
Reframing Applied Behavior Analysis into a Trauma-Informed Therapy: An Examination of the Relationship Between Applied Behavior Analysis and Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms in Adults with Autism

Abstract

Applied behavior analysis, also known as ABA, is a therapy based on the science of learning and behavior. It is heavily utilized for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other developmental disorders. Though many special educators see ABA as a foundation for our practice, recent research has voiced concerns about the practice inflicting further harm on students in adults with autism. Some adults interviewed on ABA go far as to say that it is an unethical intervention that ignores the voices of people with autism. The question is not if the two are caused or correlated, but how can we adjust this behavior therapy to be more trauma-informed? As educators, we are uniquely positioned to adapt applied behavior analysis into a trauma-informed practice in which we can elevate our students, education and personal growth. First, however, we must ask how we can do this in an effective way that benefits students, teachers, and districts as a whole.

Research Proposal

Introduction and Significance

As previously mentioned, applied behavior analysis is a behavior-based therapy utilized in training students with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities. It improves cognitive language, social, and self-help skills in young students, and intensive, comprehensive intervention aims to improve self-advocacy skills. Older students and young adults focus on teaching behaviors important to their success at home, in school, and society.

Past research has suggested that this system has an impact beyond just behavior for adults with ASD. And research studies. ABA has been associated with PTSD-like symptoms in as many as 86% of students with autism. Students have undergone ABA training, and educators who used to be in a classroom have spoken out about the therapy style's risks.

Many would agree that a system ignoring minority voices must be changed. Lived experience is something that no amount of research or education can match. We must ask ourselves if we will listen to statistics or the students, patients, and others affected by our actions and education system. Most agree that ignoring students' active voices and pain is negligent, so why continue using a system that is not trauma-informed?

According to the US Department of health and human services, a practice can be trauma-informed when it encourages patient empowerment, choice, collaboration, safety, and trustworthiness. In summation, trauma-informed practices are people-centered. They focus on the empowerment of the student, allowing them to use their strengths to develop their skills further. It focuses on students' choices regarding their therapy options and considers which options work and which do not work for each student. Collaboration centered on families and students in therapy planning. A trauma-informed practice must also emphasize safety and trustworthiness between the student and their provider.

Most importantly, trauma-informed care focuses on the patient and the impact that their services will leave on them. Disabilities are intrinsic in nature, so the therapies we use will be individualized and adapted to each individual. Studies show that ABA tends to mask symptoms and behaviors of autism rather than teach coping mechanisms.

Reframing ABA would listen to the students giving active feedback and changing therapy to fit their needs. The widespread use of applied behavior analysis and the different laws between education and state regulatory reform makes it much more difficult. Building on a small scale

and across state borders would be ideal. There is concern about retraining staff that has been certified and applied behavior analysis and funding this reformation.

Though special education is a small field, most, if not all, have come into contact with someone living with a functional disability, whether it be Autism Spectrum disorder or otherwise. It is unjust to hear the voices of those negatively affected and not want to do anything about it. By pulling knowledge from local professionals, we can look at ways to improve the quality of life and future communications and students with autism ending the cycle of trauma. The goal is to do this in a way that encourages schools, districts, and teachers by minimizing the cost and training and instead adapting what we already know and used to be more trauma-informed.

Literature Review

Interestingly, most of our classrooms and academic life are based on feedback. We receive criticism, adapt to it, and fix our mistakes to learn more and in a better way. This process does not stop suddenly. Even as educators, we are constantly changing for the betterment of our students. Educators teach 30 years, not one year 30 times. Every year a different group of students is impacted. Every one of them has their own needs and requires a different kind of lesson teachers thrive off feedback. We learn what students can handle, what works for them, and what does not.

Now, we have students who have experienced ABA and are old enough to provide feedback. It is, again, time to listen to them, accept their feedback, and change as necessary. The research examined for this proposal elevated the voices of adults with autism that have experienced negative side effects from applied behavior analysis. One researcher, Kupferstein, ran a study on individuals exposed to ABA (4). Participants who were exposed to ABA of all ages were found to have an 86% higher chance of meeting PTSD criteria than those who were not.

Applied behavior analysis is often seen as a systematic approach and understanding the behavior of social interest, as discussed by Barrett, Ross, Cihon, and Weiss in their evaluation of Kupferstein's study (6). The methodology of Kupferstein's research was discussed at length as well as her findings' legitimacy. Upon further investigation, it was determined that although ABA is the most widespread and largest category of interventions for individuals with disabilities, the data should not be ignored, and the warnings should be taken seriously.

As a practice, it should be noted that ABA complements nearly any educational endeavor for students with disabilities or without disabilities. However, that does not mean that it is without fault. In the book *Ethics for Behavior Analysts* by Mary Burch, we see the crude history of ABA and its ties to questionable and unethical practices such as electroshock therapy and restraints on students with disabilities. Like most educational tools, ABA is constantly evolving to meet the needs of students. Applied behavior analysis is constantly reviewed for ethical compliance by the BACB, the Behavior Analysis Certification Board, and the Ethical Compliance Code.

So the question lies then what do we do? Richard L Simpson, a professor from the University of Kansas, explored the different effective intervention and preparation practices for

students with ASD in a journal submitted to the Council for Exceptional Children. Simpson explores the notion that not every method approved by the state or school district for students with ASD is tolerant or has a logical foundation. He explains that the field of autism spectrum disorder is noted for a willingness to accept unconventional methods, interventions, and treatments. Simpson explores the dangers and the betterment of adapting old procedures to fit our students. His paper is the inspiration for reframing applied behavior analysis in a way that is functional for students and accessible to all districts, regardless of their financial stability.

Hypothesis

We do not need to ask ourselves if applied behavior analysis is dangerous or harmful. If there is ever an inkling of a thought that practice is problematic, we should immediately look to change it. It is our obligation to show students that their voices will be heard if something is not working. As individuals, we can watch and listen and advocate for individuals with disabilities that may not be taken seriously in the academic world. As educators, we are tasked with advocating for our students under all circumstances. We have seen the pain that non-trauma-informed behavioral therapy can cause, and now it is time to reform and adapt for the betterment of our students and the generations to come. We have the opportunity to change how our students live, improving their quality of life and their future of communication, so why wouldn't we? This research proposal will focus on adapting ABA and changing it to be more trauma-informed on a small scale so that it may be implemented later across the classrooms, regardless of the district's financial state.

Materials, Procedures, and Timeline

We will first gather information on the special education program budgets and our local school districts for this project. It is important to see what kind of allocations these programs are given so that we know how adaptable we must be in making ABA more trauma-informed. Budget is something that is constantly going through the minds of many educators. Locally, special educators have been known to train their paraprofessionals and spend their own time, money, and resources on training. If we are to push for reform in applied behavior analysis, we must consider the monetary constraints that many of our local districts face.

The project's second step will be collecting participants, special educators, special Ed directors, and other administrators in local school districts. Our initial sweep for participants will be an anonymous digital survey sent by email. In this survey, we will anonymously ask educators if they have been exposed to ABA training and if they utilize it in their classrooms. At this stage, we will also ask them about the out-of-pocket resources (if any) they have used when training their paraprofessionals on behavior analysis. Administrators that receive the survey will be asked if they provide training to their special education staff or if they would be willing to if ABA was to be reformed into a more inclusive trauma-based therapy.

The survey company will use Google forms as it is free, allows for anonymous responses, and accumulates data for every entry. Using Google forms, we can see who responds in each round of emails and monitor their responses. Anonymity is important for this research as it allows educators to be completely upfront and honest about their experiences with applied behavior analysis in their school districts. An optional follow-up interview will also be available at the end of the survey. This interview would share thoughts, opinions, or ideas on adjusting ABA for our future students.

Over the summer of 2023 will collect emails of possible special educators and other participants. An initial round of surveys will be sent out the first week of September 2023. September was chosen because it is early enough in the year for teachers not to be overwhelmed with IEP meetings or additional class structures. To ensure that we have a decent amount of data to go off of, a second round of emails and surveys will be sent the last week of September 2023. October will be used for follow-up interviews and comprehensive data collection. By the first week of November, data collection will be completed, and we will begin the analysis of our findings. It is important to finalize data collection before Thanksgiving break so that the surveys

and emails do not get lost in teachers' inboxes on break. The project will conclude with the presentation of the data at the senior seminar in the spring semester of 2024. The presentation will center on how this project can impact the future of Special Education.

References

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Budget Justification

The materials planned for this project proposal are all free. Google surveys and forums have been specifically chosen because it is a reputable company that offers free services and is easily accessible to local school districts. The only materials required for this research project are the presentation poster materials for the symposium listed below.

Commodities

Photocopying done on the SIUE campus	\$10
Presentation poster Materials	\$15
<u>Total</u>	\$25