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Behavioural Assessment of Students with Special Educational Needs

By Nah Yong Hwee

Nah Yong Hwee is Assistant Professor with the Psychology and Child & Human Development Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. Both his research and clinical interests are in the (early) detection of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in young children, as well as ASD across the lifespan.

Behavioural assessment seeks to provide an understanding of why some students with (Special Educational Needs) SEN "misbehaves" in classrooms. This article will examine the characteristics of behavioural assessment as well as the need for such assessment in the planning and evaluation of support strategies.

Teachers who work with students with SEN may often ask and wonder: "Why does my student with SEN behaves in a certain way?" Sometimes, we may even speculate and assume that the student is "intentionally" being naughty or disobedient. However, from a behavioural perspective, it is important to realise that our students are not born with "bad behaviours", and that both adaptive and maladaptive behaviours are learnt.

In order to get a better understanding of behaviour, psychologists and behaviour analysts adopt this A-B-C Behaviour Analysis Framework. A is for "Antecedent" in which we want to know what events had happened prior to the "Behaviour" (as in B) of concern while



C is for "Consequence" which is what had happened after the behaviour was demonstrated (see Figure 1 below).

Understanding the type of antecedents could trigger our that students' challenging behaviours is important as it could help us to be proactive by adopting prevention strategies rather than be reactive by dealing with the behaviours when they already happened. Based on Crimmins, Farrell, Smith and Bailey (2007), some examples of antecedents typically observed in schools include when students were given a specific assignment or type of work to do, when they were told "no" after asking for something, when they encounter

frustration, failure or interruptions on a task (especially during preferred activity), when they need to transit between activities or classes, or when they had to interact with a specific person (teacher, principal or peer).

Understanding the function of the behaviour is also important. When working with students with challenging behaviours, teachers need to ask this question: "What purpose does the behaviour serve?" In general, there are four functions to consider: (1) to gain (social) attention; (2) to gain a tangible reward; (3) to gain sensory stimulations; and (4) to escape. Once we have a better understanding of the function of the (mis)



Figure 1. The A-B-C Behaviour Analysis Framework.

behaviour, we can use certain general principles of behaviour management to help us. For instance, we can use the principle of positive reinforcement where we praise the student's behaviour of raising his/her hands up to give the answer (rather than the behaviour of shouting out the answer) if we understand that the function of his/her behaviour of shouting is to get your attention.

How we determine or make a best guess about the function of the behaviour is by conducting a behavioural assessment through either (1) indirect methods; or (2) direct methods. This next section will focus on the direct method of observation. According to McLoughlin and Lewis (2001), there are 5 steps involved in the process.

Step 1: Describe and define the behaviour to be observed.

It is pertinent to define the target behaviour so that all parties involved are clear when behaviour does or does not occur and to be able to collect data (i.e., measure). For instance, an example of operational definition of tantrum could be defined as "a tantrum will be counted whenever the student pounds on the table or throws objects".

Step 2: Select a measurement system.

If we are doing a direct observation of the student, we could consider using either (1) frequency recording; (2) duration recording; (3) latency recording; or (4) interval recording. Setting up a recording

strategy will help us identify times or activities where behaviour is most and least likely to occur. For instance, we may find that a particular student's aggressive behaviour is most likely to occur between 9.30am and 10am (English lesson), and 11am and 11.30am (Math lesson), in which little choice is given during the lessons or he is expected to work independently.

Step 3: Set up the data-collection system using the following guidelines.

- » When and where will the observation take place? Select times and settings where the behaviour is of greatest concern.
- » How many observation periods? How frequent? If possible, try to observe daily for a minimum of five days or until a complete picture of the behaviour has emerged.
- » Who will act as the observer? A teacher will be less disruptive to the classroom but may be limited by his/her classroom responsibilities.
- » How will observational data be recorded? Paper and pencil, audio or video recording? Prepare data collection sheets and interval tape or vibrating watch.

Step 4: Select a data-reporting system.

We can present results in a visual format such as a graph or chart. This visual presentation can help to compare performance or progress across different phases, facilitates decision-making, and it is also an easier format to present to parents than using statistical terms such as means, standard deviation, mode, etc.

Step 5: Carry out the observations.

The behavioural assessment process may seem tedious and time-consuming. However, once we have such assessment data, it will help us in the planning and evaluation of support strategies for our students with SEN. It is important that our practices are guided and supported by evidence (i.e., data that we have collected).

References

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