consuming of these methods

is indirect observation, followed by direct observation and the most labor-intensive form of assessment comes in the form of functional or experimental analysis (Gresham et al., 2001). These are by no means mutually exclusive, and may be used in different combinations depending on the situation. While particular situations may vary, there are basic procedures that are most commonly practiced when conducting a functional assessment.

There are differences in the specifics of how some people conduct behavioral assessments, but a majority of models include interviews, behavior observations, goals, the development of interventions and progress monitoring (Bartlett et al., 2007). The process is likely to begin with the indirect measures. These are going to include the use behavior rating scales, checklists and interviews. This would also be the stage where an exhaustive review of school records would be completed. These procedures need to gain as specific information as is possible (Dahlquist & Chandler, 2002; Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). This is the stage when there is an effort to paint a picture of the context in which the behavior is occurring.

The next stage is when FBA gets attempts to answer the question of why the behavior occurs. During the direct observation phase, it is important to try to confirm and build upon the indirect data that has already been gathered (Gresham et al., 2001). Direct observation techniques may be as simple as having the teacher record when and where each behavior occurs. This data may be graphed and analyzed to try to reveal of the causes and reinforcement of the behavior. At this point, it may be necessary to go further and conduct a descriptive analysis. This is a much more structured observation.



It is most commonly completed using the A-B-C method. This is the observation and recording of the antecedent, behavior and consequence of events. This may entail detailed counts of behavior as well as several anecdotal recordings that focus on vivid descriptions of the behavior (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). It may lead directly to intervention selection or to further analysis in the form of experimental testing of hypotheses.

The final step may not be necessary in all circumstances. It involves the actual experimental analysis of the hypotheses of the causes of the problem behavior. This is the functional analysis step that may be included as part of an FBA if there is still ambiguity remaining as to the cause of behavior following the observations. This requires manipulating the child's environment to determine if the problem behavior occurs under the exact environmental situations that is believed to trigger it (Iwata, Pace, Kalsher, Cowdery, & Cataldo, 1990). Until recently, this procedure has been used primarily in highly controlled clinical settings (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). Recent studies have begun to show its utility in the regular education setting when done systematically with a solid hypothesis testing protocol (Wright-Gallo, Higbee, Reagon, & Davey, 2006; Daly III et al., 1998). This is an in-depth and time consuming process, but it does allow for more confident statements concerning cause and effect since the hypothesis is directly tested before the intervention is implemented.

#### Effectiveness and Need

An effective FBA model and common understanding of what it entails is important in helping practitioners formulate good assessments in the future. It is critical

that these needs are met to ensure that all students in the classroom can be instructed effectively. Recent strides have been made in an effort to try and design effective models for the regular education setting (Broussard & Northup, 1995). There are now a variety of procedures to choose from that have been implemented successfully in regular and special education.

One of the critical questions that need to be asked concerning FBA is whether it is worth the time and effort that educators put into it. There is a growing body of research that examines the utility of function-based interventions. Ingram et al. (2005) set out to answer this exact question. They studied middle school boys who were not receiving special education, but whose behavior problems were affecting their academics. They found that functional assessments were a key part of the ability to implement positive behavioral supports. The boys performed significantly better when their interventions were designed based on data gathered through an FBA than when interventions were implemented without any formal procedures for identifying underlying causes. Payne et al. (2007) confirmed these results in an examination of four students in the regular education setting using a multi-treatment single-subject design. They found clear and immediate decreases in the problem behaviors using the functional assessment based interventions.

A meta-analysis that examined information from one hundred articles on FBA over a twenty-year span found that functional assessments were effective and useful for educators in their ability to discover the variables that caused and maintained the problem behaviors (Ervin et al., 2001). The limitations of this review were that it examined

down into more specific antecedents and reinforcers (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). Once these problems are isolated you have more relevant information for those situations than a broad behavioral diagnosis.

### Research Limitations

One of the problems with the studies that are analyzing the effectiveness of FBAs is the limited sample size (Payne et al., 2007). Functional behavioral assessment is a lengthy, in-depth process that requires a specific population to draw upon. It can only be studied by looking at students who are having significant difficulties that are somehow learned behaviors that are mitigated through their environment (Derby et al., 1992). This means that despite a growing number of studies, the results' ability to be generalized needs to be done carefully. The fact that it is done with such a small number may be helpful because it allowed researchers to do a thorough examination of these students, which would be helpful to someone who is interested in replicating their results. However, the small sample size still limits the amount that the findings can be generalized.

Another limitation of the research on functional assessments is who is conducting the actual process. Until recently, most of the research conducted on functional assessment procedures has come from highly controlled clinical settings (Payne et al., 2007). These settings are a stark contrast to the highly fluid situations of the average classrooms. Results from these studies are often strongly in favor of functional assessment and its utility, but it is debatable whether these findings are applicable in the classroom. More research has been done recently on FBA's role in school in both special

education settings as well as regular education classrooms. However, the people conducting the assessments are usually highly trained researchers (Payne et al., 2007). This once again points to a limited ability to generalize to actual practice in schools. Evidence is strong that these procedures are effective when done by highly trained professionals. The question for educators is whether teachers can be adequately trained, without unnecessary burden on their schedules, to be accurate and effective practitioners in this process.

### Barriers to Implementation in Schools

One of the most difficult aspects for educators in implementing functional assessment procedures of any kind is the time commitment. FBA requires a time consuming process of gathering data, conducting interviews and setting aside time for observations. After all of this is done, it is necessary to analyze all of the information to select an appropriate intervention. This can be a daunting task for teachers or other school personnel who already have busy schedules. Further time constraints may result from the need to take further professional development to gain a greater understanding of the process (Reid & Nelson, 2002). If FBA cannot be completed in a timely manner, it is very unlikely that teachers are going to be receptive and active participants in the process.

Functional assessment and targeted interventions are time consuming and out of the normal operating procedures for most teachers. In the past, addressing student behavior has been left to reacting to inappropriate student behaviors in punitive ways to extinguish the unwanted action. However, if nothing is known about the function of the behavior, it is possible that the reaction is actually positively reinforcing the students'

behavior (Scott, Bucalos et al., 2004). When behaviors worsen, the reaction is to intensify the punishment. Functional assessment is a stark contrast to this methodology. It takes time to find the function and develop effective interventions. This process may require that the teacher ignore some instances of the unwanted behavior, which proves very difficult for some educators (Scott, Bucalos et al., 2004). The process may challenge teachers if they are not doing anything to address their student's unwanted behavior.

The other time consuming procedure is collecting baseline data. If there is no baseline data collected, there is no way of knowing how effective the process was (Carr et al., 1999). The problem with gathering data is that teachers must wait while the problem behavior persists in order to establish a point of comparison to see if behavior improves. This is necessary because of the critical importance of quality baseline data. For a teacher who is already frustrated or has been dealing with the problem for an extended period of time, another couple of weeks of collecting baseline data may not seem like a reasonable expectation.

The other big concern when it comes to effectively carrying out behavioral assessments in the classroom is training. There are concerns about the ability to adequately find time and resources to train the necessary personnel to carry these assessments out in the regular education setting. In order to make this education effort feasible, there needs to be more efficient ways of getting the information to the educators as well as improving the efficiency of the process itself to make it more acceptable to those who would actually be implementing it (Scott, Bucalos et al., 2004). Few general

education teachers are aware of the process; so making them fluent could be a significant undertaking. School psychologists, counselors and specialists have typically been the people implementing these procedures (Scott, Meers, & Nelson, 2000). Therefore, some teachers may not see behavior identification as part of their realm of responsibilities and may be reluctant to take on more work, which has traditionally been someone else's responsibility.

### Acceptability and Validity in the Field

A study completed in 2003 by Chafouleas et al. examined school psychologists' acceptance of the changing role of assessment in school. They surveyed five hundred randomly selected members of the National Association of School Psychologists. Of this sample, they received one hundred and eighty-eight complete surveys. Participants completed a variety of questions concerning topics such as curriculum-based assessment, norm-referenced assessment and experimental analysis. The findings indicated that curriculum-based assessment was the area that school psychologists felt to be the most acceptable means of assessment. Curriculum-based assessment was also the method that most school psychologists preferred. Norm-referenced assessment was the least acceptable method overall (Chafouleas et al., 2003).

One of the important findings of this study of school psychologists was their lack of experience with some aspects of functional behavioral assessment. Seventy percent of those who returned the survey indicated that they had little or no training in this type of analysis. In contrast, only five percent of the sample indicated they had little or no training in norm-referenced assessment (Chafouleas et al., 2003). The exposure to these

different methodologies undoubtedly had an effect on how the practitioners viewed their acceptability. The fact that they were familiar with the norm-referenced assessments, and yet rated them the lowest, would seem to indicate that many feel that there are better alternatives. Despite the fact that the subjects lacked experience with experimental analysis they still gave it a high degree of acceptability. This may suggest that practitioners view it as a completely viable alternative, but they lack the knowledge to implement its practices (Chafouleas et al., 2003).

Other survey research has inquired about the usefulness, effectiveness and competence in different assessments with personnel outside of public education. A survey of thirty-six people working in agencies that dealt with people with developmental disabilities came up with different results (Ellingson et al., 1999). They were asked to answer questions on four different types of assessments: Interview, rating scales, direct observation, and functional analysis. Of the four, functional analysis was rated as being the most difficult to use. However, it was rated a close second in effectiveness and came in first in perceived usefulness (Ellingson et al., 1999). The majority of participants said that functional assessment methods were a vital part of developing behavioral interventions. However, only 64% of the participants were able to identify the information that could be produced by a quality functional assessment. They reported that the most time consuming techniques of direct observation and functional analysis were the most accurate in finding specific antecedents and purposes of the problem behaviors (Ellingson et al., 1999). This study supports the notion that professionals

generally view this procedure as useful, although some of the data suggests that the participants did not understand the process as well as they reported.

One of the most critical aspects of this process is the way that practitioners view FBA. Educators need to view this as an acceptable and meaningful process for it to be implemented with integrity. The amount of data on program acceptability is insufficient to make concrete statements, but early results indicate that educators saw this data as acceptable (Broussard & Northrup, 1995). The acceptability has been examined using scales that are not very strong. Despite these downfalls, acceptability for both the process itself and the outcomes has been high (Reid & Nelson, 2002). The teachers' acceptability of the intervention results is increased when explicit information is provided on the functional information that was gathered using the assessment procedures (Weigle & Scotti, 2000). This may indicate that further understanding of the process, and what it is capable of producing, may increase its acceptability and increase treatment integrity.

#### Future Implications

Experts in the field of functional behavioral assessment do not agree as to what procedures are necessary or which ones should be used in all cases when conducting functional assessments (Scott et al., 2000). These findings point to a lack of consensus as to which parts of functional behavioral assessment are critical in each case. If the experts in the field do not agree to what is involved in this process, it is going to be difficult if not impossible for it to be applied with any consistency in a practical school setting. It is important to know what people are currently doing as a part of their functional behavioral assessments. A better understanding of what is being done will paint a more complete



accurate data and understand the importance and applications of that data. School psychologists would still need to be taking leadership roles in this data collection, but the basic knowledge may be there now more than ever. There has been progress in bringing functional assessments into schools, but more needs to be known about the types of supports and structures that are needed to help all educators succeed in using this tactic (Reid & Nelson, 2002). Future research may want to examine how school psychologists view teachers' data collection abilities and their willingness to try techniques that may be new to them such as functional analysis.

Along this same line, there is more room to examine practitioners' acceptance and knowledge of the different types of assessment. The education system is undergoing major changes regarding how assessments are being done. New mandates require the use of functional assessments with children displaying problem behaviors so it is important to know how prepared professionals are to implement these changes (Gartkin & Murdick, 2001). It would be useful to know how practitioners view and are prepared for these changes. Policies such as response to intervention are pushing further towards a more functional view of problem behaviors. It is important that research is conducted on the types of hypotheses being formed and the subsequent treatments that are designed (Ellingson et al., 1999).

Another route for the future of functional assessments is to continue to do more comparisons on the effectiveness of interventions using different types of assessments (Broussard & Northup, 1995). Multiple studies that have examined different uses for functional assessments, but there is a lack of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of

different assessments when compared directly to one another. This research field would require an extensive effort and would need to eventually look at the usefulness of different assessments in many different areas. One may be the most accurate assessment of reading skills, while another may be better for math or acting out behaviors. There is not enough known about when different types of assessments are likely to be most successful.

### Implication for Current Study

School psychologists may be in an ideal position to help foster a team approach to conducting and analyzing data through the FBA procedures (Gresham et al., 2001). It is especially critical that specialists, such as school psychologists, are highly trained and fluent in the practice of administering functional assessments. This fluency could increase the utility of functional assessments as a tool for teachers in the regular education classroom (Scott & Kamps, 2007). School psychologists are more likely to be trained in assessment procedures than teachers. They are also largely used in a consultation role, which lends itself to educating others (Gresham et al., 2001).

Functional behavioral assessment is a relatively in depth process, but a small percentage of children that lead to a majority of significant behavior problems. If efforts were focused on this small population, it would be the most efficient way of reducing the school's need to deal with problem behaviors. The basic piece of effective behavioral interventions is the complete and thorough understanding of the factors that cause and maintain problem behavior. The most effective way of doing this currently is using functional assessments (Hanley et al., 2003). FBA can be a powerful mode of

uncovering the mitigating factors in an environment. This process takes the focus away from the individual student and places it on the environment, which is what educators can mold and adjust. The question then becomes how to most efficiently and accurately implement these procedures in schools in a way that is not overly intrusive to teachers and educational specialists.

There continues to be a lack of knowledge concerning how these procedures are being implemented in schools. How functional assessments are being conducted, who is taking part in these assessments, the knowledge and comfort level with these procedures and the acceptability and perceived utility are critical pieces to understanding the perceptions and future of FBA in educational settings. The research backing the effectiveness of functional assessments is solid. The real question of the future of FBA in schools lies in how it fits in the physical, systemic and theoretical framework of the educational system (Scott & Kamps, 2007). School psychologists inhabit a unique role in schools and have a great opportunity to help improve the implementation and effectiveness of these procedures. It is crucial that we know if these procedures are done in a meaningful and useful way or if they have become a mark to be made on a checklist of things to do. This proposal will try to uncover the relationship between what procedures are being done in schools and the perceptions and beliefs that surround functional behavioral assessment.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Functional assessments have now been a required part of dealing with inappropriate behavior for over a decade (IDEA, 1997). However, there is a lack of knowledge of how these procedures are actually being practiced in school settings. There are several factors that might play a role in determining the value of FBA: time constraints, knowledge of FBA procedures, faculty and parent cooperation and perceived value of the process by all those involved (Scott & Kamps, 2007). This study's goal is to understand the current landscape of these factors and how they are perceived and valued by practitioners.

#### Participants

The participants for this study were practicing school psychologists in the state of Iowa. It is important that the participants were practicing school psychology in the school setting and were involved in assessing or intervening in problems regarding student behavior. It is important that the participants were active in their schools in order to get a picture of how FBA is conducted in a school setting by professionals who are in the field full time and not doing research from the outside. Their contact information was obtained through the Area Education Agencies under which they serve. Information on school psychologists in Des Moines was obtained through the Des Moines Public Schools. Three hundred twenty-eight surveys were disseminated to practitioners around the state.

### Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire about functional behavior assessment. Participants were contacted via E-Mail and given a link to the online survey. To ensure the participants' privacy, each participant was given a numbered code to enter when completing the survey that did not provide any information other than the area agency they are currently employed in. No names were provided on the survey itself, and the code ensured that the results stayed anonymous. The use of access codes also ensured that each person completed only one survey. Those who do not respond were sent a second reminder e-mail requesting their participation.

### Instrumentation

The literature regarding the usage and perceptions of functional assessments drove the creation of the survey tool (see Appendix A). The items were predominately close-ended to keep the measure brief for the respondents. Any questions where there may have been unanticipated responses were provided with an "other" option with a write in space so the respondent is not limited. The survey contained sections on demographic information, the process of conducting functional assessments and perceptions and acceptability of the FBA process.

Demographic information was collected using mutually exclusive response types. Data was gathered on education level, years of experience, age and amount of coursework and professional development received in related to functional assessments. The participants were also asked to provide the AEA they work within as different

agencies vary in their approaches to assessment. There was a single question regarding the frequency of use of these techniques.

The survey included inquiries on the process and procedures that are completed in the field as a part of the assessments. Data was collected on how often the following steps were included in the process: file review, teacher interview, parent interview, student interview, classroom observation, and experimental analysis. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=always). The next set of questions concerns which personnel completed these same steps. The participants were given a list of different school personnel and an "other" option in case of individual case differences.

The next section of the survey concerned how much each step in the process was valued and whether the results were a valuable tool in designing behavioral interventions. Also, there was a section that asked how much the school psychologist perceived that the other key players value the FBA process. Value questions were responded to on a 4-point Likert scale (No value, Little Value, Some Value, Highly Valuable). There were individual questions that concerned the processes effects on interventions as well as possible barriers to the process. The survey concluded with three open-ended questions. One addressed the strengths and weaknesses of the role of school psychologists in the process. Another of the open-ended responses asked how effective FBA results were in helping to plan interventions. The final question asked about the perceived utility and effectiveness of conducting an FBA.

### Analysis

Analysis of the survey data will be completed through descriptive statistics. The goal of this study is to understand the process how it is currently implemented and how practitioners feel about its use. Any missing data pieces will be left out of the analysis. Partial surveys' responses will be included to the extent that the survey is filled out. Any response of "other" will be given a value and a number of responses associated with that response. Data from questions with multiple choice options will be compiled into tables to look for patterns in responses. Open-ended items will be grouped by response types and analyzed for patterns in the data. Frequency of response types will be noted by amount of total responses represented. Responses may have information that falls into multiple categories. These were classified in both so that the frequencies of the responses were accurately reflected. Individual responses that captured distinct themes and groups may be noted. Practitioners have a wide variety of experience as it pertains to FBA and it is important to provide a thorough description in order to gain a better understanding of the reality in the schools.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Survey Participant Results

This survey was completed by 194 of the 328 individuals that it was sent to for a response rate of 59.1%. The ages of those who responded to the survey ranged from those in the 21-30 year old range to participants who were over 60 years of age. The number of participants in the different age groups was evenly spread out with ages 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, and 51-60 all comprising between 18.2-29.4% of responses. Respondents primarily had obtained specialists level degrees (64.7%). Ph.D. level practitioners comprised 8.6% of the survey participants and Masters of Education level practitioners 16.6%. Those who responded other (10.2%) primarily had a Master of Education degree with several additional hours of graduate training. The largest share of those who responded to this survey had been practicing in the field between 0-5 years (39.6%). This experience interval was three times as common as all others listed which included 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, and 30+ years of experience. Each of those intervals accounted for between 8-13% of the total respondents.

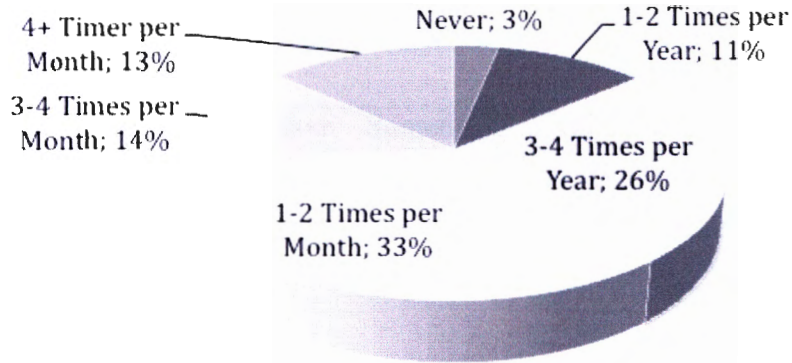
#### Survey Response Results

##### Quantitative Results

After agreeing to participate, those who chose to continue were asked how often they completed Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs). The most common response to this was that one-third of the participants were completing approximately 1-2 FBAs each month. The full results are summarized in the following chart:



## How Often Do You Complete FBAs?



*Figure 1.* Frequency of completing FBAs

Participants responded to a question that asked them how often they completed different steps when they complete a functional behavioral assessment. The following table summarizes those results.

Table 1.

*Percentages of how often each step is utilized in the FBA process*

Step Types	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
File Review	1.6%	1.6%	7.4%	20.1%	69.3%
Classroom Observation	2.1%	4.8%	10.6%	22.9%	59.6%
Teacher Interview	1.6%	0%	1.6%	10.2%	86.6%
Parent Interview	2.1%	5.9%	26.6%	42%	23.4%
Student Interview	4.8%	4.3%	33.5%	33.5%	23.9%
Scatter Plot	35.7%	20%	17.8%	13.5%	13%
Functional Analysis	27.8%	21.9%	18.7%	16%	15.5%

To better understand the process of what each individual's FBA process looked like, participants were asked who completed which steps. Participants were allowed to select more than one answer for each step. Results are summarized in the table on the following page.

Table 2.

*Summary of which educators complete each step of an FBA*

Information Source	School Psych.	School Counselor	General Ed. Teacher	Special Ed. Teacher	Educational Consultant	Social Worker	Other	Do Not Complete Step
File Review	95.2%	5.8%	17.5%	28.6%	28.6%	41.3%	3.2%	0.5%
Classroom Observation	90.9%	11.2%	20.9%	28.9%	28.9%	45.5%	3.7%	0.5%
Teacher Interview	94.7%	5.8%	17.5%	30.2%	30.2%	46%	1.6%	0%
Parent Interview	81.0%	15.3%	27%	20.1%	20.1%	48.7%	1.6%	1.6%
Student Interview	85.1%	13.8%	24.5%	19.7%	19.7%	43.1%	0.5%	6.4%
Scatter Plot	48.6%	1.7%	14.9%	8.6%	8.6%	16%	1.1%	36.6%
Functional Analysis	65.8%	3.8%	8.2%	13.6%	13.6%	26.6%	2.2%	30.4%

The final table displays the results of a series of statements that participants were asked to either agree or disagree with. Those responding were asked to pick the most appropriate response on a 6-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Table 3.

*Participants' agreement with FBA statements*

FBA Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	N/A
File reviews provide valuable information in the FBA process.	0.5%	1.6%	0.5%	9.5%	46.3%	41.6%	0.0%
Classroom observations provide valuable information in the FBA process.	0.5%	0.0%	1.6%	4.8%	24.3%	68.3%	0.5%
Teacher interviews provide valuable information in the FBA process.	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%	25.3%	72.1%	0.0%
Parent interviews provide valuable information in the FBA process.	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	15.8%	40.0%	43.7%	0.5%
Student interviews provide valuable information in the FBA process.	0.0%	0.5%	1.1%	12.2%	39.9%	44.7%	1.6%
Scatter plots provide valuable information in the FBA process.	2.2%	2.2%	4.9%	15.3%	28.4%	24.6%	22.4%
Functional analysis/Experimental analysis provides valuable information in the FBA process.	1.6%	1.1%	3.7%	14.8%	36.0%	28.6%	14.3%
The results of functional behavioral assessments are valuable when designing programs and interventions.	0.5%	0.0%	3.2%	6.9%	26.5%	62.4%	0.5%
Interventions based on functional behavioral assessments are more effective.	0.5%	1.6%	4.3%	6.9%	31.4%	54.8%	0.5%
Conducting a functional behavioral assessment is a valid use of a school psychologist's time.	0.5%	0.5%	3.2%	9.0%	30.7%	56.1%	0.0%
Teachers find the FBA process and its results useful.	1.1%	6.3%	13.2%	30.2%	38.1%	11.1%	0.0%
Parents find the FBA process and its results useful.	1.1%	5.8%	15.3%	38.1%	29.6%	7.9%	2.1%
Administrators find the FBA process and its results useful.	2.1%	4.8%	13.8%	34.4%	36.5%	7.4%	1.1%
I have had adequate professional development opportunities concerning functional behavioral assessments.	1.6%	1.1%	2.6%	11.6%	38.1%	42.9%	2.1%

Respondents were asked to share what, if any, are barriers that they encounter when conducting a functional behavioral assessment. Just over 75% of those who responded to this question noted that a lack of time was a barrier in conducting quality FBAs. The next most common response was limited cooperation with other staff, which could have been LEA or AEA (38.5% of participants selected this response). Nearly 19% of those who responded to this question noted that limited resources interfered with them conducting complete FBAs. 5.9% of those who completed the survey responded that limited knowledge was a barrier while 13.4% of respondents reported that they had no barriers. Those who responded other and wrote in additional responses noted they encountered problems when students were suspended from school and they reported having issues completing all of the paperwork.

### Qualitative Results

The following paragraphs are based on information taken from typed responses to the these open-ended questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your role in conducting an FBA?
2. How useful and effective are functional behavioral assessments in planning effective interventions?
3. In what situations do you complete functional behavioral assessments?

Over 90% of those who completed the survey also chose to provide an answer to the open-ended questions. The most consistent responses to both role strengths and weaknesses had to do with the procedure of conducting FBAs. The most common strength reported concerned confidence with their knowledge of analyzing behavior and

the proper procedures for conducting a thorough FBA. Over 75% of the respondents who listed strengths reported that they were confident in their abilities to conduct a functional behavioral assessment. Twice as many responses reported having extensive training and experience over any other area. People sighted both their graduate school training and ongoing professional development. Along this same pattern of responses, there were a large variety of different responses that focused on the fact that their training helped them to understand the importance of behavior and how it can impact student outcomes in the classroom. Another one of the five most common responses to the strengths of their role in the FBA process focused on their ability to look at and define problem behavior objectively. Many felt that being someone fresh to the situation allowed them to more easily be systematic in how they analyzed the problem behavior in question. Survey participants also felt that their role as people who serve a variety of different buildings and teachers allowed them to help educate others as to the importance of clearly defining the function of behavior to help tie it to effective interventions.

There were a couple of different areas that were consistently mentioned regarding the weaknesses of the school psychologist's role in conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments. The largest concern was with lack of time to be as thorough as people felt were necessary to be complete in their assessments. This response was twice as frequent as any other weakness or any of the areas listed under strengths. These responses frequently listed increasing caseloads and having to work in several different school buildings. Related to this response was the second most common weakness, which was not having the ability to have as much contact with the students as they would like. This

came in the form of not being able to do enough direct observations and interviews, especially parent interviews. The other primary weakness reported had to do with their relationships with the school and personnel. Over 15 responses specifically listed limited collaboration with teachers as a weakness. Many respondents also noted that they did not believe that teachers and administrators valued the information provided in the FBA. Along these same lines were another large grouping of participants who noted that they had limited knowledge of whether or not the functional assessments and the behavior plans were being read and implemented properly.

Open-ended responses were also gathered on when and for what situations school psychologists in Iowa are utilizing Functional Behavioral Assessments. The most common responses were that FBAs were being completed during general education interventions and problem solving, for initial evaluations for special education services, and for students who are already identified and either need to have a behavior goal added or their FBA was in need of an update. The most frequent responses focused on practitioners completing full FBAs before evaluations were initiated. School psychologists were getting involved when informal classroom interventions were not being successful. This meant that students often had a working FBA in place before evaluations were being completed. There were also three respondents who reported that they are not asked to do Functional Behavioral Assessments in their roles and that the school social workers were responsible for their completion.

The final responses were gathered on the question that asked how useful practitioners felt FBAs were in the process of designing behavior interventions. The

most common response with over three times as many responses as any other answer was people who indicated that FBAs were either very useful or vital pieces of their thinking in designing behavioral interventions. These people cited that having an accurate function vastly increased the likelihood of their interventions being successful. The next most common response was people who reported that they were somewhat helpful or that they were helpful in some situations, but there were other children for whom they are less effective. Situations cited as being less effective were when children had dual functions for their behaviors and when children had mental health issues. Twelve participants specifically mentioned that they had serious concerns about whether or not the behavior plans were being implemented. They stated that FBAs were helpful for finding functions, but that they were unsure whether it had meaningful benefit for students because of a lack of plan implementation.

In summary, the open-ended responses reinforced many of the trends in the other survey responses. A large majority of the individuals reported feeling that they were competent and capable professionals who state that their FBAs are valuable pieces of information when forming effective and targeted intervention plans. However, respondents also reported that their role made it difficult for them to spend the time with the student that they felt was necessary to completely understand their behavior. Those surveyed also had concerns that others either did not understand why FBAs were conducted or did not appreciate their value. People were confident in their training and available resources, but they did not know if others understood the process, used the FBA, and implemented a behavior plan with integrity.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify how confident school psychologists are in the different parts of the FBA process, how much they valued different aspects, the strengths of the process, the barriers and weaknesses of their role in the process and how FBA results are tied to behavioral interventions. It was found that student interviews, parent interviews, teacher interviews, classroom observations and file reviews were all completed over 80% of time when an FBA was conducted. These same processes were also rated as being the most valuable pieces in completing the process. Participants indicated that they felt adequately trained on how to conduct FBAs. Over 85% of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they felt adequately prepared to conduct quality FBAs, while only 4.3% responded that they did not feel prepared. These results indicate that the vast majority of respondents have a sound knowledge base in regards to FBAs and can therefore appropriately answer the questions in the survey regarding their use.

This study indicates that most practitioners find the process of conducting a functional behavioral assessment to be valuable to their practice. A large majority of respondents indicated that they believe their interventions are more affective when driven by a function-oriented assessment. Previous research indicated that, despite long standing mandates to use these procedures, utilization is still inconsistent (Scott & Kamps, 2007). This research also suggests that professionals often believe that the process is time-consuming and that many professionals do not view FBA as a useful

process (Hanley et al., 2003; Ingram et al., 2005). In contrast, this study found that most school psychologists practicing in the state of Iowa that responded to this survey believed that the FBA process is a useful process that allows them to systematically and objectively examine problem behaviors. They believed that their role is the proper one for conducting the assessments because their lack of a long history with the child allows them to offer a fresh perspective to difficult situations and 94.1% of those who responded indicated that they felt adequately trained to conduct quality FBAs. The respondents in this survey believed that their knowledge base is strong and that their role is the proper one to conduct quality FBAs. This belief in the strength of their role reaffirms findings that a consultative role is an appropriate position for conducting FBAs (Gresham et al., 2001). Previously, there had been concerns regarding the knowledge base of the people conducting assessments (Scott, Bucalos et al., 2004). However, based on the respondents' views, this was not the primary difficulty in conducting the assessments.

Less than 50% of the participants in the study marked agree or strongly agree in response to the statements that teachers find the FBA process useful. This was also true for their perceptions of parents and administrators. These responses were echoed in some of the concerns raised in the open-ended responses, which spoke about sometimes receiving minimal cooperation from teachers and administrators. Thirty-eight percent of people indicated lack of collaboration as a problem, which could be impacting the quality and utility of the assessments. This is concerning as school psychologists are not the people who ultimately have to implement behavior intervention plans. Previous research indicates that having interventions based on accurate understanding of the function

increases the likelihood the plan will be successful (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002; Payne et al., 2007). The more specific the function, the more likely it is to help successful and efficient address the behavior (Carr et al., 1999). The efficiency piece of accurate assessment is crucial when teachers are implementing plans for several students at once. A lack of collaboration or understanding could result in all team members spending larger amounts of time with a particular student than is necessary if the function is accurate. A more common understanding is critical to the success of the process (Payne et al., 2007), and the respondents in this study did not perceive that a common understanding exists.

This study contributes new information regarding the barriers to professionals implanting this method of assessment into their practice. Only 13.4% of respondents reported not having any barriers to completing quality FBAs. Specificity of the function is critical in determining success in student outcomes (Dahlquist & Chandler, 2002; Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). However, an overwhelming majority of respondents did report having barriers to completing their assessments, which could potentially prevent the level of intense assessment that some cases require. If these barriers can be identified, it is more likely that steps can be taken to minimize their influence. Lack of time was consistently the barrier or weakness that was sighted. Participants cited expanding student populations and having more buildings to cover than in past years. The school psychologists also noted that it was difficult to find structured times to see children when they were only in some buildings as little as half a day during the week. They also noted that limited resources were a concern as well. However, it was not

specified which resources were needed to more effectively conduct the assessments. One item that was mentioned was a more streamlined paperwork process, as responses indicated the extensive paperwork as being a barrier to spending more time with teachers.

Some participants also cited lack of collaboration as a problem that contributed to the lack of time available to gather quality information. In conjunction with this is the fact that practitioners are concerned that teachers do not use the information to inform how they plan for the child's success. Multiple responses noted that there were concerns that teachers and administrators felt that it was simply a paperwork "hoop" that had to be jumped through and that it served no real value. Practitioners' open-ended responses indicated that teachers might have already drawn their own conclusions prior to the assessment beginning. This coincided with the concern that administrators and teachers had a lack of understanding of the purposes and uses for the functional assessment process. An accurate identification of the function is critical to intervention planning (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002; Carr et al., 1999). If the assessments are being done only because they are a requirement it may be compromising the quality of the work being done. Despite being thorough, they may not have the intended impact if teachers and administrators do not value or know how to use FBA results.

The barriers noted in this study indicate that more education about functional behavioral assessment is needed at the building level as to what a functional behavioral assessment is, what it entails, why they are completed and how they are related to classroom interventions and planning. Professional development could be provided at the district, building and individual levels. FBAs are only valuable when all members are

actively involved in the process and the results are utilized through effective interventions. Sometimes the outcomes require teachers to do unnatural things like ignoring behavior, and without an understanding of why this is the case it is difficult to implement it (Scott, Bucalos et al., 2004). Teachers would benefit from training in how functions relate to interventions and how to gather useful behavioral data.

Implementation is more likely to be successful when there is a greater level of understanding of the reasons behind the plan (Scott, Bucalos et al., 2004). Ultimately, the staffs in each building are the people who have to implement the plans based on the FBA process and they require the necessary knowledge in how to analyze effectiveness and collect information for ongoing problem solving. A significant amount of time is dedicated to children who have behavioral difficulties. It is important to make sure that everyone has the proper education on how to be proactive and have a meaningful process up front to save time dealing with problems later on.

An overwhelming majority of participants in this study felt that functional behavioral assessments were a critical piece of creating effective behavioral intervention plans. Concerns were noted that plans were not always implemented effectively and that function was sometimes ignored in classroom practice. Some participants that felt they were not important for behavior plans noted that they often found dual functions of both escape and attention for behaviors. Over three times as many people found the process to be valuable compared to those who thought it was not necessary or only moderately helpful. Future implications include how to make this useful process more efficient and meaningful for people other than the psychologists who are completing them. Earlier

work found that most professionals valued the process, but there were gaps in the ability to apply the FBA results to interventions (Ellingson et al., 1999; Weigle & Scotti, 2000; Ervin et al., 2001). The interventions are what are going to have the most implications for the everyday interactions with the child. Respondents reported accurate functions being important to their interventions, but more needs to be done to examine actual student outcomes.

### Limitations

One of the limitations of this survey study is the representativeness of the sample. Nearly 60% of those to whom the survey was sent responded. It is possible that these were people who were either strongly opposed to or were in favor of functional behavioral assessments. The school psychologists surveyed for this study were all practicing in the state of Iowa at the time that they completed the survey. These school psychologists had a variety of educational backgrounds, but their experiences and perceptions may or may not be representative of school psychologists who are practicing in other states. Furthermore, the state of Iowa is unique in that school psychologists primarily practice through intermediary Area Education Agencies (AEAs). These AEAs have a great deal of autonomy in their training in and emphasis on functional behavioral assessments. Some of these agencies employ very few school psychologists, which meant that to report or to analyze results by specific agencies might have led to issues in maintaining respondent confidentiality. Therefore, it is possible that some agencies are more highly represented in the sample than others.

It is also acknowledged that there are other school personnel who complete FBAs, such as school social workers and educational consultants. The practice and perceptions of school psychologists may or may not be a fair representation of how these other practitioners utilize functional assessments in their own practices. The support personnel other than school psychologists often have a different set of coursework and training, which may affect their perceptions regarding functional behavioral assessments. Another limitation is that this study only asks for voluntary responses concerning their FBA practices. It does not examine the actual assessments themselves and compare that to what is actually being reported.

The open-ended question that was focused on the role that school psychologists play is information that was collected prior to statewide changes in child find procedures. Within six months of when this data was collected, the state of Iowa put out new statewide regulations that limited the amount of time and the type of duties that staff paid for through special education funding was supposed to be spending being involved in general education settings. These changes have resulted in significant changes in practices across the state, which means that these responses would likely be very different at this time. School psychologists are now to be involved on a much more limited basis in general education interventions prior to consent for evaluation being signed. The most significant new restriction is related to the directive that school psychologists are not to be doing direct and individual assessment for a child prior to beginning a full evaluation. This is a significant change in practice, as some professionals were completing FBAs or parts of assessments prior to the evaluation period. It is possible that the information

gathered as part of the FBA process is being gathered during a much more abbreviated time frame.

### Future Research

Future directions of research could focus more specifically on how practitioners view different types of training and the effect it has on how they practice. This could address whether their graduate training was sufficient or useful in the field or whether professional development on the job was their primary source of information. Another direction for future inquiry would be further examining the barriers that were noted by the participants in this study.

Examining teacher and administrator's thoughts regarding the utility of the process is important. It is clear that many school psychologists see this as a process that is useful for them, but not utilized by others. More information is needed in respects to which parts of the process are valuable to teachers and what type of training or information they require to allow FBAs to become more accessible to them. More information about what about their jobs limits the time they have to complete FBAs and getting to know the student that they are assessing. It would also be beneficial to sample actual assessments to see which pieces of information are actually being included on a consistent basis. This would help to validate the accuracy of the statements and responses that the participants provided in this study.

More research needs to be done with the perceived lack of cooperation between school psychologists and the districts and teachers they are serving and collaborating with. Specific information on what teachers utilize is important in understanding how



school psychologists can more effectively communicate assessment results with the staff in their buildings. It is unclear what levels of understanding teachers have of the FBA process. It would be important to understand how teachers are informed of the process and outcomes of a functional assessment. Ultimately it is the teachers' understanding of the child's problem behavior that affects the student's environment and outcomes.

School psychologists in this study questioned whether the results of FBAs are being applied in the classroom. It needs to be known if this perception is accurate, and if it is, why that is the case. Further research could focus on the school personnel's perceptions and background with functional behavioral assessments. Based on the current study it is unclear if this lack of collaboration is due to a lack of understanding, lack of time or poor relationships with staff completing assessments, or some other factor.

#### Implications for School Psychology

This study's goal was to identify what was being done in the field as part of the FBA process. This is important because it is a required element, but what it entails is not defined (Gresham et al., 2001). In that respect, it has shown which pieces of the assessment process respondents reported doing. With the wide variety of needs that practitioners deal with, it is important to understand where skill levels are sound and what areas are in need of further development. Efficiently increasing skills through professional development and coursework is important for practitioners and trainers. Professional development on FBAs is sometimes viewed as a barrier when it is perceived as adding to time difficulties (Reid & Nelson, 2002). Therefore, further education needs to be poignant and valuable to the school psychologists conducting them.

This survey also sought out information on what pieces of information were valued, how the assessments were being utilized and what barriers are affecting the outcomes of these assessments in the field. Based on this study, there are some sources of information that practitioners valued more than others. Identifying these valuable pieces may help trainers better understand where to target instruction so that school psychologists are able to gather information that will be applicable in their practice.

This study also showed that those who responded feel that FBAs are valuable when doing intervention planning. There were concerns about whether teachers were considering function when dealing with behavior, but psychologists saw function as a critical piece of planning. A greater understanding of the barriers is also critical for practitioners, supervisors and trainers. This information is directly tied to the quality of the functional behavioral assessments that are being conducted in the field. If barriers are known and defined, practitioners and supervisors can partner with schools to be more proactive in preventing those issues. Students with behavioral needs are a small percentage of the student population, but they account for over half of the behavior that results in office referrals (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002). This highlights the importance of making the functional behavioral assessment as efficient and effective as possible in order to more accurately plan for student needs.

### Conclusions

One of the keys to better serving students with behavior problems is having an understanding of how assessment is done presently. This knowledge will help practitioners and school psychology training faculty focus on areas of weakness and

further develop areas of strength. Most school psychologists who responded to this survey felt confident in their abilities to conduct a quality assessment. However, most also noted that there was at least one barrier that made the process difficult. Another common theme was that teachers either did not understand the process or were not utilizing it. These concerns need further exploration to fully understand their implications. The participants in this study were confident in their training and knowledge, which is a strong foundation to build on as the impetus then becomes educating other professionals and focusing on student outcomes.

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APPENDIX  
STUDY SURVEY

Approximately how often do you complete functional assessments?

Never                       1-2 times/year                       3-4 times/year  
 1-2 times/month                       3-4/month                       More than 4 times/month

How often do you complete the following as part of the functional behavioral assessment process?

File Review

Never       Seldom       Sometimes       Often       Always

Classroom Observation

Never       Seldom       Sometimes       Often       Always

Teacher Interview

Never       Seldom       Sometimes       Often       Always

Parent Interview

Never       Seldom       Sometimes       Often       Always

Student Interview

Never       Seldom       Sometimes       Often       Always

Scatter Plot

Never       Seldom       Sometimes       Often       Always

Functional Analysis/Experimental Analysis

Never       Seldom       Sometimes       Often       Always

Who completes each of the following procedures in the functional behavioral assessment process? (Check all that apply or do not complete this step if it is not applicable)

1. File Review

- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- General Education Teacher
- Special Education/Resource Room Teacher
- Educational Consultant
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do not complete this step

2. Classroom Observation

- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- General Education Teacher
- Special Education/Resource Room Teacher
- Educational Consultant
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do not complete this step

3. Teacher interview

- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- General Education Teacher
- Special Education/Resource Room Teacher
- Educational Consultant
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do not complete this step

4. Parent Interview

- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- General Education Teacher
- Special Education/Resource Room Teacher
- Educational Consultant
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do not complete this step



## 5. Student Interview

- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- General Education Teacher
- Special Education/Resource Room Teacher
- Educational Consultant
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do not complete this step

## 6. Scatter plot

- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- General Education Teacher
- Special Education/Resource Room Teacher
- Educational Consultant
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do not complete this step

## 7. Functional Analysis/Experimental Analysis

- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- General Education Teacher
- Special Education/Resource Room Teacher
- Educational Consultant
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do not complete this step

Please evaluate the following statement by selecting the option that best describes your agreement or disagreement with each statement.

## 1. File reviews provide valuable information in the FBA process.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Not Applicable

2. Classroom observations provide valuable information in the FBA process.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Slightly Disagree

Slightly Agree

Agree

Strongly Agree

Not Applicable

3. Teacher interviews provide valuable information in the FBA process.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Slightly Disagree

Slightly Agree

Agree

Strongly Agree

Not Applicable

4. Parent interviews provide valuable information in the FBA process.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Slightly Disagree

Slightly Agree

Agree

Strongly Agree

Not Applicable

5. Student interviews provide valuable information in the FBA process.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Slightly Disagree

Slightly Agree

Agree

Strongly Agree

Not Applicable

6. Scatter plots provide valuable information in the FBA process.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

7. Functional Analysis/Experimental analysis provides valuable information in the FBA process.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

8. The results of functional behavioral assessments are valuable when designing programs and interventions.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

9. Interventions based on functional assessments are more effective than interventions that are not based on functional assessment data.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

10. Conducting functional assessments is a valid use of a school psychologist's time.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

11. Teachers find the FBA process and its results useful.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

12. Parents find the FBA process and its results useful.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

13. Administrators find the FBA process and its results useful.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

14. I have had adequate professional development opportunities concerning functional behavioral assessments.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

15. I feel adequately trained to conduct effective functional behavioral assessments.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly Disagree
- Slightly Agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
- Not Applicable

Indicate which of the following are barriers to you conducting functional behavioral assessments (check all that apply):

- Limited time
- Limited resources
- Limited cooperation with other staff
- Limited knowledge of the procedures of functional assessments
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- None, I have no impediments to completing an FBA

What are the strengths and weaknesses of your role in conducting an FBA?

How useful and effective are functional behavioral assessments in planning effective interventions?

In what situations do you complete functional behavioral assessments?

Age (years):

21-25     26-30     31-35     36-40     41-45     46-50     51-60  
 61-65     65 +

Highest School Psychology Degree:  MAE/MSE     Ed.S.     Ph.D.

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Years Working as a School Psychologist:

0-5     6-10     11-15     16-20     21-25     26-30     Over 30

Indicate the group you serve in your schools (Check all that apply).

Early Childhood     Elementary School     Middle School     High School