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NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: ABA OPPORTUNITY OR GUILT BY ASSOCIATION?

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The roots of today's No Child Left Behind are at least as old as the Great Depression of the 1930's. During those challenging times, when nearly one quarter of the work force were without employment, the government developed a Social Security system. That system was to assure that all citizens could count on a minimum of financial support to pay for the necessities of life. Unfortunately, Social Security did not solve all the problems of achieving universal health, education, and welfare. In the 1950's the nation was shocked by the exposing of the plight of rural citizens in the documentaries "Harvest of Shame" (showing the conditions of migrant farm workers and their families) and "Appalachian Spring" (showing the conditions of coal miners and their families). It was clear that much remained to be done to raise the standard of living for many of our citizens to an acceptable level.

These events prompted the government to develop a war on poverty in the 1960's that added health and education initiatives to the welfare support of the Social Security system. Notable among these initiatives was the attempt through Head Start to assure that all disadvantaged children received the health screenings and early experiences that prepared them for learning. The initial results were quite promising showing that Head Start participants were better prepared than their non-participant peers. However, after six months of schooling the difference had disappeared. This result prompted the government to sponsor Project Follow Through during the late 1960's and early 1970's to determine best practices for maintaining the gains of Head Start through the third grade by which time it was assumed that the positive impact could be sustained without additional assistance.

The results of Project Follow Through (Stebbins, St. Pierre, Proper, Anderson, & Cerva, 1977) were promising with two or three models showing substantial gains for their students bringing them to or near the median performance levels of the general population of students. This largest ever educational research and development effort established evidence-base practices that allowed virtually all students to make substantial learning gains each year. It didn't matter how intellectually skilled they were to begin with, students all made roughly the same substantial gains each year with the only difference being where they started. Thus, there are effective curricula and instructional practices for all students regardless of initial skill levels.

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In the 1980's and early 1990's a comprehensive study of the early language experience of very young children was completed to document what may account for differences among children in their preparation to benefit from preschool experience (Hart & Risley, 1995). The results of this study indicated that the differences among children were indeed meaningful. Children from homes with minimum language experience were millions of language experiences behind those from homes providing the maximum language experiences. Thus, the magnitude of the differences in language experience is quite substantial. Early language experience is a strong predictor of later learning achievement (Hart & Risley, 1992, 1995).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB: <http://www.ed.gov/nclb>) integrates all of these results and many others to provide incentives for educators to use evidence-based practices to assure adequate yearly progress for all students. No Child Left Behind has been informed by the research and development efforts of many who have utilized applied behavior analysis practices to demonstrate that this can be accomplished. The regulations promulgated to implement the Act have been frustrating educators for good reasons. As applied behavior analysts we have the tools to be of assistance in removing the frustrations and facilitating the attainment of the goals established by the Act. If we act effectively to provide such assistance we can deliver on the promise of applied behavior analysis that attracted so many of us to the field. If we miss this opportunity to be part of the solution we are likely to be seen as guilty of creating the problems of NCLB by our association with the development and implementation of the Act. This paper suggests ways for us to be of great service to educators and our society at large. If we succeed applied behavior analysis can become a significant part of the mainstream of American Education.

The No Child Left Behind Act claims that it focuses on what works, reduces bureaucracy, increases flexibility, increases accountability for student performance, empowers parents, and closes the achievement gap for disadvantaged students (<http://www.ed.gov/nclb>). Who could be opposed to such goals? Why all the frustration being expressed by educators and others? Is it not desirable to operate in an environment where such goals are being pursued? The answers to these and other questions related to the implementation of NCLB can be found in the constitutional separation between the authority to create the legislation and the authority to implement it.

The United States Constitution reserves the authority over anything not specifically mentioned in it for the states. Education is not mentioned in the United States Constitution and therefore the authority over education is reserved for the states. Thus the department of education in each state oversees the implementation of NCLB. This oversight has resulted in the promulgation of procedures for implementation of NCLB that have created opposition to the Act. Such procedures as requiring almost all special education students to be assessed using the same assessment as general education students, requiring students near the top of the achievement scale to make the same proportional progress each year as all other students, and prescribing the use of only certain approved curricula create an environment filled with frustration and aversive practices.

Applied behavior analysts have the opportunity to relieve the frustration and transform the aversive practices into reinforcing ones. The requirement for using only evidence-based practices in the education of our children challenges behavior analysts to translate applied behavior analysis research into practices that are feasible and likely to be successful during everyday implementation (Vollmer, 2006). Much of that research is understandable upon reading it yet difficult to implement skillfully without coaching by someone experienced in ongoing functional behavior assessment practices. Functional behavior assessment practices are filled with nuances that are not readily apparent from the applied literature. For example, novice practitioners do not often consider the impact of schedules of reinforcement or deprivation and satiation on the usual arrangements. These principles are also understandable as presented in the literature and yet difficult to apply when caught up in the dynamics of the classroom environment. To the degree that we can make conspicuous the ongoing shifts in contingencies is the degree to which we may be able to coach educators to see patterns that will allow them to arrange and rearrange the parts of their instructional conditions to create contingencies that will strengthen desirable and weaken undesirable repertoires (Hursh & Tucci, 2005). The work of Tucci and her colleagues illustrates one promising way of doing this by providing a course of study that coaches educators in utilizing an Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence means of tracking learners' behavior so that patterns of contingencies can be seen as they emerge from such data (Tucci, Hursh, & Laitinen, 2004).

Evidence-based practices can also be developed in the day-to-day operation of a classroom. Teachers can track the impact of whatever practice they implement and keep that evidence to guide their subsequent practices. Behavior analysts have been trained to develop, deliver, and monitor educational programming that is driven by the results it produces with students. Collaborative consultation with the moment-to-moment coaching it entails can assist educators to create their own evidence-based practices. What better way to serve educators than to solve problems in tandem with them? Behavior analysts are at their best when being influenced by the contingencies of the situation they have been asked to study with the educator. The synergy created by such collaboration builds momentum for the practices that work and discriminate for all involved what doesn't work. The behavior analyst's measurement expertise can also be put to good use to make it easy for teachers to see the impact of what they do and make needed adjustments. Such evidence is the best basis for any practice.

The Adequate Yearly Progress requirement for all students under NCLB is to be assessed by criterion-referenced tests designed to assess rigorous content standards and objectives (CSOs) that have been developed by each state. Behavior analysis has developed based on criterion-referenced measurement of objectively defined behavior. Applied behavior analysts have developed the skills needed to assure the reliability and validity of measuring behavior that is functional in everyday situations. These skills can and have been put to use assisting educators with the challenges of developing competent learners (Tucci, Hursh, Laitinen, & Lambe, 2005). Applied behavior analysts are prepared to translate CSOs into everyday behavior in the classroom and collaboratively design feasible means for educators to formulate, delivery, and monitor their practices.

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This allows educators to have almost continuous data on the impact of their practices as a basis for arranging and rearranging the parts of their instructional conditions.

All of the resources applied behavior analysts bring to the classroom can be integrated into teacher training programs and transferred to classroom practices by identifying, coaching, and maintaining those practices. Teachers who are credentialed by such a training program will indeed be highly qualified to employ evidenced-based practices to assure adequate yearly progress for all students. Applied behavior analysts can provide assistance for teachers to engage in ongoing action research to assure this outcome. Behavior analysts can help to design direct and frequent measurement systems and coach teachers on contingency management in the classroom. All of this must be done while relying on the teachers' expertise born of experience with students everyday in their classroom. The details of the practices developed depend on that expertise. Collaboration can assure the best possible outcomes for the students and teachers while allowing the behavior analyst to become a member of the instructional team that serves the classroom and school (Tucci, Hursh, Laitinen, & Lambe, 2005).

Applied behavior analysis has been defined by addressing socially significant behavior in ways that demonstrate clearly the functional connections between interventions and desired outcomes (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968, 1987). Doing this in ways that are feasible and sustainable for educators in the absence of the behavior analyst is the ultimate goal. For this to happen requires that whatever we do provide some immediate relief from the problems challenging the educator on a daily basis. By acknowledging educators' legitimate concerns regarding NCLB's implementation and collaboratively consulting with them in the classroom on an ongoing basis we can achieve the goal of evidence-based practices and adequate yearly progress for all educators and students.

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