The Seven High-Hit Reasons for Students' Challenging Behavior: Functional Behavioral Assessment and Why Schools Don't Climb into the 21st Century

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When Personal Agendas Overrule Effective Professional Practices

Dear Colleagues,

Introduction

I hope you are doing well. . . and that your school year (such as it is) is also going well.

Last Wednesday, I presented a webinar on The Seven High-Hit Reasons for Students' Challenging Behavior: Functional Assessment for the 21st Century to over 3,500 educators from across the world. For schools with students demonstrating social, emotional, or behavioral upsets (or not enough appropriate prosocial, emotional, or behavioral interactions), this is a critical topic.

The webinar promotion described the session as follows:

> For students with significant social, emotional, and/or behavioral issues, Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) are sometimes a part of the assessment process. However, many FBAs still are completed using approaches that have existed since

the 1970s, they focus on a narrow operant perspective of behavior that does not incorporate over 40 years of biologically- and psychologically-based research, and hence, they may result in questionable conclusions and recommendations.

This presentation describes the seven "high-hit" reasons why students present with behavioral challenges, discussing how to assess these reasons as part of a "21st Century" functional behavioral assessment. It also demonstrates how to link each high-hit functional assessment reason with specific social, emotional, or behavioral interventions. The tiers in such a multi-tiered system will be defined based on the intensity of services and supports. Thus, most of the discussion will center on what should be the Tier II level of strategies and interventions.

Critically, most "traditional" FBAs assess—at most—only two of the seven high-hit types (i.e., students with motivational or emotional difficulties). This presentation will assert that some student behavior does not have a specific motivational function. Thus, a traditional FBA is not always helpful to the assessment process.

After the webinar, I received the questions and comments collected in the Chatbox. One comment was from a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) who felt that I disrespected her and her colleagues during the presentation.

As I read her comment, it seemed that she heard me say "BCBA" every time I said "FBA."

In reality, I mentioned BCBAs only once during the entire hour-long presentation. I identified them as members of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Team who—with school counselors, psychologists, and social workers—are the professionals most-often involved in assessing and addressing behaviorally challenging students' concerns.

Thus, the offended BCBA's misperceptions of my FBA discussion was troubling.

And yet, I find that misperceptions like this one are common in districts and schools.

Today, I would like to outline my Seven High-Hit presentation, and then address the issue of MTSS members who hold their methodologies "so close to their hearts" that they sometimes lose the professional objectivity needed to help MTSS Teams "move into the 21st Century."

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<u>Important Functional Assessment Principles</u>

First of all, let me re-state that, when I discuss functional assessment in this Blog, I am referring to the data-based assessments that determine the root causes of students' social, emotional, or behavioral challenges.

A Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is but one specific approach within a broad assortment of different data-collection approaches in a functional assessment.

Critically, if we do not accurately determine the underlying causes of a students' challenging behavior through the functional assessment process, we cannot discriminate symptoms from actual problems, and we cannot link the assessment results to the strategic or intensive services, supports, strategies, or interventions needed to solve or resolve the problems at-hand.

Note that this is exactly what doctors, car mechanics, and electricians do.

They complete diagnostic, functional assessments to determine why a patient is running a 93-degree fever, a car will not start, or a fuse continues to blow, and they link the assessment results with appropriate interventions. Moreover, they tailor their assessments to the apparent (or discovered) problems.

Indeed, they do not do just their favorite assessments. And they do not bypass the assessment process—trying, instead, random interventions that might make the problem worse.

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To guide any functional assessment process, the following scientifically-based principles and practices should be heeded:

- Principle 1. The functional assessment process begins when a classroom teacher has concerns about a student's behavior and/or social or emotional interactions, involves the student's parents or guardians, discusses the concerns with the student, and implements (as appropriate) targeted classroom management interventions.

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- Principle 2. If needed, the classroom teachers may consult with other general education colleagues, or they may begin to work with one or more members of the multi-disciplinary MTSS Team.

  As these consultations begin, the student's cumulative and other records/history should be comprehensively reviewed, and (a) student observations; (b) interviews with previous teachers and/or intervention specialists; (c) assessments investigating

the presence of medical, drug, or other physiologically-based issues; and (d) evaluations of previous interventions should be completed.

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Two important practices are embedded here:

First, the functional assessment process begins in Tier 1, as teachers (typically) are first recognizing students' classroom or school concerns.

Second, if students' problems are sufficiently frequent, intense, significant, or severe, classroom teachers should immediately involve one or more MTSS Team members. This involvement occurs without requiring that classroom teachers implement a specific number of interventions over a set period of time. . . demonstrating "with data" that they have not worked.

Relative to these practices: MTSS Team-level functional assessments should not be delayed until (a) after classroom-based "Tier 1" interventions are tried, (b) after a series of "Tier 2" interventions are completed, and thus, (c) as part of a "Tier 3" referral to the school's multi-disciplinary MTSS Team.

That is, if required by the conditions of the case, students should receive immediate multi-disciplinary MTSS Team attention if needed. They should not have to sequentially "fail to respond" to interventions at Tier 1, and then fail to respond at Tier 2, in order to "qualify" to receive Tier 3 "attention."

Using a sequential tiering process is like a primary care physician requiring parents to complete a series of home remedies when their child is sick ("Tier 1"), and to be treated by a physician assistant ("Tier 2"), before allowing the parents to bring their child to their physician's office ("Tier 3").

Obviously, in medicine, if children need to go to their primary care physicians (or emergency rooms, for that matter), they go. There are no prerequisite treatments required, because—in some cases—if the right physician-directed assessments or treatments are delayed, patients die.

Doubling back, even when treated by a physician, that doctor completes thorough child and family medical interviews and histories on the young patient, and thorough diagnostic, medical assessments to determine the root cause of the problem—all before implementing medical treatments.

Critically, what medical doctors do with their patients, teachers and multi-disciplinary MTSS Teams should do with their students.

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- Principle 3. Diagnostic or functional assessments evaluate students and their past and present instructional settings and interactions. This helps differentiate student-centered social, emotional, or behavioral concerns vs. setting-student interactional concerns vs. concerns due to largely environmental, instructional, or situational conditions.

  These assessments evaluate the quality of past and present instruction, the integrity of past and present social-emotional learning curricula, and the integrity of accurately selecting and implementing the interventions already attempted.

  Once again, this helps determine whether a student's difficulties are due to teacher/instruction, curricular, or student-specific factors (or a combination thereof).

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- Principle 4. As above, diagnostic or functional assessments to determine why a student is not making progress or is exhibiting social, emotional, and/or behavioral concerns should occur prior to any Tier 2 or Tier 3 student-focused interventions. These assessments should begin as soon as a student concern is recognized (i.e., during Tier I).

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- Principle 5. When Tier 2 or 3 interventions do not work, the diagnostic or functional assessment process should be revisited, focusing on whether (a) the student's problem was identified accurately, or has changed; (b) the assessment results correctly determined the underlying reasons for the problem; (c) the correct instructional or intervention approaches were selected; (d) the correct instructional or intervention approaches were implemented with the integrity and intensity needed; and/or (e) the student needs additional or different services, supports, strategies, or programs.

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- Principle 6. The "tiers" in a multi-tiered system of supports reflect the intensity of services, supports, strategies, or interventions needed by the student of-concern. The availability of different services and supports in a school or district often determines where they are "placed" in the three-tiered continuum.

  For example, if a district has related services professionals (school counselors, psychologists, social workers) skilled in cognitive-behavioral therapy, these will likely be considered Tier 2 interventions.

If these interventions are available only in the community's mental health system, they may be considered Tier 3 supports.

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With these functional assessment principles as a guide, let's discuss the Seven High-Hit Reasons underlying many students' challenging social, emotional, or behavioral interactions.

Critically, these Seven High-Hit Reasons are largely student-centered reasons. Thus, please note that this Blog discussion does not also focus on the underlying reasons (see Principle 3 above) that occur due to setting-student interactions, and/or environmental, instructional, or situational conditions, respectively.

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The Seven High-Hit Reasons for Students' Challenging Behavior

Any analysis of the underlying reasons for a student's social, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges must investigate the presence of one or more of the seven high-hit reasons for these challenges. This analysis involves (a) the use of different data-collection tools, tests, and/or procedures, that (b) are completed by different respondents, and that (c) evaluate the students' behavior in multiple settings. All functional assessment tools or processes must generate both reliable and valid data.

The Seven High-Hit Reasons are:

- High Hit #1: Skill Deficits. These are students with social, emotional, and/or behavioral skill deficits who are not demonstrating enough or appropriate interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention or resolution, and/or emotional control, communication, or coping skills.

  This typically occurs (a) because of the absence of a social-emotional skills program —or a scientifically-sound program (i.e., a curriculum gap); (b) because students have not been taught these social skills—or they have not been taught effectively (i.e., a teacher/instructional gap); and/or (c) because students have not learned or mastered the skills being taught—even when taught effectively.

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- High Hit #2: Speed of Acquisition. Here, students are learning the social skills being taught, but their speed of learning and mastery is slower than other same-aged students. This may occur during the social skill lessons themselves, and/or in a cumulative way over time.

This typically occurs because these students need the instruction to be adapted or modified to fit their different learning styles or approaches, or because they simply learn and master skills at a slower rate—regardless of what anyone does to speed their learning up.

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- High Hit #3: Generalization. These students are learning their social, emotional, and behavioral skills at the time of instruction or in an isolated way, but they are not integrating, transferring, applying, or generalizing this "learning" to "real life" situations. For example, some of these students may be learning and using their social skills in one school setting, with one teacher, or with one group of peers. . . but not in all or most school settings, with all or most teachers and adults, or all or most groups of peers or student groups.

  This typically occurs because students (a) do not realize that their social skills are for all staff, peers, settings, and situations; (b) have not been trained to use or adapt their skills in these different areas; or (c) stop using their skills because adults, peers, or others are not responding in a way that reinforces their continued use over time.

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- High Hit #4: Attributions or Conditions of Emotionality. These students have internal beliefs, attitudes, expectations, or attributions that interfere with their ability to demonstrate their social skills, and/or they are unable to perform these skills when experiencing different conditions of emotionality.

  This typically occurs when students are not confident that their social or behavioral performance will be successful, or they experience so much emotion (e.g., fear, anxiety, stress, anger) that they freeze or forget, flea or escape, or act out or make inappropriate choices.

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- High Hit #5: Motivation. These students have learned and mastered their social, emotional, and behavioral skills. . . they just choose either not to use them or to abuse them. This is a motivational issue, and the assessment goal is to determine what "function" the inappropriate behavior has for each individual student.

  Under extreme circumstances, this is where many schools—appropriately—conduct Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) as part of the data-based functional assessment process.

High-Hit #5 students typically (a) are internally motivated to make “bad choices;” (b) are being more strongly reinforced, for example, by their peer group than by school adults; and/or (c) are not externally motivated by meaningful incentives (for appropriate behavior) or consequences (for inappropriate behavior) in their school or classroom settings.

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- High Hit #6: Inconsistency. These students have experienced enough inconsistency in one or more areas that their prosocial interactions vary across people, settings, or times of the day; or their inappropriate behaviors have been incorrectly reinforced.

  Functionally, these students’ inconsistent appropriate or improperly reinforced inappropriate behavior, respectfully, result from (a) the inconsistent behavioral expectations of different teachers or staff; (b) the inconsistent teaching or prompting of prosocial skills; (c) the inconsistent use of motivational incentives and consequences; (d) the inconsistent ways that different staff hold (or do not hold) students accountable for their behavior; (d) the inconsistent ways that peers versus adults value different school or classroom behavior; and/or (e) the inconsistent staff expectations or responses in different settings or across different circumstances.

  When present, and based on their age and maturity, inconsistency creates confused, differential, manipulative, entitled, and/or emotionally reactive behavior across students.

  Inconsistency also undercuts students’ self-motivation, self-evaluation, and self-accountability, and this often results in inconsistent prosocial behavior or inappropriate behavior that—once again—has been incorrectly reinforced.

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- High Hit #7: Special Situations. These students have one or more significant, intense, unique, specialized, or individualized situations or circumstances that are interfering with their social, emotional, or behavioral learning or performance.

  These circumstances may occur in the common areas of a school (which have different social-ecological dynamics than classroom settings).

  These circumstances may involve frequent, persistent, or significantly negative peer interactions like teasing, taunting, bullying, harassment, hazing, or physical/emotional aggression.

  Or, these circumstances may involve specific student, community, or home situations like physical or medical issues, mental health issues, disabilities, racial prejudice or bias, toxic stress or significant trauma, physical or sexual abuse,

poverty or homelessness, or other family issues or events at home.

Regardless of the source, when intense enough, these situations typically require more multi-faceted functional assessments, and more varied multi-tiered social, emotional, or behavioral services, supports, strategies, interventions, or therapies to address different students' needs.

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Why FBAs Do Not Assess the Seven High-Hit Reasons Above

While subtly addressed in the section above, it must be emphasized that the root causes of students' social, emotional, or behavioral challenges must be linked to needed strategic or intensive services, supports, strategies, or interventions (and therapies).

Unfortunately, this does not occur in many schools and districts. . . as they are missing the comprehensive multi-tiered science-to-practice approaches that reflect a 21st century approach to functional assessment, and their strategic and intensive services and supports are extremely limited.

But beyond this, for students with significant challenges, many schools use Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) as the foundation of their root cause analyses—even when the FBA cannot answer the questions directly related to the student concern.

To be more specific, FBAs most often answer the question, "What is the function of this inappropriate behavior for/to the student, what conditions are triggering the behavior, and what contingencies are reinforcing it such that it continues to occur?"

Typically, the most common FBA hypotheses underlying students' inappropriate behavior focus on (a) their need for attention, control, approval, escape, or communication; or (b) their resistance, self-stimulation, noncompliance, and dependence.

The point here is: For an inappropriate behavior to have a "function," there is a presumption that the behavior is motivated or planful. If this is true, then an FBA can only answer questions that confirm a High-Hit #5 Reason for an inappropriate behavior.

Said a different way: If a student's inappropriate behavior is largely self-generated, an FBA does not answer the questions needed to evaluate whether the behavior is occurring due to High-Hit #1, #2, #3, #4, #6, and #7.

As Mark Twain said, "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

Translating: If all a school has or does is an FBA to explain a student's inappropriate behavior, it is likely that the results will point to a motivational reason or function for the behavior. . . even if one does not exist.

In my experience, I have read too many inaccurate FBA reports that have "forced" the data into conclusions about student motivations that either did not exist or did not accurately explain the reasons for a student's inappropriate behavior.

Indeed, let's remember that some student behaviors are due to organic, genetic, physiological, neurological, biochemical, or hormonal conditions or imbalances. And because these conditions are not always visible, some students' inappropriate behaviors look (and may be) random.

At the very least, most biologically-based behaviors do not have an underlying motivational function. I have worked with very few students who want to be impulsive, emotionally reactive, or physiologically out of control.

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When MTSS Professionals Feel "Disrespected"

And now, back to our "disrespected" BCBA.

In the introduction to this piece, I noted that—after my webinar—I received feedback from a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) who felt that I disrespected her and her colleagues by critiquing and contextualizing the FBA process within the Seven High-Hit Reasons for students' challenging behavior.

In retrospect, I believe that she heard me say "BCBA" every time I said "FBA" because, in reality, I mentioned BCBAs only once during the entire hour-long presentation—and the reference was related to the MTSS Team, not to FBAs.

While the Seven High-Hit discussion above might persuade many districts and schools to review, reconsider, and renovate their MTSS Team processes, some MTSS Teams, unfortunately, will not undergo this self-evaluation (at all or effectively) because one or two members overtly, covertly, or unconsciously sabotage the effort.

This often occurs when personal agendas or a lack of professional knowledge or objectivity either (a) diminishes a Team member's openness to new information and learning, or (b) motivates that member to undermine the Team's self-evaluation process.

Robert Glazer, an organizational management expert, discusses this situation as the "Feedback of One."

He states:

> I believe feedback is essential. It is one of the best ways for individuals and organizations to uncover their blind spots, correct their course of action, and take advantage of opportunities to improve. Generally, we don't ask for, or receive, enough direct feedback (https://fridayforward.cmail19.com/t/y-l-ukddjkl-irdjltukdu-y/).

> However, there is one type of feedback that's often better to ignore: "Feedback of One."

> "Feedback of One" is an outlier. When a single person or very small group is dissatisfied, that's often due to their specific needs or wants. That person's singular response may be irrelevant, or even contrary, to what the majority values. And in some cases, that respondent may just have a fundamental disagreement with the individual or organization's core value proposition.

> It's impossible to make everyone happy. Each of us has to decide *who we want* to make happy. Overreacting to a single voice or vocal faction carries as much risk as ignoring feedback, especially when people want to change the exact thing that many other people value.

For me, it is not just about a group consensus. It is about the Six Principles of functional assessment that we discussed earlier in this Blog, and about the need to always advocate for the children and adolescents who we serve.

The best ways to prevent or address the negative effects of the Feedback of One is for the MTSS (or any) Team to periodically:

- Discuss the characteristics of effective group process, member contribution, and group decision-making;
- Allow one or two independent and skilled observers to critically watch and evaluate the interactions during two to five Team meetings;
- Evaluate itself relative to the group characteristics above; and
- Invest the time to listen to the observers and each other so that group process and decision-making strengths can be extended, flaws can be discarded, and weaknesses can be corrected.

At times, some or all of these suggestions may require an outside consultant to facilitate these processes.

Remember: Very few educators have ever been trained in these organizational management, group process, and Feedback of One areas. MTSS Teams often do not know what they do not know. . . they do the best that they can given the skills that they have.

But, critically, a lack of training does not excuse a Team when its processes do not result in effective and successful services, supports, strategies, interventions, and outcomes for all students.

This is especially true for those students who struggle with social, emotional, or behavioral challenges. . . challenges that could be successfully decreased, eliminated, or changed with the right assessments and the right services and supports.

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Summary

I hope that this Blog has provided a comprehensive perspective of the principles and (seven high-hit) practices needed to conduct effective functional assessments for students with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges.

I appreciate the time that you invest in reading these Blogs, and your dedication to your students, your colleagues, and the educational process.

Please feel free to send me your thoughts and questions.

And please know that I continue to work with schools across the country. . . helping them to maximize the effectiveness and outcomes from their multi-tiered systems of support.

I would love to work with your school or district. Feel free to contact me at any time.

Best,

Howie