

Kentucky Teacher Education Journal: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Kentucky Council for Exceptional Children

Volume 3

Issue 2 Special Issue: TED Conference 2016,
Summary of Kentucky's Faculty and Faculty-Supported
Student Research Presentations

Article 4

2017

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Recommended Citation

Crites, Steven A. Dr. (2017) "The Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) Credential: What is it, how to get it," *Kentucky Teacher Education Journal: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Kentucky Council for Exceptional Children*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 4. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/ktej/vol3/iss2/4>

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The Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) Credential: What is it, how to get it

Abstract

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is a research-based and effective procedure used to change the behavior of individuals, groups, and organizations. While some may think of ABA to decrease maladaptive behavior, it can also be used to improve adaptive behavior, academic, social, and employment skills. There is a growing need for experts in behavior analysis to provide services in early intervention programs, schools, day treatment centers, institutions and in the work place. A board certified behavior analyst (BCBA) is credentialed to provide these behavior analytic services. This paper will provide a brief overview of applied behavior analysis, define the BCBA credential, illustrate the process of becoming a BCBA, and explain the role of the BCBA.

Keywords

BCBA, applied behavior analysis, autism, emotional disturbance

The Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) Credential: What is it, how to get it

Introduction

Individuals with autism and those identified with emotional disturbance present unique challenges in today's schools. According to the 37th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA (2015), students with emotional disturbance were suspended or expelled from school for more than ten days 4.3 times more often than students with disabilities from all disability categories combined. Although the percentage of students in special education who dropped out of school decreased from 31.1 percent to 18.8 percent from 2003-04 to 2012-13, for students with emotional disturbance, the trend is reversed, moving from 38.4 percent to 53.8 percent during that same time period. Left untreated, the behavior problems exhibited by individuals with emotional disturbance tend to disrupt all areas of their lives, and these increased levels of problem behaviors often predict problems later in life (Windle & Mason, 2004). Consequently, providing intervention during the school years may avoid future problems.

In addition to concerns for individuals with emotional disturbance, the number of students with the label of autism that schools served was 215 percent larger in 2013 than in 2004 (37th Annual Report to Congress, 2015). Scheuermann and Webber (2002) reported that students with autism often exhibit either behavioral excesses (e.g., aggression, self-abuse) or behavioral deficits (e.g., compliance, academic skills, self-help skills). Teaching these students requires a combination of reductive techniques and good skill training techniques, often associated with applied behavior analysis (Maurice, Green & Luce, 1996).

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is a research validated practice often associated solely for use with individuals with autism and developmental disabilities, but has broader application in school settings with individuals who have problem behaviors which interfere with learning (Bloh & Axelrod, 2008). In fact, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-446) requires behavioral support components such as functional behavior assessments (FBA), positive behavioral supports, behavioral interventions, classroom and student management, and prevention of behavioral problems. Additionally, research has demonstrated ABA techniques have been used to improve the functioning of individuals with learning disabilities and ADHD (Lauermann & Potoczny-Grey, 2013) and mental health issues (Harvey, Luiselli,

& Wong, 2009), as well as to improve student's overall academic performance (Johnson & Street, 2012).

Because of the research support, ABA has become an important part of services. Bloh and Axelrod (2008) suggested, "As improving the ability for students to learn in the general and special education classroom is socially significant, using the latest and validated methods of ABA is vital for those students who would benefit" (p. 55). Similarly, Walsh (2011) described the success of ABA for her son with autism. She is an advocate for ABA to be used in schools not only because there is scientific evidence that it works, but also because behavioral interventions helped her son to become independent and have a more fulfilled life. Unfortunately, Burns and Ysseldyke (2009) found that special education teachers reported using ineffective approaches (e.g., social skills training) as often as they did approaches with a strong research base (e.g., applied behavior analysis).

An Overview of Applied Behavior Analysis

In a seminal article in the field, Baer, Wolf, and Risley (1968) defined ABA:

"Analytic behavioral application is the process of applying sometimes tentative principles of behavior to the improvement of specific behaviors, and simultaneously evaluating whether or not any changes noted are indeed attributable to the process of application - and if so, to what parts of that process" (p. 91).

This initial definition has continued and been expanded upon. More recently, Mayer, Sulzer, & Wallace (2012) described behavior analysis as the experimental investigation of variables that influence behavior, with application defined as quantitatively describing and functionally addressing problem behaviors that are socially important. In practice, the behavior analyst operationally defines the problem behavior; examines both the antecedents that trigger the behavior and the consequences which maintain it; determines its function; and creates an intervention to replace the problem behavior with an acceptable one which serves the same function.

Lovitt (2012) identified seven components of applied behavior analysis (ABA) that should be seriously considered by teachers in general and special education to develop and maintain behaviors of their students. The components include: direct measurement, contingency management, precise behavioral language, behavioral processes, self-management or self-control, pinpointing behaviors, and charting data. Lovitt's seven components are all essential skills

contained in the Behavior Analyst Certification Board's 4th Edition Task list, and Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA's) are required to be proficient in them. Although not a certified special education teacher, the BCBA could help to improve the use of applied behavior analysis in schools by acting in both a consultative role providing training on the use of ABA to the special and general education teacher; and in a direct service role providing ABA services to students in the classroom. According to Dorsey, Weinberg, Zane, & Guidi, (2009), "historically, individuals providing ABA services worked primarily in state or federally operated facilities, at public and private schools, or within academia" (p. 53).

What is a BCBA Credential?

The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) created the Board Certified Behavior Analyst credential in 1998 (Shook & Favell, 2008). The intention of the credential was to "(a) provide a credential that identified a qualified behavior analyst, (b) increase the quality of ABA services, and (c) increase the amount of ABA services available" (p. 44). The BCBA credential can only be obtained by meeting the requirements of the Behavior Analyst Certification Board, which describes a BCBA as:

"a graduate-level certification in behavior analysis. Professionals who are certified at the BCBA level are independent practitioners who provide behavior-analytic services. In addition, BCBAs supervise the work of Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, and others who implement behavior-analytic interventions" (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, n.d., "About the Credential," para.1).

Currently, there are 20,274 BCBA's and 2,000 BCBA-D's (doctoral level BCBA's) worldwide (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, n.d.). In the state of Kentucky, 126 individuals held BCBA certification in 2014 (Deochand & Fuqua, 2016).

How do I become a BCBA?

According to the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (n.d.), BCBA certification may be obtained in one of three options. Option 1 requires a graduate degree, acceptable coursework, acceptable practical experience, and passing the BCBA exam. Option 2 requires a graduate degree, three years full-time work as a faculty member at an accredited institution within a five-year period teaching

graduate level ABA courses, having published at least one behavior analytic article in a high-quality peer reviewed journal, meeting current experience requirements, and passing the BCBA exam. Option 3 requires an acceptable doctoral degree, ten years post-doctoral experience practicing behavior analysis, supplemental supervised experience, and passing the exam.

The requirements for Option 1 are within the scope of this article and will be discussed in further detail. The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (n.d.) requires applicants to possess a minimum of a graduate degree (e.g., master's or doctoral) in an acceptable field of study from a qualifying institution. Acceptable fields of study are behavior analysis, education, or psychology. Degrees may also be accepted from degree programs in which the candidate completed a Behavior Analyst Certification Board approved course sequence.

Coursework must come from a qualifying institution and cover the required content outlined in the BACB's Fourth Edition Task List and Course Content Allocation documents (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, n.d.). Only graduate (i.e., master's or doctoral) courses where the applicant was formally enrolled and earned a passing grade ("C" or better for graded courses) are acceptable. Coursework may come from an approved course sequence, although other coursework may also be acceptable, subject to approval of the board. The board's website, found at www.bacb.com, has a listing of all the universities offering approved course sequences.

In addition to coursework, other BACB requirements include experience and testing (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, n.d.). Applicants must complete experience that fully complies with all of the Experience Standards hours (currently 1,500) supervised by an approved supervisor who holds a BCBA credential. Applicants must carefully review the experience standards with their supervisor(s) before beginning their experience because the requirement is subject to change. Finally, applicants must take and pass the BCBA exam. Authorization to take the exam is provided only to applicants who have submitted a complete application to the BACB, including all documentation necessary to demonstrate that they have met criteria.

State Licensure as a Behavior Analyst

According to the Association of Professional Behavior Analyst (2015), 24 states now license behavior analysts to provide ABA services in their states. Of the twenty-four, 23 allow licensure based on obtaining the BCBA credential;

Kentucky is one of those states. According to Kentucky Revised Statutes (KRS) 319C.080, a person applying for a license as a licensed behavior analyst

“shall apply to the board upon such form and in such manner as the board shall prescribe and shall furnish evidence to the board that such person: (a) has met the education requirements of the Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) standards, has passed the Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) examination, and is credentialed as a behavior analyst by the certification board; (b) maintains active status and fulfills all requirements for renewal and recertification with the certification board as a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA); (c) conducts his or her professional activities in accordance with accepted standards as required by administrative regulations promulgated by the board in accordance with KRS 319C.050(1); and (d) complies with all applicable administrative regulations promulgated by the board.” (Kentucky Applied Behavior Analyst Licensing Board, n.d.).

What can I do as a BCBA?

Under the above cited state law, licensed behavior analysts in Kentucky utilize the “practice of applied behavior analysis,” which means the application of the principles, methods and procedures of the experimental analysis of behavior and applied behavior analysis. They apply the principles to design, implement, evaluate, and modify treatment programs to change the behavior of individuals diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder; the behavior of other individuals; the behavior of groups; and to consult with individuals and organizations (Kentucky Applied Behavior Analyst Licensing Board, n.d.).

Burning Glass Industries (2015) analyzed the employment demand for individuals holding BCBA certification and found 85 percent of job postings were in three areas. The first area was jobs in the health care industry (e.g., treatment planning, therapy, and case management); the second, in educational services (e.g., primarily located within schools and calling for data collection skills); and the third, in social assistance (e.g., therapy skills, employee training, and treatment planning). The report concluded that the demand for BCBA’s is increasing; the number of newly credentialed BCBA’s tracks closely with the demand; and the BCBA credential is required in a range of occupations and titles. Similarly, Deochand and Fuqua (2016) concluded the employment prospects for BCBA’s in the future remain strong.

In summary, applied behavior analysis is a research validated practice that has been shown to be effective with individuals with disabilities. A BCBA is a credentialed individual who has completed graduate studies in ABA, has supervised experience providing ABA services, and has passed the BCBA exam. More information on the requirements for a BCBA credential and where to find an approved course sequence can be found at the website of the Behavior Analyst Certification Board, www.bacb.com.

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