INFUSING CHOICE THEORY INTO FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOURAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract:

Children with behavioural challenges present clear questions to teachers, classrooms, and schools striving to create inclusive classroom environments for all students. Many of the common modalities used to support students with behavioural challenges involve some form of Functional Behavioural Assessment (FBA) to assist school personnel in identifying the externalizing mediators of behaviour; however, FBA approaches do not necessarily consider internalized motivators of behaviour. This paper explores the use of a Choice Theory informed FBA (CT-FBA) in creating program plans for students who display challenging behaviours. The CT-FBA was developed through a team effort of psychologists, consultants, behavioural coaches, and administrators to improve the FBA, moving it towards a more strength-based, student-centric process. This paper reviews how the CT-FBA is conducted and provides a template for others to use this process to improve student behaviour intervention plans using Choice Theory.

Children who exhibit emotional or behavioural difficulties present challenges to schools and classrooms. Their behaviours can be disruptive to the learning of the individual child, the students in the child's classroom, and in some cases, to the school and community at large. Among teachers and school psychologists, there is a significant interest in knowing what to do to support children with challenging behaviours. Common approaches to manage student behaviour have largely been informed by behavioural-analytic psychology (e.g., functional behavioural analysis, rewards and consequence-based programs) or cognitive psychology (e.g., cognitive-behavioural therapy).

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) is a process by which behavior is assessed, hypotheses are made, baseline data collected, interventions are provided, intervention data is collected, and plans are revised based on the outcomes (Moreno et al., 2014; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2010). Traditional FBA is based on behaviorist theory that posits that behavior can be controlled through operant or classical conditioning of antecedent or consequential events (e.g., reward and/or punishment, reducing aversive stimuli by associating something more pleasurable). The theory behind FBA is that behavior serves a function, either to meet a sensory, escape, attention, or tangible desire (Durand & Crimmins, 1988). FBA was developed primarily for use with individuals with intellectual or developmental difficulties, however, it is increasingly being used in cases of students with disruptive behaviors in classroom settings (Lloyd & Kennedy, 2014).

FBA strategies have demonstrated strong empirical support across multiple settings and student populations. Gage and colleagues (2012) found in their review of 69 FBA studies that FBA based interventions reduced problem behaviour by an average of 70.5%. This was further confirmed by Goh & Bambara (2012) who found similar effectiveness in the use of FBA across diverse student populations and settings, including general education classrooms. They further found that team-based, positive behaviour supports were more effective than FBA on its own. Some researchers (Hurl et al., 2016) report that FBA is approximately four times more likely to increase appropriate behaviour, and that non-FBA approaches are less effective in changing problematic behaviour. There is however, a controversy regarding the procedures involved in the FBA process (Losinski et al., 2014).

These authors reported that the ways that these assessments and determinations are made are not consistent in the literature. While FBA seems to be a promising practice, further work is needed to establish a consistent process across practitioners and researchers to determine most effective implementation practices.

The benefits of FBA are that they are specific and tailored to each individual student. The assessment process includes perspectives from all people who work with the child; hypotheses and interventions are data driven so effectiveness can readily be assessed; and as an evergreen process, something that can be continued if it proven effective, otherwise a new hypothesis testing procedure can be implemented, and programming can be modified. It is also important to note that the interventions selected often change the environment for the student, rather than the forcing the child to comply, as such, students just do better.

A drawback to FBA is that it is very labour intensive. The assessment process can be long, and tedious. Furthermore, the hypothesis testing process can be challenging, as the inappropriate behaviour needs to be observed for several events, and inter-rater reliability of data collection can be inconsistent. In some instances, additional staffing is required to support both data collection and the implementation phases of the process. Although FBA is an evidence-based intervention, its lengthy process is not efficient to get at root causes of behaviour.

Choice Theory

Reality Therapy/Choice Theory (RT/CT) is a therapeutic approach which focuses on goal-directed behaviour and has had many applications to encourage children to become active learners in their school environments. RT/CT was developed by Dr. William Glasser, M.D., who advocated against mainstream treatments of psychiatric disorders at the time, namely, behaviourist or pharmacological approaches in exclusivity. As stated by one of his clinical colleagues, "Reality therapy is a system for mental health, not simply a method to remediate mental disturbance" (Wubbolding, 2015, p. 203). Thus, RT/CT seeks to provide a framework for overall mental health and wellbeing. RT/CT has been used in multiple contexts, including couples counselling, group therapy, individual therapy, Quality Schools, business management, and the like (Glasser, 1998). It has also been used internationally and cross-culturally, but have had specific groundings in North America, Korea, Malaysia, Europe, and the Philippines (Wubbolding, 2015).

Quality World

Glasser's (1998) model describes how individuals navigate the world, and references two worldview constructs. The first being the Perceived World which consists of everything an individual knows or has had experience of. Individuals can each have different perceived worlds based on their life experiences and opportunities for learning. Further, the Perceived World only filters in things that are understood, or things that are valued (i.e., the knowledge filter and the valuing filter). A subset within the Perceived World is the Quality World. Within the Quality World are the pictures or items of the Perceived World that are expected, valued, and needed, and are in a large part informed by one's basic needs. If one's Quality World and reality are congruent, individuals are generally content. If one's Quality World and reality are incongruent, this can signal frustration and causes the system to behave. A foundational theory to Reality Therapy, is that change occurs as a result of frustration in a person's life (Cockrum, 1989), that is, reality not meeting one's expectations. This creates a signal to act in such a way that one's needs or desires can be met.

Basic Needs

A core theoretical tenant to RT/CT is the concept of five basic needs (Glasser, 1998). Our basic needs are genetically encoded, and while theorized in the 1970s, have been affirmed by current neuroscience (Wubbolding, 2015; Glasser, 1998). The first need is primal, and somewhat supersedes the others, and is Survival. Survival includes the need for food, shelter, and security in the immediate environment. The other four needs are not hierarchical and consist of: Love & Belonging (the need to be part of a community and have quality relationships in one's life); Fun (the need to take part in activities, hobbies, or learnings that one enjoys); Freedom (the freedom to do what one chooses to do and/or the freedom from imposed restrictions); and Power (the experience of achievement, recognition, and esteem). Our behaviour and our world view is shaped by our needs, which are individual to the person. Glasser, in several interviews (see Brandt, 1988; Cockrum, 1989; Glasser, 1997, 2000) would indicate that the need for Love & Belonging is often neglected in schools, in favour of coercive strategies which place undue limits on children in schools.

Organized and Organizing Behaviours

Total Behaviour, as described by Glasser (1998), is the culmination of a person's actions, thoughts, feelings, and body physiology in response to a need to behave. Behaviour is needs-oriented, and goal driven. When behaviours result in a basic need being met, they are reinforced, and often repeated. When behaviours are not need-satisfying they are often reorganized and attempted differently. Thus, when an individual displays a behaviour that is consistent and chronic (a habit) it is because on some level it is need-satisfying, whether or not it is a positive or negative behaviour. Children and students are often in a phase of practicing organized behaviours and organizing new behaviours in order to have their needs met. Teaching teams can use this framework to understand behaviours they are observing in their classroom settings.

Development of the CT-FBA.

The CT-FBA was borne from my experience as a school psychologist with a rural school division in Saskatchewan, Canada. I was named to the Behaviour Intervention Team, and we were tasked to set up supports for students who were at-risk for exclusion from regular classroom settings due to behaviour. My training as a psychologist was largely informed by behaviourist approaches, including FBA. One of the issues that I observed as a clinician was that for every child that I worked with, there were several adults who were in some way part of the behavioural issue that I was witnessing. We would gather the adults, and we would discuss the problematic behaviour that the child was exhibiting, and how this behaviour was impacting the teacher, the classroom, other children, and the school community. We would rarely talk about the adults' behaviour, and how these behavioural patterns were impacting the child themselves, and their relationships with their teacher, their classroom, their peers, or themselves as a learner. While as a team we were willing to hold the child accountable for their behaviour, we seemed to not hold the adults to the same level of accountability.

I began to explore the ideas of CT/RT and began to think about shifting the work of our behavioural team away from externalizing psychology (i.e., rewards and punishments) towards processes that included student needs, skills, and choices as it related to their behaviour. There is a role for schools to teach children appropriate behaviours to get their needs met in the school, but we have to use motivational mechanisms that meet our

student's needs more than our own. I also had to use a system that could get buy-in from the adults, who are desperately seeking a solution to the behavioural challenges they are witnessing. Thus, I combined the elements CT/RT with the FBA process.

CT-FBA Process

The CT-FBA is a meeting of relevant stakeholders used to systemically review behavioural data from a student who is displaying challenging behaviours in the school environment. The purpose of the meeting is not to apply externalized control on the student but rather to accomplish two goals: (1) create a need satisfying environment for the student; and (2) identifying skills and behaviours that the child needs to learn. With this information the teaching team creates a plan to create a positive learning environment for the student, and clear direction for teaching skills to assist children in attaining their quality world pieces. The following section will review how the meeting is planned, and how the CT-FBA form is used to guide the team towards a clear plan to support the student.

There are a couple of logistics to consider when setting up this meeting. First, is to identify who the team, and who should be invited to this meeting. Depending on the context, it can involve small teams (e.g., parents, teacher, student), or large teams (e.g., school planning teams, consultants, and administrators). The chair of the meeting should ideally have certification and experience with RT/CT, and if not, a working knowledge of the principles. This form can be reproduced so everyone has a copy, or it can be projected on a computer screen so that everyone can see the work coming together. The meeting will take about 90 minutes, and their may be some questions that cannot be answered by the team present, so a follow up meeting to complete the work and refine the program plan may be necessary. The student may or may not be involved in this plan, given the child's age and capacity. It should be noted that this program planning process is ultimately to change the behaviour of the teachers, parents, and others who are involved in working with the student rather than the student's behaviour directly. Thus, input from the student is very important, however, this may occur outside of the meeting context.

At the onset of the meeting, I review the following tenants of the CT-FBA:

> *There are a few guiding principles that will guide our discussions today. They include:*
>
> - *Teachers have a greater influence on the learning environment, rather than on the student*
> - *Students require predictability, relationships, and safety*
> - *Behaviour is learned, therefore, it can be unlearned*
>
> *From a Choice Theory Perspective further, we understand that students will work hard for teachers that:*
>
> - *The student cares about and who care about them (Love & Belonging)*
> - *The student respects and who respect them (Power)*
> - *Allow the student to think for themselves and provide with choices (Freedom)*
> - *Allow for laughter and fun. (Fun)*
> - *Provide conditions for physical and emotional security (Survival).*

The following section reviews the meeting agenda, and the data points that need to be collected in order to develop the program plan. A sample form is provided in Appendix A that can be reproduced for readers and their purposes.

1. **Identification of the student**

This section reviews the essential data about the student. It includes the students name, date of birth and school. It also identifies classroom teachers that work with the student during the school day. The parents/guardians are also identified as important members of the student's team. A meeting schedule is determined for the initial meeting, and a follow up meeting. An individual is identified as being the chair of the team, ideally this should be an individual who can make sure that all perspectives are being represented during the CT-FBA, and that the basic tenants of choice theory are being privileged. For this reason, it's ideal that the chair be certified and experienced in RT/CT.

2. **Identification of the planning team**

The planning team members can include teachers, administrators, student support specialists (e.g., counsellors, psychologists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, consultants), educational assistants. It can also include the parents as collaborative team members. In my experience, I have had the parents and school team meet jointly at times, and separately at other times. It is important that the chair be a neutral and encouraging to both parents and the school, particularly in cases where a student's behaviour is challenging to the home and/or school environment. At this point in the meeting, it is helpful to go around the table, having all members introduce themselves and their role working with the child. At times, the team members do not know how everyone that may be involved with the child's academic day.

It is important to note, that the point of a CT-FBA is to get all the adults on the same page when it comes to a child's behaviour. The point is not to exert external control on the child's behaviour. As such, the process that the team will follow is to build insight into the adult's influence on the learning environment and support the creation of a quality school environment where both the teacher and the student can have their needs and expectations met. Thus, it is important that the team be a safe and encouraging space, utilizing the seven connecting habits (i.e., supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences).

3. **Identification of student strengths**

It is important at the onset of the meeting that the first discussion of the child will be on the student's strengths. I have used the *Circle of Courage* philosophy (Brendtro et al., 2006) to assist the team to identify strengths across belonging (i.e., social functioning); mastery (i.e., talents); independence (i.e., able to make choices, solve problems, make decisions); and generosity (i.e., giving of oneself to others). At times this may be a challenging part of the meeting; however, it is essential to assist the team in getting a broad view of the child. Through identifying children's strengths, we also identify the adaptive skills they have already acquired and use this as a basis to scaffold the skills that still need to be acquired.

4. **Identification of student challenges**

Next, the team identifies the student behaviours that are a challenge in the school environment. The chair must be very diligent to assure that this discussion does not overtake the meeting. Often, I will introduce this section to say, *"What is the most challenging behaviour that we want to address today*? *Keep in mind, we will not be able to solve all of the problems today, but we can likely work on one or two. What is the problem we wish to address today in this meeting."*

Once everyone has shared and come to an agreement, the behaviour of focus is identified. Other issues may be identified, but these will need to be discussed at a future meeting. It is important to describe the behaviour in specific, observable terms (e.g., *leaving the classroom during instruction* vs. *storming out when frustrated*).

5. Review of collected data about student behaviour

At this point the team reviews any behavioural data that has been collected, specific to the identified behaviour for this meeting. There may be anecdotal records, observation checklists, office referrals, discipline records, or ABC charts (antecedent, behaviour, consequence). If none of these items are available, the BOATS resource provides two useful checklists to help identify potential functions for the behaviour, including the FAST, and the PBQ. Common outcomes from this review can be sensory (e.g., a response to external environment of light sound or texture or internal physiology, including fatigue, hunger, pain), escape (e.g., from peers, teachers, less preferred tasks), attention (e.g., from peers, teacher, parents), and tangibles (e.g., to acquire an item). This information can be useful in the behavioural analysis.

6. Review of student's quality world

This question shifts the perspective away from the student behaviour, towards the student perspective. This question may be asked of the student ahead of the meeting, or it can be reflected by the participants who know the student well. If this is a difficult question for the team to answer, I will ask prompting questions like:

- When during the school day is the student at their best?
- When does the student seem happiest or most content?
- If you were to ask the student, what would you imagine they would say the best part of their school day is?
- What do you think the child's expectations are when they come to school?

The purpose of this section is to find the environment where the student can do well and use this information to help the team create a learning environment that can meet the child's quality world pictures.

7. Review of student needs

In this section, the team reviews each of the five basic needs (i.e., Survival, Love & Belonging, Fun, Freedom, and Power), and identifies if the child's needs are being met, both on a holistic level, and also in the school. Often, if team members are not aware of the five basic needs, this needs to be reviewed. If the need is being met, the team moves on to the next need. If the need is not being met, the team is asked what organized behaviours does the child demonstrate to meet that need. This question may link directly to the problematic behaviours that are under discussion, or they may identify other behaviours that the child exhibits. Most often, the team starts to make connections between the behaviours the child is displaying to the goals the child is training to attain. Most often, this results in a sense of empathy and understanding towards the child. Finally, the team identifies other behaviours the child may need to learn in order to meet a specific need.

8. Choice-Theory informed Functional Behavioural Analysis

At this point in the meeting, the team returns to the original behaviour, and begins to analyze it across three components. First, they review the antecedents (i.e., the environment where the behaviour is most likely to occur). This could be a time of day, a location, during a particular activity or task, or in a particular social interaction. Next, the team reviews the outcomes from the behaviour from an SEAT perspective (sensory, escape, attention, or tangible). Finally, they identify which need is being met by the behaviour (e.g., Survival, Love & Belonging, Fun, Freedom, and Power). This information will be used subsequently to create the Behaviour Program Plan.

9. Behaviour Program Plan

The behaviour program plan is developed by the team, either at the meeting, or by members taking the information, reflecting on it, and returning back to the team with directions to move forward. A hypothesis can use the following sentence stem: "Student will display (Behaviour) when (Antecedent) in order to (Consequence) and meet their need for (Need)." Once the sentence stem is complete, the team can then consider three types of changes that can be made to the student's environment. These interventions can be proactive (e.g., occur before the behaviour occurs); responsive (e.g., what are the adults going to do in response to the behaviour); and positive program supports (e.g., what structured skill-based teaching will need to occur). Again, the focus of the team is not to punish or reward behaviour, but rather to change the learning environment and instructional practices to assisting the child to learn pro-social organized behaviours to have their needs met.

10.Setting roles and responsibilities

Each of the team members who participate in the meeting should identify their role and responsibilities as it relates to the behaviour program plan. It is important to specifically address issues of communication between the student, teacher, school team, and parents. There may also be specific commitments that each team member takes on. Establishing these roles is vital for the plan to be a success for all.

11.Continued follow up

While the participation in the meeting can instigate a significant change alone through a change of perspective, it is also important that the team who is part of creating this plan review it on a regular schedule. I recommend follow up meetings biweekly when the plan is getting started to work out any details, and increasing the interval as needed.

Benefits of the CT-FBA

In my experience, team members and students have demonstrated a high interest in participating in the CT-FBA process. The structure of the conversation allows for an expression of their concerns as it relates to the student's behaviour, but further allows for a new insight as to why the behaviour is occurring, and what they as teachers can do to support the student. Overall, I have observed a shift among planning team members moving away from disconnecting behaviours as they relate to the student (e.g., criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, or rewarding to control), moving towards connecting behaviours (e.g., supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences) (Glasser, 2013). It is important to recognize that the purpose of the CT-FBA is intended to change the behaviours of the teaching team in support of the student who needs to learn new organizing behaviours to have their needs

met. This process results in an exploration of RT/CT principals, greater self-reflection on the part of the teaching team, and allows for a reconsideration and reframing of the student's behaviour.

To illustrate how the CT-FBA can result in behavioural change for teachers and students, I'll provide an example from my work. In this case, my student would often disengage from classroom activities and would actively distract their peers. When their peers would disengage, my student would hit, push, or call the peer a name. When the teacher was called to the situation, the student would fairly easily redirect to the task, but once the teacher's attention moved to someone else, the student would again attempt to bother another student.

Following a traditional FBA, the hypothesis for the behaviour would be that "The student engages in hitting, pushing, and name calling when working on independent classroom tasks in order to gain attention from their peers." A result of this hypothesis could result in the following programming recommendations:

- Provision of a token system to reward child for working independently
- Removal of child from the classroom during independent work tasks (e.g., the hallway)
- Increased consequence for misbehaviour in this environment
- A review of expected behaviours daily

Following a CT-FBA, a deeper analysis would determine that the student has unmet needs for love and belonging and is continuously looking for approval from peers and teachers. Thus, the hypothesis for the behaviour might be that "The student engages in hitting, pushing, and name calling when working on independent classroom tasks to gain attention from their peers in order to meet their need for love and belonging." A result of this hypothesis could result in the following programming recommendations:

- Increased time with teachers and peers throughout the day to model appropriate social skills
- Negotiated and consistent times for cooperative learning
- Review of academic activities and choices during independent work times
- Rewards system to include need satisfying items (e.g., additional peer time after completed work)

Future Work

The development of the CT-FBA has come out of five years of professional practice and embedding its use within one school district. Further evaluation of this measure is indicated by independent practitioners. Further studies reviewing the application of the CT-FBA are planned, and any readers who are interested in using this tool are invited to contact the author to share their feedback and experiences.

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APPENDIX A: CT-FBA Meeting Form

Choice Theory – Functional Behavioural Assessment (CT-FBA) Form

Student: _____ DOB: _____ Grade: _____
School: _____ Teacher(s) _____
Parent/Guardian: _____
Planning Meeting Date: _____ Next Meeting Date: _____
Meeting Chaired By: _____

Planners (Names & Positions of people involved in collecting data and developing this plan):

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Strengths of the Student:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Behaviours of concern? Prioritize the behaviours of most concern:

1) _____
2) _____
3) _____

FBA data collected by the school team:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

From a Choice Theory/Control Theory perspective, identify the student's Quality World Pictures (what would the child want in an ideal school environment):

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Needs:

Questions	*Is this need being met?*	*What organized (consistent, habitual) behaviours does the child demonstrate that are need satisfying?*	*What behaviours does the child need to learn how to do?*
Survival			
Love & Belonging			
Fun			
Freedom			
Power			

Functional Behavioural Analysis

Behaviour	Setting Events where/when behaviour is most likely to occur (Antecedents)	Outcomes (Consequences – SEAT, sensory, escape, attention, tangible)	Satisfied Need (Survival, Love & Belonging, Freedom, Fun, Power)

Beahviour Behaviour Plan

Hypothesis	Proactive (Preventative)	Responsive (Reactive – Consequence)	Positive Program Supports

Roles & Responsibilities:

Teacher		**SS Coordinator**	
Admin		**Psychologist**	
EA		**Counsellor**	
Parent		**SST**	
Other		**Outside Agency**	

Brief Bio –

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