Chapter 7
Assessing the Functions of Behavior for Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom Environment

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the identification of students with Autism. According to research and the laws that guide Special Education, inclusive settings benefit both students with and without disabilities. However, teaching students with Autism in inclusive settings can bring about challenges, as teachers are responsible to effectively manage academic and social behaviors. Years of research support the evidence that behaviors do not occur in isolation and behaviors serve a function, even those that are deemed as socially maladaptive. Today's classroom teachers need the tools necessary to identify the function of the student behavior so that appropriate strategies can be applied. Based on the evidence, these strategies can be used to target and transform socially significant behaviors required for successful inclusion and optimized independence.

INTRODUCTION

For the past ten decades, there have been notable increases in the number of students diagnosed with Autism (Geneva Centre for Autism, 2010). Students with Autism display various characteristics such as problems communicating, delays in social development, ritualistic behaviors, and adverse reactions to changes in the environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2012). As the number of students identified as having Autism increases, so does their representation in mainstream and inclusive settings (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010). Teachers are expected to meet the needs of these students and find ways

to include them, although they may not have specific guidelines or strategies to accomplish these tasks (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008). Students with Autism display challenging behaviors and require a systematic approach for the assessment of behaviors, as well as the implementation of interventions, that differs from other students with disabilities. Legislation that guides the practice of Special Education, such as placing the student into the least restrictive environment, speaks to the ethics of what should be done for all students with disabilities without connection to specific classifications or characteristics of the student (Wright & Wright, 2007). It is the goal that all students with special needs be included to the maximum extent possible. Now that more students with Autism are being included, teachers need an inventory of skills and strategies, which address the unique needs of this student population, despite the challenges that may arise in the process (Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson, & Scott, 2013)

There are two most frequently cited issues or barriers to including students with Autism in mainstream or inclusive settings. Teachers report that they are not equipped with the knowledge or skills to address the needs of these students (Rodríguez, Saldaña, & Moreno, 2012). Teachers are not certain on how to effectively respond to student behavior (Brown & McIntosh, 2012; Hart & Whalon, 2013). The two issues are tightly knitted. In order for teachers to effectively work with student behaviors, they must have the knowledge and understanding of evidenced based practices that can be used to understand and change behavior. In fact, studies show strong connections between students' behaviors and the participation of those students in inclusive settings (Ervasti, Kivimäki, Kawachi, Subramanian, Pentti, Ahola, & Virtanen, 2012). Additionally, behavior impacts student to teacher relationships, and the perceptions of teachers, students, and families to the effectiveness of the student success in the inclusive classroom (Gao & Mager, 2011; Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009). Therefore understanding the function of behavior is imperative. Understanding behavior is not just limited to behavior that is maladaptive. Behavior encompasses all actions that occur daily in the classroom, for example, speaking, walking, writing, looking at a computer screen, sitting and countless other academic and non-academic actions.

In a review of research-based interventions for students with Autism, Spencer, Evmenova, Boon, and Hayes-Harris (2014) listed several strategies used to teach students academic skills. Although the strategies were based on various theoretical perspectives with various targeted outcomes, the one common denominator for all classroom strategies was that the evaluator ultimately relied on measuring an observable behavior. Measurements should include what the students do, say or produce (Alberto & Troutman, 2012; Cooper, Heron & Heward, 2007). Measurement is required to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy. Therefore, skills in observing and analyzing behavior are a must-have classroom skill.

The study of behavior in relation to students with Autism has grown tremendously and this chapter will highlight components of behavior analysis which have been made "classroom ready". The essential ways in which teachers can use data for decision-making is presented in a succinct and meaningful way. 'Classroom ready' refers to the features and aspects of these strategies as presented for immediate use. In addition, the strategies presented are compact but carefully selected with an intentional focus on classroom application for teachers in inclusive settings working with students diagnosed with Autism. National research indicates that training in the area of data-based solutions, including behavior intervention, needs to be more accessible (Couvillon, Bullock & Gable, 2009). The complexity of the information and variation among classroom implementation of data collection and analysis may present as a barrier (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009). This information is presented in the "classroom ready" manner which streamlines the information into the main skills that every teacher should have as a part of their teaching toolkit.

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