



Vanessa Tucker, Ph.D.,  
BCBA-D, LBA  
Associate Professor:  
Pacific Lutheran University

## The Roles of BCBA's in Providing Behavior Supports in Schools: Uncovering the Complexities

Midwest Symposium for Leadership in Behavior Disorders February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019

## Key Issues

- Rapid increase in hiring of BCBA's and RBT's either:
  - -In schools as employees,
  - -In schools as contractors from agencies
  - -Parent-provided BCBA/RBT in school (insurance or private pay)
  - -Part or full time.



In WA State:

Applied Behavior Analysis is covered by insurance

Schools have recognized the value of ABA practitioners as a key component of behavior support

However...

The **roles and relationships** are unclear and **misunderstandings persist**.

The **ethical bounds** of BCBA's in schools may be at odds with the norms, laws and practices of Special Education.

There may be a **training issue** with BCBA's who are not teachers in terms of "understanding school."

Districts struggle with how to **provide competitive pay** to non-teachers who have a Master's Degree.

If you build  
it...they will  
come

---



But it feels  
more like  
this...



## Misunderstandings

Recommendations of BCBA's seen as "at odds" with SDI in Special Education, or general education practice

Ethics issues persist with different definitions and boundaries in place-and this is not unique to ABA

Collaboration is difficult if the BCBA is perceived as an outsider or someone who will "make my job harder"

BCBA's may be seen as the person who has a magic wand, who should instantly solve every problem

The vocabulary alone may cause tremendous difficulty with collaboration

## Literature Review Findings

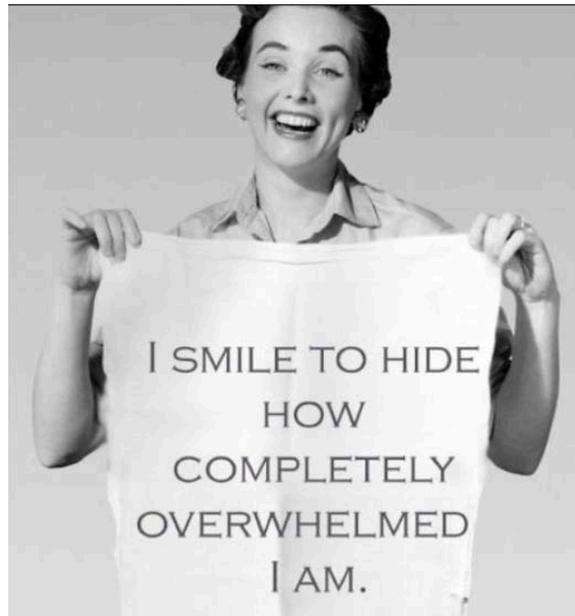
- Collaboration training is needed, and there is a problem with skill transfer from BCBA to classroom teachers (Kelly, A. & Tincani, M., 2013).
- School districts are often unaware of the strict codes of ethics that guide BCBA practices (Menendez, A.L., Mayton, M.R. & Yurick, A.L., 2017).
- Burnout rates are high among early career BCBA's, in part because there are low levels of mentoring/support/collaboration available (Plantiveau, C. & Virues-Ortega, J., 2018).

Tucker & Rose (2019)

Q7 In an average week, how would you describe your typical job duties?

interventions treatment plans staff observations training creating students  
IEP supervision plans programs behavior writing  
meetings support behavior technician data

Have we clearly identified roles and scope of work for BCBAs in schools?



“I am a Special Educator for the Public School System - first and foremost - that was my first job - and have been unable to walk away from the students who really need support.”

## Roles and Responsibilities

### **BCBAs Must Define and Uncover:**

- Scope of work
- Nature of consent
- Boundaries (what you will not do)
- Education on terminologies and treatments in laymen’s terms
- Ethical mismatches

### **Administrators Must Define and:**

- Expectations/scope of work
- Exact work expectations
- Develop referral process
- Work with others to define job duties
- Encourage others to include BCBA’s recommendations

## Maggie's Corner

2x10

### Developing expectations for the work (Brodahl-Busey, M. 2019)

- Behavior specialist/BCBA should be doing the following:
- Full file review
- Consent, ethical issues
- Review ODRs
- Impartial observation of life spaces
- Interviews of teacher, counselor, administrator, parent, other adults (recess duties, specialist, bus drivers)
- Goals and expectations for the work (what this looks like)
- Empower/engage teacher: "What would you like to see?" (Using their own words)
- Provide social positive reinforcement for both admin and teacher
- FBA and PBIP (new or review)
- Commitment to time with interventions (at least 2 weeks in most cases) and why
- Data collection and other systems in place for the teacher

Describe what, if any barriers exist that prevent you from doing what you consider to be best practice for a BCBA.



“As a public school employee, I support students even when I do not feel highly qualified to do so (e.g., mental health concerns, EBD etc). I also do not oversee implementation of programs. If a staff member is not following a plan or not using an EBP, I do not have the authority to make them change.”

“Administration not knowing what a BCBA can do, lack of ABA principals (sic) being employed in schools, District leaders untrained in behavior principals (sic).”

“The amount of school district resources provided in that specific classroom (i.e., lack of curriculum, lack of staffing, etc.), limited contracted hours that do not allow for all necessary work to be done.”

“Too many needs with too few resources - lack of training and/or "buy in" from school staff who are expected to follow through on behavioral plans and recommendations - serving only as a consultant or coach with no authority or evaluative process to ensure implementation - I do want to add that I am fortunate in that my Supervisors understand the Code of Ethics and most really sticky problems are avoided.”

Resources, Training, Ethics and Understanding of ABA Principles

“In all my BCBA coursework- I was listening to it through the scope of a public school educator - as I feared I may not walk away from public schools, and they focused a lot on 1:1 situations- which just is not a reality in public schools. Though the coursework may have made me stronger in my thought process for thinking through behavior plans- that ask for wrap around services for the student that desperately needs it, just may be a lot longer coming than one may want. Even with 20 phone calls.”

## Roles and Responsibilities

### BCBAs Must:

- Advocate for training in Special Education in preparation programs!
- If you didn't get preparation, seek out your state agency for training (especially if you are a clinic employee or consultant)
- Ask before you recommend things like services and placement
- Avoid assumptions-there are reasons why things happen the way they do in special education

### School Districts Must:

- Onboard your BCBAs by providing mandatory Special Education Process and content training,
- Provide a mentor to the BCBA that is a school district employee, such as an administrator, TOSA or ESA,
- Avoid putting a BCBA in a supervisory position over non-ABA staff unless there is a clearly established record of leadership training, such as an admin credential

Buy in and Staff Follow through

"Barriers mainly consist of buy-in from school staff or family. It takes a considerable amount of dedication and consistency to effect change in behavior. Another barrier is that I work for a company who uses carbon paper to create materials and collect data and write programs, it makes some tasks more difficult than necessary."

"IEPs require a team decision and often the district does not follow recommendations I present. I have no authority to ensure that plans are followed."

"Our school district doesn't have behavior technicians and I have less control of decisions than in an ABA setting. Therefore, I feel I use my knowledge as a BCBA more as a behavior consultant, rather than creating and implementing ABA that you would find in a typical ABA setting."

"Lack of engagement/motivation to collaborate from school staff."

"Reluctance of teachers to implement evidence based interventions with fidelity."

"Differing opinions and ideologies from collaborating rehab therapists such as speech and occupational therapists. Lack of knowledge on the scientific principles behind ABA in schools, hospitals and amongst insurance companies."

“The discrepancy between the policies/ethics of the BACB and state law/policy for education, especially SPED. Using behavior analytic methodology is complex, as well, because in schools you cannot control for every variable, and you cannot do some procedures, as defined (ex: extinction, planned ignoring, etc).”

“Usually treatment for challenging behaviors is not a 6 week enterprise. Our team is mainly diagnostic and then turning over treatment to school personnel, many of which have no previous training and possibly not the capacity (or desire) to effectively implement interventions is challenging and I'm not sure always ethical. This is particularly true with so many students who are displaying challenging behaviors due to trauma. As a teacher and a BCBA, I'm bound by some opposing ethics. As a teacher, I am bound by IDEA and the concept of zero reject. As a BCBA I am bound by the ethical code of Boundaries of Competence. I don't have the right training and experience.”

What would  
you like to see  
changed to  
make your job  
easier?

“I would like the schools to know what we do and why. We are not there to take over or to make them look like they don't know what they are doing. It would be easier if they understood that we are there to help give intensive service, teach essential behavioral skills, make sure (sic) those skills belong to the student and school, then fade away to the next student.”

## Crosswalk to create mutual understanding

- What is ABA? (And why it isn't a curriculum),
- Where the principles already exist within other areas of education and outside (e.g. marketing, OBM),
- What contributions a BCBA can make to a team within clearly defined roles, while defining everyone else's too,
- Why certain confounds in schools make clinical ABA in practice inherently different (and impossible to replicate) outside of the clinic.

“Schools are a dynamic environment and we do not have control over many of the variables. I think it's important for parents and private ABA providers to recognize the constraints that come with this.”

“While progress being made, albeit slowly, for staff buy-in, it would make my job easier if there was some sort of understanding in principle, that the BCBA has expertise that we WILL access and implement.”

## Training Needs

Q11 If you are a BCBA who works in schools, what training do you wish you had received before you started working in this environment?



## Drowning in the reality of ABA in practice:

“I have all of this. Maybe they should have to be a teacher first. When I work my Tier 2 team, the last question I always ask after we have created an intervention - we go over data collections, how to do it, - Then I say "Is this doable?" As in are they really going to do it-- if not the intervention may be fine- but some part of the data collection may need to be altered- the reality of teaching 30 students needs to be understood and appreciated. Yes, we will still create an intervention- but if it is not doable it is not going to be done with fidelity in the elementary school setting so you may as well, alter it a little.”

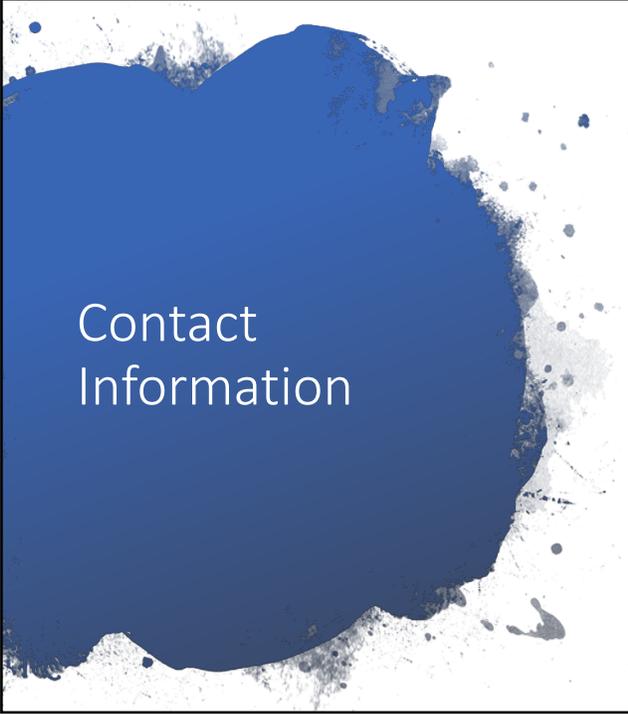
What is the “ABA” environment? Why is school inherently different than a clinic?

“Training regarding the lack of knowledge that is out there (surprisingly) among school staff and how to take baby steps in bringing knowledge of ABA to school staff.”

“School staff need more understanding/training of what we do. Often, they want us to continue using the techniques that they are, but we don't because they're not working. However, when we begin to do behavior analytic practice we are seen as crazy! They don't understand the "why" behind some of the methods we use, and they cannot see the end. They especially do not understand behavior function and functional relationships and why reinforcement is more powerful than punishment.”

## Discussion and Take Away Points

- Leadership is needed to develop mutual understanding
- Ethics must be defined, protected and cross-walked
- ABA practices must be better defined-what is acceptable and ethical to do in schools? (e.g. Functional Analysis)
- Resources must be made available including pay, time and materials
- Training is needed on “both” sides of the aisle
- -Special Education
- -Consultation models and skills
- -Basic ABA principles, knowledge and practices
- Buy-in is needed, which may develop via training
- Roles and authority need to be determined and strengthened through collaboration
- Compensation models must be developed that make sense for districts



Contact  
Information

- Vanessa Tucker [tuckerve@plu.edu](mailto:tuckerve@plu.edu)
- Thank you for attending!