BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES REVISITED: WHY PROFESSIONALS NEED TO USE THEM

By

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses why teachers, clinicians, consultants, and psychologists prepare behavioral objectives when they work with individuals and groups. The reasons include planning instruction and intervention to meet state standards and guidelines, evaluating the outcomes of instruction, data collection for research purposes, and reporting results to stakeholders. Additionally, the authors discuss the components of sound behavioral objectives for multiple purposes.

Keywords: Behavioral objectives, Accountability, Planning curriculum, Curriculum-based measures.

INTRODUCTION

Liz Felder, a dedicated third grade teacher, spent the last hour of her day preparing her lessons for the following week. Her school's principal requires teachers in her elementary school to submit their lesson plans for review prior to Monday morning, and Ms. Felder believes this responsibility is a strong indicator of the commitment she has made to be the best teacher she can be. After reviewing the state standards she has been addressing all year and selecting specific guidelines that match her school district's textbook selections, Liz began organizing her reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies lessons. Included in her lesson planning are specific objectives that will assist in accomplishing her curriculum goals, just as all teachers do when they develop instructional plans. Because she wanted her children's learning to be observable and measurable, she chose to write behavioral objectives (Warner & Sower, 2005). This example has been provided so that the reader will have a frame of reference for the concepts that will be discussed in this article.

What is a Behavioral Objective?

A sound behavioral objective consists of a target skill or measurable behavior that is written in objective terms, a reference to the conditions under which the behavior is performed, and the criteria for acceptable performance. Behavioral objectives are said to have "good form" when they meet all three of these indicators (Warner, Lynch, Nabors, & Simpson, 2007). For example, if

an educator expects a child to be prepared for class, he or she might write an objective stating, "The student will bring pencil, paper, and textbook to class 5/5 consecutive days" rather than "The student will be prepared for class." This objective clearly states what the student is expected to do, since being prepared for class could mean any number of things to different people.

All too frequently state standards for academic performance consist of a set of vague, non-measurable indicators (Lynch & Adams, 2008). For use in a child's individual education program, these standards must be translated into objectives that are observable and measurable. One example is the skill in a state standard, "responds constructively to other's writing." Since "responding constructively" is not clearly measurable or observable, this skill can be translated into a behavioral objective by stating, "After reading a one-page paper written by a peer, the student will state one positive characteristic of the paper and one way the paper can be improved, 4/5 consecutive opportunities." In this case, the condition for the behavioral objective would be, "After reading a one-page paper" and the behavior would be, "the student will state one positive characteristic of the paper and one way the paper can be improved."

The next step in the process is to determine the criterion for acceptable performance. Sometimes this is stated as a percentage of accuracy; other times it can be stated as a proportion. For the objective above, acceptable performance would consist of a proportion such as "4/5 consecutive opportunities." Objectives that use a

percentage of accuracy are typically academic skills or skills that can be performed in massed trials. A proportion better evaluates skills that occur less frequently and cannot be effectively practiced in massed trials.

When considering the criterion for acceptable performance one should examine the environment where the skill will be used and the degree of mastery that will be needed in order for the skill to be functional (Lynch & Adams, 2008). With academic skills, an acceptable criterion is typically between 80% to 95% accuracy. Although a passing grade is usually 70%, this level is considered minimal and is not an acceptable level for mastery. For self-help skills such as crossing the street or toilet training, the criterion performance should be 100% accuracy or 10/10 consecutive opportunities. One would not want to cross the street with only 90% accuracy and be hit by a car only 10% of the time.

Reasons for Using Behavioral Objectives

Professionals who work diligently to demonstrate their accountability to stakeholders establish goals and objectives to maximize the work they do with students and clients. Consultants, clinicians, psychologists, and teachers alike observe their clientele to determine if progress is occurring as a consequence of their efforts. In Ms. Felder's case, this third grade teacher wants to show her principal that learning is occurring in her classroom. Instructors in general need to demonstrate effectiveness to their stakeholders who monitor their efficacy in meeting their goals. In the long run, though, she will also be meeting the needs of parents, her district's school board, and agencies governing the state's educational system. Other professionals find that behavioral objectives assist them in their abilities to collect data about their clients and plan essential interventions. Research efforts by all professionals are improved when objectives are clearly defined and outcomes are quantified for research reports, abstracts, and monographs. Psychologists need accountability measures to meet the insurance company requirements for reimbursement of fees.

Accountability in classrooms has become a critical issue for legislators as they grapple with expenditure of state tax dollars within their respective states. Accountability is addressed when student learning is evaluated each year through competency exams. As a consequence,

1. State agencies decide which school districts need intervention to improve predetermined learning outcomes; and

2. District and campus administrators conclude that individual teachers might need instructional leadership to improve their classroom performance.

Teachers who teach children who have special needs also work to achieve preset instructional needs of individualized education programs (IEPs) defined for their students.

Using Behavioral Objectives in the Lesson Cycle

For classroom teachers, the primary reason for using specific objectives is to ensure that instructional planning is on target for meeting state guidelines and standards, as well as to document that students are learning. Planning for each lesson involves decisions about the behavioral objectives for the lesson, the focus (how to capture students' attention for the lesson), the body of the lesson (what instruction will occur during the lesson), review of lesson material, and how the lesson will be evaluated. Behavioral objectives become the foundation for quality teaching as teachers evaluate whether students are acquiring the concepts they are presenting, both during the lesson and as a consequence of the lesson. Informal and formal evaluation strategies demand that educators re-teach content, if necessary, and plan for future lessons in order for children to build on previous learning.

For example, a teacher who is focusing on the topic of dairy farming in social studies instruction might select these behavioral objectives for various lessons throughout the week:

- Students will be able to list five tasks dairy farmers perform daily with 80% accuracy.
- Students will be able to draw a diagram showing how a milking machine works using five essential features.
- Students will be able to name five dairy products with 100% accuracy.

- Students will be able to describe how milk is processed for delivery to their homes using six essential steps.

- Students will be able to write a four-paragraph report about dairy farming using complete sentences with 95% accuracy.

Each of these objectives is measurable, and teachers will be able to assess easily whether children have acquired the basic knowledge presented during the unit of study.

Teaching Students with Disabilities

Behavioral objectives often are used in educational and therapeutic settings for students with disabilities. Although the content of the objectives will vary significantly, the process for writing them is the same. Before writing the objective for an individual student, the interventionist must determine what the child needs to learn. This is done through either a formal or informal assessment process. Informal assessment might consist of conducting behavioral observations, examining work samples, or using a behavioral or academic checklist. Formal assessment can be conducted with criterion-referenced tests or curriculum-based measures. Some criterion-referenced tests that are widely used for children with disabilities include the Brigance Inventories and the Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills-Revised (ABLLS) (Sundburg and Partington, 2007). After administering one of these tests, the interventionist can then determine what skills the child can perform and what skills can be addressed in behavioral objectives in the child's individual educational program. For example, if the interventionist administers the ABLLS to a preschooler with autism and learns that the student is not able to imitate motor actions, he or she can write behavioral objectives for motor imitation: "the child will imitate actions with objects, 10/10 consecutive trials;" "the child will imitate actions within his repertoire, 10/10 consecutive trials."

Examples of Behavioral Objectives

Curriculum-based measures are frequently used at the primary level to address reading, written expression, spelling, and mathematics. When using curriculum-based measures for determining objectives, one first obtains a baseline measure such as correct words per minute (CWPM) for oral reading fluency. Using established norms for predicted weekly gains, the interventionist sets an aimline connecting the baseline measure to the predicted goal after a specified number of weeks of instruction (Hosp & Hosp, 2003). For example, if a beginning reader has a reading fluency score of 24 CWPM and the average weekly gain is 1.5 CMPM, then the goal for the child would be 33 CWPM after six weeks of instruction. To obtain this goal, the number of weeks '6' was multiplied by the average weekly gain of 1.5, with the result of 9 CWPM. This number '9' was added to the baseline measure (24 CWPM) to set the goal at 33 CWPM. The behavioral objective for this child would be, "When reading grade-level material orally, the student will read at a rate of 33 CWPM after 6 weeks of instruction."

Checklists and informal measures provide qualitative and quantitative data on a child's behavior and performance. For example, a teacher might be concerned about an adolescent's social behavior in the hallway. When assessing the student by observing him in the hall, the instructor notes that the student pushes others, dawdles when talking to peers in the hall, and is late to class. After designing an intervention to teach appropriate hallway behavior and reinforcing punctuality, one would expect improved behavior. To document improvement, behavioral objectives should be developed to establish these goals (Etscheidt, 2006). The behavioral objectives in this case might be the following: "the student will walk between classes, keeping hands to himself, 5/5 consecutive opportunities, for 5 consecutive days;" "the student will walk between classes within a 5-minute period, 5/5 consecutive opportunities, for 5 consecutive days."

The interventionist can evaluate learners with significant disabilities (severe mental retardation or cognitive disabilities, multiple disabilities) using both criterion-referenced tests and observation in the natural environment to determine needed skills. One important, but often neglected area of assessment is determining the symbolic level of the individual (Downing, 1999). Young children and learners with severe cognitive

disabilities respond only to concrete objects rather than pictures or print media. Because the learner requires concrete objects in instruction, she is at the presymbolic level. Other learners respond to pictures and have some emerging literacy skills, recognizing a few letters, sight words, and numbers. Students at this stage are at the early symbolic level. Learners who respond to print media, and can read words and numbers, are at the expanded symbolic level. These levels should be considered when writing behavioral objectives since they directly affect the progress of the student for accomplishing the objective (Lynch & Adams, 2008).

In the US, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) requires all students to have access to the general curriculum, i.e., the state standards for learning (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003). This requirement can present challenges for teachers whose students work at the presymbolic or early symbolic levels. However, behavioral objectives can be developed in a way that both meet individual student needs and relate to the state academic standards when one considers the critical function (White, 1980) of the standard. This requires educators to think of academic skills in a broader, expanded context. For example, when considering writing skills, this concept can be generalized to the broader skill of communicating with others through permanent product. The skill statement from the state standard reads: "The learner will write to entertain such as to compose humorous poems or short stories." For a learner with significant disabilities at the expanded symbolic level who needs to work on rhyming words, the objective might read, "The learner will complete the second of two sentences by stating and copying a rhyming word, 4/5 opportunities." A student at the early symbolic level who needs to work on rhyming words might work on a modified version of the objective: "After listening to two sentences read orally by the instructor (one complete and one incomplete sentence), the learner will complete the second of two sentences by selecting from two pictures, the word that rhymes and placing it in the blank at the end of the second sentence, 4/5 opportunities."

The greatest area of difficulty for many educators occurs when matching academic content to the needs of students with the most severe disabilities who work at the presymbolic level (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002)

Often these students need to work on choice making, cause and effect, communication of wants and needs, and basic self-help skills; pencil and paper tasks are not appropriate or relevant to these learners (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers, Algozzine, & Karvonen, 2004). For the skill from the state standard, "The learner will write to entertain such as to compose humorous poems or short stories," the learner can still take part in classroom activities by using switch-based software to activate a printer to print stories or poems written by peers. This enables this learner to work on cause and effect by activating the printer, as well as participate in classroom literacy projects. In this case the student's behavioral objective might read, "The student will use a computer switch to print stories, poems, and other genres 4/5 opportunities."

Summary

All in all, behavioral objectives are an avenue to (i) planning and evaluating classroom instruction; (ii) making essential decisions about interventions for targeted individuals and/or groups in and out of educational settings, and (iii) reporting results to the involved stakeholders. When professionals recall that they are accountable to others, they discover that efficiency and competency are the desired results of carefully written behavioral objectives.

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