

## Procedures for the assessment of severe behavior difficulties in basic level students: Theoretical review

### Procedimientos para la evaluación de dificultades severas de conducta en alumnos de nivel básico: Revisión teórica.

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#### Abstract:

The objective of this study was to make a theoretical review of research related to the evaluation and brief functional analysis in basic level students (3 to 12 years old) who present problematic behaviors or severe behavioral difficulties, which act as barriers to learning and student participation, limiting access and participation for the maximum achievement of the expected learning. The review did not take into account the presence or absence of any type of disability or disorder or the dates of publication of the studies, due to the scarce empirical research on the subject. Emphasis is made on functional evaluation and analysis procedures, however, given the relevance of its therapeutic approach, mention is made of various intervention strategies that are functional for behavioral modification.

#### Keywords:

Functional assessment, brief functional analysis, severe behavioral difficulties.

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#### Resumen:

El objetivo del estudio fue realizar una revisión teórica de investigaciones relacionadas a la evaluación y análisis funcional breve en estudiantes de nivel básico (3 a 12 años) que presentaran comportamientos problemáticos o dificultades severas de conducta, los cuales funcionan como barreras para el aprendizaje y participación de los educandos, limitando el acceso y participación para el máximo logro de los aprendizajes esperados. En la revisión no se tomó en cuenta la presencia o ausencia de algún tipo de discapacidad o trastorno ni las fechas de publicación de los estudios, ello debido a la escasa investigación empírica sobre el tema. Se hace énfasis en los procedimientos de evaluación y análisis funcional, sin embargo, dada la relevancia de su abordaje terapéutico se hace mención de diversas estrategias de intervención que resultan funcionales para la modificación conductual.

#### Palabras Clave:

Evaluación funcional, análisis funcional breve, dificultades severas de conducta.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Today, the Mexican National Education System (SEN) is in a transition from an Integrative Education to an Inclusive Education (IE), which is based on attention to diversity "*adapting the system to respond adequately to the needs of each and every student*" (Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP], 2018, p. 21), emphasizing that education is a responsibility that must be shared among all members who are part of the school, from teachers and directors to families. The educational system faces the challenge of developing and implementing strategies that guarantee IE, which allows students to develop comprehensively, achieving the expected development and learning, however this goal may not be achieved for various reasons, one of the main ones being behavioral problems, which can be caused, reinforced and maintained by various factors, such as an educational system that does not guarantee a

dignified, fair and equitable environment, as well as by developmental, personal, family or environmental characteristics.

In order to implement inclusive education, it is necessary to have policies that allow laying the foundations for its incorporation into school contexts. Thus, we find that in article 61 of the General Education Law (SEP, 2019) it is stated that "*inclusive education refers to the set of actions aimed at identifying, preventing and reducing the barriers that limit the access, permanence, participation and learning of all students, by eliminating practices of discrimination, exclusion and segregation*".

Therefore, equity, justice and equality are guiding principles of the term inclusive education, meaning that in those contexts in which this scheme is not implemented, it is very possible that they are places conducive to the generation of Barriers to Learning and Participation (BLP) that prevent access to quality

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education. BLP can affect the comprehensive development of Girls, Boys and Adolescents (GBA) as well as school environments, generating favorable contexts for the development of behavioral problems, which is made evident by finding a high prevalence percentage of these problems, according to the study by Valencia and Andrade (2005) these difficulties or behavioral problems can be found in various parts of the world, for example, in India it was found that 45.60% of children presented them, in Uruguay 53% and in Chile 15%, on the other hand, in the United States an increase has been observed in psychosocial problems, attention problems and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The Ministry of Public Education in Annex 1 of the School Control Standards (SEP, 2019b) proposes the term Barriers to Learning and Participation to refer to those difficulties that the student may experience in the development of learning, these barriers are found in the different contexts in which the student develops and arise from the interaction with them, some of these may be the physical facilities, the organization of the school or even an evaluation that is not adequate to the characteristics, needs and interests of the students can be considered BLP.

The SEP's approach is clear in relation to the need to implement actions that guarantee that each and every one of the GBA are given what they need based on their unique and individual characteristics. In Mexico, around 20% of school-age children are at risk of presenting severe behavioral problems. Among the most recurrent behaviors are tantrums, arguments, opposition, disobedience, irritability, anger, aggression, inattention and hyperactivity (Morales et al, 2017).

For its part, the SEP (2019b) defines the term severe behavioral difficulties as those behaviors or conducts that in certain places, times and schedules, have negative consequences for the student, as well as for the people around him, these behaviors are not isolated, that is, they occur repeatedly and over time they can increase in intensity, they can occur for different reasons or situations, such as parenting style, psychological or emotional conditions, among others, giving rise to the appearance of different behaviors such as calling attention in an impatient, aggressive or impulsive way, remaining isolated, self-harming behaviors, refusal to complete tasks or activities, use of foul language, among others. It is important to mention that in the case of severe behavioral difficulties, the educational authority has not provided theoretical references for teaching in situations such as those described. There is no operating manual that provides guidance on the modes of action in order to identify, prevent and reduce severe behavioral difficulties that, as described, act as Barriers to Learning and Participation, which limits the access and participation of students.

In this sense, and from the teaching function in the field of psychology, we seek to investigate effective evaluation procedures that consider the characteristics of the student, the contexts and relationships in which they develop, which allow us to know, understand and explain problematic behaviors, with

the aim of laying the foundations for an intervention process that adjusts to the needs and characteristics of the student, under the premise of an intervention in the natural development of the school classroom, thereby promoting the implementation of actions aimed at inclusive education.

## **METHOD**

The theoretical search for studies was carried out through two strategies. The first consisted of using the Google Scholar, Academia.edu and redalyc.org platforms, in which books, scientific journals, professional journals, doctoral theses and degree works were selected, in English and Spanish. The inclusion criteria were that they were theoretical or empirical studies. No filter related to the year of publication or place of origin of the study was included.

The search terms were functional assessment, assessment of behavioral problems, functional analysis in schools, inclusive education, severe behavioral difficulties and behavior modification.

Finally, the second strategy consisted of reviewing normative documents and legislation applicable to the Mexican Educational System, in order to locate manuals, action protocols or guides related to the topic addressed.

## **RESULTS**

Severe behavioral problems or difficulties are, in many cases, the result of contingencies in the environment in which a person develops, which are maintained and reinforced by various mechanisms. Identifying the contingencies, as well as the functions and reinforcement mechanisms, allows us to understand the reasons why a child acts the way he or she does. According to Skinner (1971), human behavior is a variable dependent on the immediate environment and its learning history, therefore, if the environment can be manipulated, it is possible to produce changes in behavior.

There are various methods through which scientists have tried to explain, describe, and predict human behavior. However, it is through functional assessment or functional behavioral assessment that it is possible to obtain information that allows us to identify the function of the problem behavior, as well as the contingencies that maintain it.

Functional assessment involves gathering information about the elements present in a behavior problem, such as antecedents and consequences that are functionally related and explain why the problem behavior is occurring. In addition to understanding and explaining behavior, functional assessment provides sufficient information to make decisions regarding the treatment that best fits the modification of said behavior, since it determines what other behaviors can generate better functionality for the individual, it also provides information on the motivating variables or establishment operations that influence the maintenance of the problem and which stimuli function as reinforcers (Miltenberger, 2013).

However, the information gathered during a functional assessment is not sufficient to confirm or rule out why a behavior occurs and is maintained; to do so, it is necessary to formulate hypotheses and manipulate variables experimentally that allow corroborating the functional hypotheses; this is known as functional analysis.

In general, there are three forms of assessment that have been studied empirically; these methods are distinguished by the way in which the information is obtained and by the time or frequency with which the events are studied or manipulated; however, all three have the same objective, to determine antecedent events (generators) and consequences (maintainers) of the problem behavior. These are: (1) anecdotal or indirect methods, (2) experimental analysis or functional analysis, and (3) descriptive or correlational analysis (Iwata & Wordsell, 2005).

Anecdotal or indirect methods are those based on verbal reports from third parties through the use of questionnaires or interviews with family members, therapists, or teachers of the person being evaluated. These interviews have the objective of obtaining information about the problematic behavior, the stimuli that evoke the behavior, and what type of responses they produce. One of the problems with its use is that the person answering the interview may deny or ignore the responses that the subject in question presents to the problematic behavior, in addition the responses described in a situation may change from one moment to another in apparently similar situations, that is, the same topography can have multiple functions (Casey et al. 2004).

Functional assessments are mostly carried out using the experimental method, that is, situations analogous to the problematic situation are presented, so that the analyst is able to manage the antecedents and consequences that may be controlling the behavior being studied. However, this type of assessment is complex and involves a great deal of time, in addition to its difficulty for its application in controlled environments, which is why the complementary use of other assessment methods is considered (Hall, 2004).

For their part, Bijou et al. (1968) have referred to descriptive assessment as that through which the conditions under which a behavior is more likely to occur are empirically studied. This method answers the question *How?* It provides information on events, their occurrence and frequency. In these studies, an operational definition of the behaviors being studied is made, as well as the antecedents, responses and consequences. The objective is to obtain an anecdotal description that allows us to understand the behaviors being studied in a consecutive order.

In countries such as the United States of America (USA), federal laws provide for the educational right of students who exhibit problematic behavior to a functional behavioral

assessment. This assessment generally includes 5 steps: the first refers to the identification of the problematic behavior(s); the second has to do with the operationalization of said behaviors; these descriptions must be able to be measured and recorded in the simplest way; the third step consists of gathering information on the causes of the behavior, emphasizing whether they are related to a lack of skills, knowledge or consistency in its execution; in the fourth step, the information is analyzed under the explanatory model of stimulus-behavior, emphasizing the prediction of behavior, the consequences that maintain it and the possible functions; finally, the hypothesis is formulated and verified, which must describe under what conditions it is more or less likely that the study behavior will occur and what consequences are those that maintain it; in this step, the variables that have to be manipulated in the intervention phase are specified (Casey et al, 2004).

In the example of the methodology used in the U.S.A., we can see that the different methods are used in a complementary way, in order to guarantee better results, since as Hall (2004) mentions, "the use of descriptive methods in functional assessment in the absence of experimental methods would fail to identify the behavioral functions of behavioral problems, or worse, would identify inappropriate functions" (p. 524).

Up to this point and from a general perspective, it is possible and suggested to use various techniques in order to determine the function of problematic behavior, some require more training than others, and all have advantages and disadvantages, however, as Rueda & Novell (2021, p. 275) refer, "When carrying out the functional assessment, in general, the sequence followed is the following: first the indirect systems are used, then the direct descriptive systems and, finally, the functional analysis"; There are two types of functional analysis: brief and extensive. The latter involves various evaluations lasting several minutes for each condition (positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, being alone, and a control condition). Brief functional analysis, on the other hand, includes the same methodology but with a difference in the number and duration of the evaluation sessions.

Brief functional analysis arises as a response to the problem of applying an extensive or traditional functional analysis in contexts where there is limited time for its application; this analysis consists of the manipulation of a series of conditions, in intervals of 5 to 10 minutes in a period of approximately 90 minutes, in which the objective is to identify the function of the behavior that maintains the problematic behavior; for this purpose, a multi-element design is used consisting of two phases, the first called analogous, aims to select the function associated with the highest percentage of problematic behaviors, for this purpose, participants are observed in the various conditions that may be maintaining the behavior (it is supported by previously collected information); the second phase, contingency reversal, aims at the experimental manipulation of the functions to corroborate or discard the

results observed in the analogous phase. Here, participants are observed in three more conditions. In the first contingency reversal I, the condition that produced the highest percentage of problematic behavior is presented, with the difference that the consequence is presented contingent on the appearance of an appropriate response (previously trained) while the problematic behavior is ignored. The second reversal consists of a control condition, in which the condition of the analogous phase that produced the highest percentage of problematic behavior is repeated. Finally, contingency reversal II is carried out, in which the condition carried out in contingency reversal I is presented again (Northup et al. 1991).

From the above, Ruiz's study (2016) emerges, in which he analyzed the disruptive behaviors of a first-year Primary Education student in an ordinary classroom in the City of Jaén, Spain. The research was carried out in three phases. In the first phase, an unsystematic observation was carried out to obtain general information, identification of the behaviours under study, facts, antecedents and consequences. In the second phase, the information was analysed and the most frequent problematic behaviours were selected, as well as the antecedents and consequences. Finally, in the third phase, a registration sheet was made in order to carry out a systematic observation, in which the date, time, problematic behaviour, antecedents, consequences and the category to which the behaviour belonged were recorded. After this, an analysis of the information and formulation of functional hypotheses was carried out. However, experimental manipulation was not carried out. It was concluded that it is through this procedure that it is possible to formulate hypotheses about those functions that could be maintaining the problematic behaviour, thus allowing the development of intervention proposals appropriate to the behaviours to be modified. This type of study would correspond to the first phase of a brief functional analysis, that is, to the analogous phase (Northup et al. 1991).

Now, according to a study carried out with a single-subject experimental design (N=1) in which a five-phase procedure was carried out, 1) baseline, 2) hypothesis formulation, 3) manipulative functional analysis, 4) functional treatment and 5) follow-up, it was shown that in schools it is possible to carry out functional evaluations followed by a brief functional analysis to children who present severe behavioral difficulties, significantly reducing study behaviors, in addition to providing the opportunity to carry out and apply treatments and/or interventions without altering the normal course of classes, or removing students from their classrooms (Calvillo & Fernández, 2003). Within this order of ideas and according to another exploratory and clinical study in which a brief functional analysis of alternate measures of 10 minutes was designed, to two people who presented challenging behaviors, the conditions of noncontingent reinforcement, contingent reinforcement, demand and alone were tested, it was possible to find and verify the main functions that cause and maintain the

behaviors under study, in which it was concluded that it is feasible to carry out this type of analysis in natural contexts, where the extensive form is not an option (Forteza, 2014).

Another study analyzed 79 cases of outpatients at the Division of Developmental Disabilities in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Iowa during the period from 1987 to 1990, in which an analysis of the functional evaluations of patients who presented problematic and self-injurious behaviors was performed. Among its main objectives, it was defined the analysis of the percentage of cases in which it was possible to specify which conditions maintained the problematic behavior; the analysis of the percentage of patients who decreased the problematic behavior and increased alternative behaviors, as a result of the identification and manipulation of the maintenance variables; as well as the analysis of the scope of the procedure for its replication in other cases that present the same response topographies. The results indicated that 1) the maintenance conditions were identified in 74% of the cases, in which the target behavior occurred during the evaluation; 2) in 54% of the cases it was possible to reduce the problematic behavior by implementing an appropriate contingency for it; 3) the target behavior was reduced by 84% when it appeared during the assessment (after the maintenance contingency had been identified); 4) the appearance of appropriate behaviors increased by 65% when the assessments focused only on them; 5) overall the percentage of behavioral change, whether in problematic or appropriate behavior, occurred in 77% of the assessments. These results suggest that one of the difficulties of the procedure is the limited appearance of problematic behaviors during the assessment, indicating that the procedure is replicable and generalizable to a large part of the population, as long as there is a high frequency of appearance of problematic behaviors during the same (Derby et al. 1992).

Based on the results of various investigations, it is known that most behavioral problems are acquired and maintained by reinforcement, therefore analyzing behavior only topographically does not produce sufficient information when making an intervention plan, which is obtained through an analysis of the functions of behavior that provides important and relevant information for the design of behavior modification programs (Iwata & Worsdell, 2005).

In general, the purposes of a functional analysis would be summarized in three large sections, firstly the description of the behavior and the events associated with it, secondly the elaboration of the functional hypotheses and thirdly their verification, therefore and as the ultimate goal, the goal of the evaluation consists of using all the information collected to design and evaluate intervention programs that result in the modification of the target behavior. These programs are based on the understanding of the contingencies that influence behavior, from which it is possible to determine the behavioral change strategies (Kazdin, 2000).

There are various types of interventions in behavior modification, some of the most common categories are 1) modification of antecedents and situational events, 2) teaching alternative skills, 3) interventions on consequences, and 4) lifestyle interventions (Rueda & Novell, 2021).

An important point to take into account is the issue of the validity of the programs and strategies of behavioral modification. To do this, it is necessary to have data that allow measuring the results during and at the end of an intervention. A baseline or operant rate of the target behavior is essential to achieve this objective. Therefore, it is possible and necessary to involve parents and teachers by filling out records of problematic behaviors, since in behavioral modification, direct observation of open behavior is the most important and central measure of the intervention. In the classroom, the frequency and severity of the behavior can be evaluated, observing when and under what circumstances they occur, in addition to analyzing whether the response changes after the intervention (Kazdin, 2000). The above is supported by the study by Calvillo and Fernández (2003) where it was confirmed that it is viable, under supervision and training, for teachers to participate in the functional assessment processes, either by controlling or manipulating the experimental conditions, as well as intervening in the problematic behavior, that is, in the intervention phase, which demonstrated that these procedures, when executed by the same classroom teacher, allow the activities to develop normally, without altering their course; as mentioned by Sattler (2003, p. 248) *"The behavioral intervention plan must be practical, viable and reasonable, and must help the student to benefit from classroom instruction. It must be adapted to the student's needs. In general, it must have gradual improvement goals designed to reduce problematic behavior and not just a large-scale improvement goal."*

## DISCUSSION

According to the results, two important issues can be highlighted, firstly the presence of a high frequency of problematic behaviors in school classrooms (Valencia & Andrade, 2015) and secondly, the amount of time available to carry out evaluations of these behaviors, with a high degree of reliability without interfering in the normal development of the class (Calvillo & Fernández, 2003), characteristics that together have been studied theoretically and empirically, giving the Functional Evaluation and subsequent Brief Functional Analysis an important advantage over other evaluation methods, however, most of these studies (Forteza, 2014) have been carried out in non-Mexican population, as well as have focused their attention on population that presents some type of disability comorbid with the presentation of problematic behaviors (Derby et al., 1992). It has been shown that, through functional assessment and analysis, it is possible to gather the necessary elements to formulate hypotheses about the function

of behavior and the development and implementation of behavior modification programs, which focus their goals on reducing the frequency of problematic behaviors, as well as increasing appropriate behaviors that benefit the comprehensive development of children and adolescents.

In recent years, and despite the significant development of research focused on the development of evidence-based treatments, the starting point that largely guarantees the success of interventions, evaluation, has been neglected. Currently, the normative criteria that govern Mexican education are based on clear, concrete and precise principles, including inclusive, equitable, comprehensive and diverse education (SEP, 2019), which frame the criteria for action that support and management teaching staff must take into account when intervening in situations in which children and adolescents face barriers to learning and participation, such as severe behavioral difficulties or how behavioral problems have been handled. However, derived from the search for protocols, research, articles, theses or manuals that are adapted to the intercultural context of Mexico, there is little empirical research that accounts for the effectiveness and viability of the application of this evaluation method in school contexts. Although there are theoretical references (Rueda & Novell, 2021) that allow laying the foundations for the elaboration of the processes, these have not been put into practice. It would be convenient to carry out studies with the Mexican population that show the advantages and disadvantages of carrying out this procedure.

On the other hand, it is important to mention that in the studies carried out, there was very little participation of regular classroom teachers, the control and management of the situation was carried out entirely and under the direction of psychologists who are experts in functional evaluation; In the case of the Mexican Educational System, there are support services for regular education, which in their organic structure, have the psychology specialist, who could act as the professional who guides said evaluation, always with the support of regular classroom teachers, since as concluded in the study by Calvillo & Fernández (2003), and in order not to interfere with the normal development of the class, group and support teachers actively participate in both the evaluation and intervention stages.

Finally, according to the review of both theoretical and experimental procedures, it is concluded that there are elements or phases that generally coincide in the implementation of an intervention strategy, always starting from an initial assessment. The phases or processes are framed in four major stages, which are 1) functional assessment, which includes the comprehensive approach to the behavior problem through the use of tools such as observation, identification of the target behavior, establishment of its baseline that includes frequency, intensity and severity, that is, the topography of the behavior, as well as the collection of information from various sources of the student's immediate context; 2) brief functional analysis, which

consists of the formulation and verification of functional hypotheses, information that provides sufficient data for the proposal of the intervention plan; 3) implementation of the intervention or behavioral modification plan, in which some strategies are considered such as the modification of antecedents, consequences, context, teaching of alternative skills or intervention in the lifestyle; and finally; 4) evaluation and monitoring, in which a comparison is made between the pre-treatment baseline and the post-treatment results. In this last phase, it is possible to verify that the changes in behavior have occurred as a result of the intervention, in addition to monitoring that the changes are maintained over time.

It is concluded that the evaluation and functional analysis procedures are a tool that allows the detection, analysis and intervention of behavioral problems, which makes it possible to reduce and/or eliminate some of the Barriers to Learning and Participation faced by girls, boys and adolescents who present problematic behaviors.

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