Behavior Problems

Using Narrative Logs—Understanding Students' Challenging Behaviors

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How can we encourage students to improve their behavior in the long term? How do we respond to the "challenging" behavior of some students? How can we learn to be proactive, not just reactive, concerning classroom behavior? So many questions—and so many teachers feel unprepared for this complex task, particularly for students with disabilities included in the general classroom (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?").

This article shows how teachers can use observation and assessment to begin to understand the behavior of their students—and find ways to encourage more positive behavior.

A Graduate Course in Behavior

Teacher training programs play a critical role in preparing educators for supporting children with diverse needs including children with challenging behaviors. The Master of Arts in Teaching program in the Department of Special Education at the College of New Jersey requires graduate students to take the course titled "Positive Behavior Supports" (see box, "What Are the Features of Positive Behavior Supports?"). Approximately 20 students enroll in this course every fall.

This course focuses on training preservice and inservice teachers to use positive behavior supports strategies. As a part of this course, graduate students conduct a functional assessment, including direct observations of students with challenging behaviors, as well as hold interviews with people who know the student (parents, teachers, therapists, and others).

Drawing primarily on the direct observations conducted by graduate students in this course, we describe the personal insights into student behavior that emerged from this exercise. Many of the graduate students who take this course initially express a sense of frustration or feelings of inefficacy in dealing with challenging behaviors. Being teachers themselves, they struggle with a need to build a connection with the student and also maintain order in the classroom.

What Does the Literature Say About Challenging Behavior?

An increasing number of children with disabilities are now being educated in general education classrooms. Many of these children include those with a history of behavioral challenges. Existing literature that focuses on the perspectives of teachers indicates teachers often feel underprepared or unprepared to address the needs of students who demonstrate challenging behaviors (Sachs & Cheney, 2000; Weigle, 1997). Strategies typically used to manage challenging behaviors involve a combination of rewards and punishments. Whereas these strategies may offer an immediate antidote for the troubling behavior, they have limitations with respect to bringing about a long-term change in behavior (Weigle).

In contrast to more traditional approaches to behavior management, which have tended to be reactive, Positive Behavior Support (PBS) examines behavior from a posture of "inquiry" (O'Rourke-Lohrman, Knoster & Llewellyn, 1999). The underlying focus of this approach is not merely on the deceleration of negative behavior but on the following:

• Understanding the student.
• Identifying the function or the purpose of the behavior.
• Uncovering the ways in which various aspects of the context or the environment appear to be contributing to the behavior.
• Identifying new skill repertoires that could replace old behaviors (Horner & Carr, 1997).

Through PBS, educators approach behavior as being "meaningful" and serving a "communicative function" for the person demonstrating that behavior (Carr et al., 1994).

Here, we show how narrative logs can be a powerful tool that enables teachers to go beyond enforcing compliance to understanding student needs and student perspectives. Such a perspective has critical implications for the quality and long-term effectiveness of intervention plans for students, as well as feelings of self-efficacy in teachers.

Stages of Positive Behavior Supports

One of the key elements of the Positive Behavior Supports process is the functional assessment. The purpose of the functional assessment is to systematically collect and analyze data on student behavior in order to identify the "function" of the behavior. A functional assessment includes several stages (Rao & Kalyanpur, 2002).

- The first stage of inquiry is broad and focuses on interviews with key people who interact with the student. The purpose of these interviews is to get a sense of the topography of the behavior, as well as an overall understanding of student's strengths and weaknesses.
- The second stage of inquiry is more focused and requires teachers and other participants to conduct direct observations of the students in specific settings.
- In the third stage of inquiry, teachers analyze data from the direct observations and interviews to identify the purpose of the student's behaviors, as well as contextual elements that might be supporting or maintaining the student's behavior.
- In the fourth stage, educators use the information to develop a Positive Behavior Support plan which focuses on identifying new skills the student needs to learn, changes that need to be made in the classroom context, and ways to respond to the behavior. The quality, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the plan depends to a great extent on the comprehensiveness of the process, as well as the depth of the functional assessment data.

Not all students who demonstrate challenging behavior require a functional assessment. Certain factors determine whether you want to conduct such an assessment (see box, "When Would We Need to Conduct a Functional Assessment?"). You would typically conduct a functional assessment when the challenging behaviors are intense and place the student or others around the student at risk for injury. You might also conduct a functional assessment when the student's behaviors place him or her at risk for being moved to a more restrictive setting or when the behavior adversely affects the student's relationships and quality of life.

Narrative Logs

Narrative observation formats are not new in the area of behavioral assessments. Indeed, educators usually use various kinds of narrative observation

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Positive Behavior Support focuses first on understanding the student and identifying the function or the purpose of his or her behavior.

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formats for functional assessments (Janney & Snell, 2000). Most commonly used narrative formats include the "ABC" (antecedent, behavior, consequence) analysis, incident records, and anecdotal records. All of these formats incorporate a certain level of detail on the behavior, the antecedents, conse-

quences, context, and the overall sequence of events that occur during a particular period of time or an episode. The format used by graduate students in this course incorporated the details used in traditional narrative observation formats. They were also encouraged, however, to record other information including their own reflections.

Each narrative observation log was to be divided into two sections, observation and reflection (see Tables 1 and 2). The description section incorporated all factual details related to the incident and focused on describing the behavior, the context, the activity, directions, and peer responses in sequential detail.

The reflection section focused on the observer's reactions to the behavior. Within this section, observers recorded the following details:

- Personal reactions, including their perception of the behavior and its potential function.
- Analysis of student's strengths and weaknesses.
- Their views on the strategy used and the extent to which it was efficient.

Table 1. Observation Section of Observer Self-Evaluation Rubric

Observation Section	Yes	No
1. Do you record factual information, such as date and time of the incident?		X
2. Who is present when the incident happens?	X	
3. What is the activity/task and what is the sequence of instruction?		X
4. What are the kinds of materials being used?		X
5. What time of the day is it?	X	
6. Where did this incident take place? (classroom, playground, hallway)	X	
7. How are the children grouped or seated?		X
8. Have you captured the behavior in sequence with its antecedents and consequences?		X

Table 2. Reflection Section of Observer Self-Evaluation Rubric

Reflection Section	Yes	No
1. What could be the function of this behavior or the message behind it?	X	
2. What do my observations tell me about who this child is and what strengths he or she has?	X	
3. What are classroom antecedents that appear to be supporting this behavior?	X	
4. How are the reactions of the adults or other children maintaining this behavior?		X
5. What are new skills that the student needs to learn?		X
6. What are changes that need to be made in the classroom instruction, routines, grouping, or curriculum?	X	
7. How does my current observation compare to my previous observations? What are some new questions that I have?		X
8. What are my own perceptions of the behavior? How have my perceptions changed over the course of my observations?		X
9. What are some intervention strategies that I think might be effective?	X	
10. What are some quality of life issues that need to be addressed?		X

Note: Graduate students used the rubrics in Tables 1 and 2 as tools to help them assess their observation skills. They used the rubrics at the initial training sessions and after the completion of the first two observations. After the completion of the second observation, the instructor asked the graduate students to assess the extent to which their narrative logs incorporated data related to each of these questions. If the log did incorporate data related to a question, the student would place a checkmark in the "yes" column. If it did not incorporate data related to the question, the student would place a checkmark in the "no" column. The number of X's in the "yes" or "no" columns provided the graduate students an immediate way to assess their competency as observers and the level of detail that they had incorporated into their narrative logs.

• Potential strategies for future intervention.

Graduate students evaluated the quality of their narrative logs by using a rubric that would help them identify their strengths and weaknesses as observers. The rubric was first introduced during initial training sessions. It was also used after the students had conducted two observations in the field. Students went through each question in the rubric to determine if data related to that question had been incorporated in their narrative logs.

Based on the rubric, the graduate students then identified the kinds of data or information that they needed to incorporate in their future observations. At the close of the semester, students developed an intervention plan based on their observations and interview data. Each of the graduate students whose narrative observations are quoted in this article functioned in the dual roles of observers and teachers.

Advantages of Narrative Observations

We have found six advantages of using this narrative format that have implications for understanding the function of student behavior and generating ideas for an intervention plan. The following discussion includes excerpts from the narrative logs of three graduate students who were enrolled in this course.

Empathy and Appreciation for the Student's Perspective on the Behavior

When a student demonstrates challenging behavior, many educators find it difficult to set aside the tendency to judge the student and instead focus on understanding the behavior from the student's perspective. The immediate human reaction is to find a way to decelerate the behavior rather than to understand what purpose the behavior serves for the student. One of the dramatic outcomes of using the narrative log was the way in which it helped develop observer empathy and appreciation for the perspective of the student.

Narrative logs helped develop observer empathy and appreciation for the perspective of the student.

Instead of regarding the student or the behavior as a mere nuisance, observers focused on developing a thoughtful understanding of the purpose and the message of the student's behavior.

One teacher chose to focus on Jason, a 6-year-old student with autism who had several challenging behaviors including a tendency to continually engage in "video talk" or "jingles." The teacher's initial purpose for conducting the functional assessment was to find a way to "decelerate" Jason's "off-task" behaviors such as his video talk. However, as the narrative recording progressed, it was clearly obvious that her perspective had shifted from perceiving Jason's speech as a disruption to beginning to understand why Jason makes these noises and what purpose these noises serve Jason.

> The video talk, noises, and singing also appear when Jason is in a group that shifts its activities often. I wonder if changing the activities is overwhelming for Jason. He may have a hard time figuring out what to expect next or what is expected of him in each new situation. Humming or repeating a familiar video dialogue may be comforting to Jason. It may also be a way for him to help himself while his environment appears to be chaotic. It may also be an indication that he is not interested in the activity and is shutting out the environment. He repeats the teacher's words or sentences while he performs the action. He seems to repeat the teacher's question when he doesn't know the answer. This may indicate that Jason repeats things to process the words being spoken to him. Repeating the phrases is meaningful for Jason to process and cannot be considered as being off-task.

Jason's behaviors helped him to cope with transitions and unstructured time, communicate his boredom with certain tasks, and give himself time to process directions. Jason's intervention plan identified several strategies based on the functions of his behavior, as follows:

- Providing Jason a visual schedule to cue him for transitions.
- Changing the tasks to make them more challenging.
- Teaching Jason "waiting" skills.
- Modeling functional language.
- Teaching him to use a picture card to request change in task.

Jason's intervention plan identified changes that needed to be made in Jason's existing curriculum and classroom activities and new skills that Jason needed to learn.

Understand the Instructional Context

Student misbehavior within the context of the classroom may be related to the difficulties that a particular student might be experiencing within a specific curriculum area (Janney & Snell, 2000). Thus, difficult behavior that occurs consistently during specific academic activities, such as math or reading, may signal the need for teachers to closely examine the curriculum, the performance expectations, the instructional strategies, and the need for individualized supports.

Yet identifying the relationship between curriculum and behavior, though a seemingly easy connection, may not be as simple as it sounds. Although one could make an educated guess that a student is having difficulty in math or reading or writing, how does one pinpoint the relationship between specific aspects of teaching, curriculum, or assessment that appear to trigger these behaviors?

The narrative format used in our observations helped the graduate students clearly identify elements of the instruction that might be particularly problematic for the student and trigger student frustration. The following

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excerpt focuses on Matthew, a 14-year-old student who tended to get frustrated and angry. His typical way of venting anger was to engage in bouts of cursing. Initial observations suggested that the behavior tended to occur most frequently during English and math.

Further detailed and focused narrative logs in both of these subject areas revealed the specific difficulties that Matthew experienced in these areas. In the area of English, certain kinds of written activities tended to be the antecedent event for his outbursts. The narrative logs helped identify the kinds of written assignments, along with specific expectations, that appeared to result in this behavior.

> English class and paragraph writing was a problem for Matthew today. We began with some brainstorming activities to get the students to feel comfortable with the writing assignment. Each student was given a picture of three men sitting at a table that was scattered with money. Basically the students were supposed to write their first thoughts. Matthew just wrote down specifically what was in the picture . . . which was fine for the first round of brainstorming. We then had the class create ideas explaining why the money was there and what would happen next. Matthew had a nervous look in his eyes. I went to him and tried to calm him down. Every other word was a curse word. I calmly spoke to him and told him to take a few minutes of a mental break and relax. He was unable to deduce what could have happened, and as a result his frustration level skyrocketed.

The description and the sequence of events indicate that the relative open-endedness of the writing task was a challenge for Matthew. Matthew appeared to have several difficulties. First, writing his initial thoughts was particularly challenging for him because he needed support to identify thoughts that were appropriate for the task at hand. His initial thoughts focused on what was visible and obvious in the picture but did not go beyond the superfi-

cial, which indicated that he needed some scaffolding to generate more ideas. Second, given the fact that Matthew had not generated too many ideas in the first stage of this task, building on this became even more challenging.

Third, seeing his peers progressing with their written assignment while he had not made any progress with it only made the situation worse.

Instead of getting aggravated by Matthew's cursing, Matthew's teacher began to see the specific connections that existed between Matthew's behavior and the curriculum. It was clear that Matthew's behaviors helped him to escape tasks that were difficult. Writing was particularly challenging for Matthew. The intervention plan for Matthew focused on providing him additional support through prewriting conferences, webs, providing questions to get him started, and pairing him with a partner whose strength was writing.

Introduction of these interventions not only resulted in a dramatic deceleration of Matthew's challenging behaviors but also an improvement in his overall quality of writing and willingness to engage in writing activities.

Provide Details on Environmental Aspects That Could Influence the Behavior

Whereas reasons for student behavior may stem from unmet needs, communication barriers, and lack of choices, it may be physical aspects of the immediate environment that trigger such behavior. Lauren was a 12-year-old student with autism who appeared to have a lot of difficulty in the cafeteria. Narrative logs helped Lauren's teacher identify a clear connection between the environment in the cafeteria and Lauren's behavior.

> The student walked down to the cafeteria, which is a large, open, bright, and loud room that also doubles as the school gym. Yellow walls and fluorescent lights, as well as a low humming sound from the air conditioning units, are a constant distraction. The room contains six tables where six classes of students are eating lunch. There is

a constant sound of talking and lunch trays banging throughout the period. Lauren is hesitant to enter the new setting; and when she does, she proceeds to rock back and forth very quickly, flapping her hands and making grunting noises. She begins to sign "bathroom," although she has just finished using the toilet immediately before walking to the cafeteria. Lauren begins to cry and is escorted to the restroom, which is 2 feet outside the cafeteria doors. Once inside the stall, Lauren refuses to go, continuing to rock and cry.

The narrative logs helped identify the fact that Lauren's refusal to go to the cafeteria or to stay in the cafeteria was not "noncompliance"; rather, something about the cafeteria and its environment was overwhelming for Lauren. Lauren's behaviors helped her escape a situation that was overwhelming for her. This helped generate several questions: Has she ever had lunch in a school cafeteria? Does she have aversions to bright lights, loud noise, or background noise, i.e., humming from the air conditioners? Are certain smells in the cafeteria triggering her reaction?

The intervention plan for Lauren included providing her the choice to eat in her classroom with another student, phasing Lauren into the cafeteria slowly in small increments, and providing Lauren a means to communicate so that she could request to be removed from the situation or ask for a break.

Determine a Focus

One of the challenges in conducting a functional assessment is making decisions on which behaviors to focus. Teachers are often confronted with situations where a particular student may display many kinds of challenging behaviors. The first instinct is to focus on all of them so that they can be magically erased. Such a task, however, is both overwhelming and unrealistic. Narrative observations provide a framework for understanding students and their behavior. They help observers make informed decisions about which behaviors to focus. (on)?

One of the challenges in conducting a functional assessment is deciding which behaviors to focus on.

When Matthew's teacher began observing him, she observed several behaviors on which she wanted to focus. As data collection progressed, however, she obtained clarity regarding her priorities in addressing his behavior. Observations articulated the rationale for her decisions:

> I have some handle on Matthew's outbursts. I am slowly getting to know him so that I can see when he is going to display his frustrations and curse. He has gotten a little bit out of control over wandering out of the room. The problem exists, however; and I have had to remind him of his responsibility to tell one of the teachers where he is going. Therefore there are two behaviors that I want to focus my attention on: (a) cursing and (b) walking out of class without warning the teachers.

Generate Multiple Interventions

Another task that educators face in managing students' challenging behavior is generating creative ways to address the behavior, rather than getting trapped in reactive cycles. Many educators speak of reaching a point where they hit a wall or a barrier and run out of options. One of the advantages of a narrative log is its potential to generate multiple options. The observers have been immersed in systematic data collection that focuses on procuring in-depth information and thus have a closer understanding of the student, the context, and the behavior (for sample intervention strategies, see Table 3).

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Table 3. Intervention Strategies

Student	Challenging Behaviors	Function	Intervention Strategies
Matthew	Cursing	Matthew's behaviors helped him to escape difficult writing tasks	• Individual prewriting activities such as webs. • Graphic organizers for discussions. • Question prompts for written assignments. • Peer support. • Specific praise. • Writing rubrics. • A behavior contract.
Jason	"Video talk" or "jingles"	Jason's behaviors helped him to 1. Cope with transitions and unstructured times. 2. Communicate his boredom with assigned tasks. 3. Give himself time to process directions.	• Provide a visual schedule to cue Jason for upcoming transitions. • Change the tasks to make them more challenging and engaging. • Teach Jason waiting skills. • Teach Jason the rules for appropriate behavior during "work time." • Develop a social story about "work time." • Provide opportunities for Jason to interact meaningfully with his peers. • Model functional language by asking him questions about the work he is doing. • Teach him to use picture symbols to request change in task.
Lauren	Crying, flapping hands once she enters the cafeteria Hitting, pushing, or leaving the room when physically assisted to do exercises in the gym.	Lauren's behaviors helped her to 1. Escape situations that result in a sensory overload. 2. Escape tasks that are difficult and require physical assistance.	Cafeteria: • Provide Lauren choices about where to eat lunch. • Phase Lauren into the cafeteria in small increments. • Let Lauren choose a peer to sit with in the cafeteria. Gym: • Use verbal directions for gym exercises. • Provide picture prompts. • Provide verbal reassurances. • Develop a communication system using pictures. • Use a timer. • Modify gym exercises to make them simpler. • Use initial 1:1 verbal assistance. • Provide verbal praise in a quiet tone. • Provide a social story to rehearse the gym routine prior to the gym class.

Lauren's behavior was perplexing to her teachers because she did not like any kind of physical prompting in her gym class. She had a tendency to cry, hit, push, or leave the room when offered physical assistance. This posed a problem because Lauren did seem to require some physical prompting to initiate an activity or to complete it. Close observation of Lauren indicated that her behaviors helped her to escape tasks that were difficult and required physical prompting. It was apparent that the tasks in the gym class had to be modified to enable Lauren to perform them more independently so that she would require minimal physical assistance. Also, a less intrusive system of prompting needed to be used with Lauren. The narrative logs helped Lauren's teacher identify intervention strategies that took Lauren's needs into consideration.

First, it seems that Lauren does not like physical force of any

kind. She likes to touch on her own terms when she seeks out a hand to hold or words of comfort from a staff member. Although she needs that type of reassurance, she does not want it forced on her. Verbal directions are taken well by Lauren especially when she is calm. Lauren must always be told that she will not be hurt and that everything will be okay. There needs to be a functional way for Lauren to make choices, explain her feelings, and answer questions. The first step to alleviating Lauren's fears and frustrations is to develop a way for her to communicate clearly with those around her. Lauren also seems to lack the ability to judge time, as in knowing when an activity will begin or end. Should a timer be set at the beginning of each new activity so that there is a visible end in sight to each task? A timer could be set up for the entire period or even for individual sections of the gym class, such as walking, warmup exercises, and the main activity.

Explore One's Own Perceptions of the Student and the Behavior

When students display challenging behavior, teachers tend to assume it is the student's fault. Or teachers may assume that the behavior indicates the student's lack of skills in particular areas, like problem-solving and anger management. The reflection section in the narrative logs enables observers to candidly examine their own biases and perceptions (see Table 2).

Matthew's behavior presented a big challenge for his teacher. It was difficult initially for her to get beyond the fact that she found his behaviors disruptive and frustrating. It was also hard for her not to take Matthew's cursing personally. In the reflection section, Matthew's teacher began to examine her own feelings about Matthew's behavior and why she personally found the behavior annoying.

> What a session! At times I am frustrated and overwhelmed by the frequency of Matthew's swearing. He cannot continue to do this during class because it will have a domino effect: Once he starts, then all students will feel that this is the norm. How do I get him to buy into the norms of the classroom? I do not like when students curse in the room. I am personally offended and at times today actually felt helpless stopping him. In a way, I feel that cursing is a personal affront to my authority within the classroom. I understand that outside the school, his foul language is common but in the classroom it must stop! I just feel like I have not made the connection with him yet. I know that I must dig deeper and get to know him. I did learn from day one not to take things that students say or do personally…
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> So why is this such a dilemma for me? Because there is a certain atmosphere that I want in my classroom, and it definitely does not include swearing. So I guess that is where I stand. I must find a way to let him know how I feel about it. However, my feelings will not matter unless I go out of my way to make a connection with him.

In this excerpt, Matthew's teacher candidly begins to explore various reasons why Matthew's behavior is a problem for her. These reasons range from maintaining order in her classroom to seeing his behavior as an affront to her authority. Why was exploring her feelings about Matthew and his behavior important? Exploring her feelings was critical in helping her first understand that her perceptions of Matthew's

behavior were related to her own interpretations of the behavior and her expectations as a teacher.

Second, once she understood why the behavior was problematic for her, she began to appreciate that Matthew may have his own perspective, which might be valid. Thus she states that though she needs to get Matthew to follow the rules in her classroom, she cannot do so without building a "connection" with him.

Final Thoughts

Why should teachers use narrative logs as a way to conduct direct observations? Are they not time-consuming? Is it not easier to use other alternative direct observation formats, which are less time-consuming? The fact that keeping narrative records requires time cannot be denied. Yet investing this time can help manage student behavior, prevent certain behavior, increase the quality of life for students, and develop in teachers a feeling of self-efficacy.

The rewards of seeing the effectiveness of intervention plans can make up for the time spent in the observation and data collection process. Narrative data collection helps teachers not only understand their student's perspective and the context but also themselves and their own perceptions of behavior. Through positive behavior support, teachers can generate interventions that may significantly affect the long-term educational and social outcomes for their student.

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