


Using Brief Assessments of Important Indicators to Inform School-Based Interventions and Practice

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Abstract

Despite having a large number of readily available measures with strong psychometric properties, schools face barriers in implementing many of these tools. One logical candidate to explain limited practical utility of existing measures is their cost, both financial and time. Thus, the purpose of this special issue is to highlight several recently developed measures that hold promise for meeting the demand for brief, accurate, and useful educational assessments that can be used across the multiple systems of schools. The articles feature feasible and useful assessments that provide data at the school, classroom, and individual student levels. These measures consider the system-level aspects of implementation, directly address the feasibility aspects of screening, and avoid the historically-rooted assumptions that longer assessments are quality assessments. These articles push the science in new and positive directions with an emphasis on how brief and efficient tools can be part of the solution toward improving the academic and social emotional outcomes of youth.

Keywords

prevention, assessment, measurement

On the one hand, it would be hard to argue that there is a shortage of psychometrically sound measures of educational practices and outcomes. An entire, multi-billion-dollar industry has emerged to create, evaluate, and disseminate these assessment tools (Hoxby, 2002; Jackson & Bassett, 2005). On the other hand, there is a shortage of technically sound assessments that are practical, efficient, and dynamic enough to inform daily educational practices. School personnel do not simply need *more* assessments. Rather, they need better assessments that fit the contextual demands of school. In particular, with the growth of tiered models of intervention supports in schools (e.g., Multi-Tiered System of Supports [MTSS]; School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports [SWPBIS]), schools need feasible and useful assessments that provide data at the school, classroom, and individual student levels. Thus, the purpose of this special issue is to highlight several recently developed measures that hold promise for meeting the demand for brief, accurate, and useful educational assessments that can be used across the multiple systems of schools.

Advances in school-based screening are necessitated by several ongoing realities. First, despite the promise of school-based screening, most youth with social behavioral concerns go undetected and untreated (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002; Mills et al., 2006). Little progress has been made to reduce this identification and service gap even though it has been well known and documented for decades

(Lewinsohn, Rohde, & Seeley, 1998; Pfeiffer & Reddy, 1998). Second, despite the development and availability of many technically sound screening tools, one study estimated that fewer than 2% of schools conducted any systematic mental health screening on a regular basis (Romer & McIntosh, 2005). In combination, the reality that tools exist but schools do not routinely use them to address the identification and service gap strongly implies that existing measures, despite strong psychometric properties, may come with barriers to their widespread use. One logical candidate to explain limited practical utility of existing measures is their cost, both financial and time (McIntosh, Reinke, & Herman, 2010; Romer & McIntosh, 2005). Although existing tests are “brief,” completing a 30-item, 5- to 10-min survey on an entire classroom of students would still take several hours of a teacher’s time.

Third, many schools have moved to public health approaches to address the population-level academic and behavior health of students. These approaches, like MTSS and SWPBIS, require population-based screening approaches which are much more practical and likely to yield public

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health benefit than individual approaches (Dowdy, Ritchey, & Kamphaus, 2010; Herman, Riley-Tillman, & Reinke, 2012; Short & Strein, 2008). These systems-level approaches require their own set of assessment strategies to specify implementation factors, processes, and barriers and inform sustained implementation (Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008; Herman et al., 2012).

To address these needs, two articles in the special issue focus on measuring these systemic aspects of schools, particularly applied to the school-level SWPBIS model. First, Turi et al. (2016) describe a five-item tool, entitled the *Assessment of Barriers to Implementation and Sustainability in Schools* (ABISS), that can be used to measure barriers to sustained implementation of SWPBIS. Second, Filter, Sytsma, and McIntosh (2016) describe a tool to assess staff commitment or buy-in to SWPBIS. Both articles highlight the need for brief tools to guide school decision making about how to implement and sustain SWPBIS over time. These measures hold promise toward informing our knowledge of how barriers and buy-in impact sustainability of practices over time, and supporting schools in improving SWPBIS over time.

The article by Reinke, Herman, and Newcomer (2016) describes a tool that can be used to support teacher implementation of effective classroom management practices, a system-level process, and to assess individual student response to classroom interventions. The *Student-Teacher Classroom Interaction Observation* (ST-CIO) is a 5-min observation tool for assessing student-teacher interaction patterns including praise-reprimand ratios and student disruptive and aggressive behavior. Notably, Reinke et al.'s (2016) article also hints at the tools promise for assessing culturally responsive classroom practices. One of the essential aspects of teacher professional development is the need for ongoing coaching/mentoring and ongoing performance feedback about skill development (Reinke, Herman, & Sprick, 2011; Stormont, Reinke, Newcomer, Darney, & Lewis, 2015). The ST-CIO is a useful tool for providing objective and meaningful feedback to teachers toward informing classroom practices.

The last two articles address the feasibility gap of existing social behavioral screening tools. First, Stormont, Thompson, Herman, and Reinke (2016) describe the ongoing evaluation of single-item readiness indicators, the *Kindergarten Academic and Behavior Readiness Screener* (K-ABR), that can be used to efficiently screen youth at risk for academic and behavior problems. These single items directly address the most significant aspects of cost; it is free and it would take less than 5 min for a teacher to rate an entire class. The study showed that the K-ABR identified students who were below benchmark and not prepared to start school with higher accuracy than a 14-item social rating scale, holding promise for schools in using this tool to accurately identify students in Kindergarten who would

benefit from additional supports. Kilgus, Sims, von der Embse, and Taylor (2016) evaluated the *Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener* (SAEBRS), a quick and easy universal screener for behavioral and emotional risk among elementary students. This measure assesses both social and academic behaviors, offering a feasible and efficient method for schools to determine students in need of social and/or academic supports.

Collectively, these articles highlight a promising direction for future assessment development and research. By extending measurement approaches to consider the system-level aspects of implementation, by directly addressing feasibility aspects of screening, and by avoiding historically rooted assumptions of quality assessments (e.g., longer is better), these articles will push the science in new and positive directions. Brief and efficient tools will be part of the solution to improve the academic and social emotional outcomes of youth.

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