On the Shoulders of Giants: Kansas City Autism Training Center

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Stand on my shoulders as I stood on Fred Skinner's shoulders. You see more big things from up here and you see further. –Ogden Lindsley (w/Nancy Hughes), 2004

Ogden Lindsley is known for many achievements in behavior analysis, but perhaps his most important and lasting mark was in the area of education. Lindsley recognized the need for a nurturing educational environment that emphasizes teaching children at their instructional level, rather than prescribing behavioral treatments based solely on diagnoses or educational classification labels. Even in the infancy of behavior analysis, Lindsley advocated that deficits observed in children were merely the consequence of deficits in the design of educational settings (1964). Lindsley's vision of quality educational settings lives on between the walls of the Kansas City Autism Training Center in Prairie Village, KS, not far from Lawrence, KS, where Lindsley researched and refined behavioral solutions for instruction.

The Kansas City Autism Training Center (KcATC) began as a joint effort between a concerned parent of a child with autism (Ron Johnson, current Executive Director and Chairman of the Board for KcATC) and a behavior analyst (Dr. Linda Heitzman-Powell, who at the time was working under the tutelage of Dr. Donald Baer). Says Johnson, "Having my son diagnosed with autism, discovering how important ABA was in the treatment of autism, along with the void in the availability of services in the area, was the initial reason I became interested in developing a center. At the time of my

son's diagnosis, information was just coming out about the Lovaas study at UCLA and the positive results from that research. While learning more about the Lovaas study and trying to create an appropriate program with our school district, I contacted the Department of Human Development and Family Life at the University of Kansas."

Since its formation, KcATC has been at the cutting edge of behavior-based education. Today, KcATC provides a number of services to families in the Greater Kansas City area, ranging from intensive autism services to their newly formed Astra Day School that entails 1:1 therapy and integrated preschool classrooms. Tanya Baynham (current Director of Center-Based Programming), describes their tactic as an "apolitical approach to intervention and education," using a mix of direct instruction and evidence-based treatments for skill acquisition and behavioral assessment, regardless of whether the child has a diagnosis of autism. Toward this end, children are grouped by ability, not age or classification. Once placed in a learning group, children are exposed to behavioral instruction techniques based on decades of rigorous experimentation.

Watching the delivery of services, observers will quickly notice two themes that would surely make the founders of applied behavior analysis proud: (1) incorporation of rate-based performance and stimulus control procedures and (2) humanistic radical-behaviorism that emphasizes positive reinforcement. As an example, consider KcATC's curriculum-based cohort learning. Children are grouped into learning cohorts based on their current levels of academic responding. The students engage in choral responding and must meet group-based criteria for reinforcement. While such arrangements have the likelihood to breed competition, KcATC staff prompt the students to encourage one another to meet their goals in an effort to obtain group celebrations. Like other KcATC programming that depicts rate-based performance, data from these teaching sessions are graphed on the Standard Celeration Chart. If a case provider begins to detect changes in

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trend, data are shown to supervisors and BCBAs to make a change in the programming. Baynham says that programs are paused until a BCBA has adequately reviewed changes and made the requisite modifications because KcATC's philosophy is that no child should be exposed to ineffective teaching. "There are no slow learners," says Baynham, "just those whose BCBAs have not accurately identified component skills, determined the current steps, or trained staff to deliver an effective program." Even more unique is KcATC's *assent-based programming* technique that promotes a humanistic approach to behavioral instruction. Scott Born, Director of Curriculum and Training states that, "A disinterested learner is a misplaced learner, or an uninteresting learning environment. We measure assent withdrawal across programs and let it inform and define the success of our intervention. We also teach children to appropriately advocate for preferred teaching arrangements and to better their social environments."

In (1992), Ogden Lindsley published a paper describing the potential for tools such as programmed instruction, precision teaching, and direct instruction and advocated that stakeholders for childhood education begin demanding these techniques. Lindsley would be proud of the work of KcATC. Through informed integration of contemporary behavior analysis (e.g., functional analyses, the verbal behavior approach, criterion-referenced assessments, stimulus control topography coherence theory) with the time-tested skill acquisition approaches that Lindsley advocated, KcATC is well positioned on the shoulders of Lindsley and Skinner, looking optimistically to a future where KcATC hopes to begin expanding its services to teenagers with autism, providing home services to children with autism and children at risk for autism and systematizing their methods to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of child and staff learning.

For more information on KcATC, visit www.kcatc.org/.

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