

# ASSESSMENT FOCUS

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## Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability in Today's Schools

*Donna R. Smith, EdD*

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) publication, *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice II* identifies 10 domains of school psychology leadership and function. The first domain, Data Based Decision Making and Accountability, is employed as the organizing theme for the practice of psychology in today's schools and should "permeate every aspect of the practice" (Ysseldyke, et al., 1997, p. 7).

School psychologists are involved in a number of problem-solving, decision-making activities. For some time, the school psychologist has been expected to identify why a student experiences learning and/or behavior difficulties. However, today's school psychologist also is expected to determine how best to intervene to help the student and to measure the effects of those interventions. In other words, the focus on assessment of the student has widened to include the evaluation of the system.

Many school psychologists are struggling to find the right tools to get the job done. They are still required to answer eligibility questions, but now they are also accountable to use assessment data to make intervention-related decisions about instructional practices, student modifications and accommodations, and appropriate monitoring procedures. Some were not trained to function in the expanding consultant role; others are wondering how they can add these new responsibilities to their growing list of things to do.

Secondly, with renewed interest and funding for early identification of, and intervention for, students at risk for academic or emotional/behavioral difficulties, additional expectations are levied on assessment specialists to find this larger body of students sooner without administering comprehensive evaluation batteries and to recommend appropriate interventions. As a result, the need for efficient and effective screening procedures has grown, the demand that the school psychologist employ assessment tools closely linked to intervention has increased, and the value of research-based, proactive interventions that can be implemented in general, rather than special, education settings has dramatically increased.

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## Empirically Based Decision Making

*Thomas R. Kratochwill, PhD, Karen Callan Stoiber, PhD, and Donna R. Smith, EdD*

Increasingly, psychologists and educators have been interested in using empirically supported intervention programs in psychological and educational practice (Kratochwill & Stoiber, in press; Stoiber & Kratochwill, in press). In fact, there has been considerable interest in developing and disseminating empirically supported intervention guidelines in American Psychological Association (APA) Divisions 12, 16, 17, and 53, as well as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC).

As part of the effort to implement interventions in applied settings, psychologists and educators have been interested in instruments that both help design intervention programs and monitor outcomes of these programs.

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To enable psychologists to address this need, the *Academic Competency Evaluation Scales* (ACES) (DiPerna & Elliott, in press) provide an integrated pre-referral system for identifying students who are at risk or who demonstrate learning difficulties.

An additional challenge is to monitor intervention effectiveness for the individual student and concurrently measure the effects of the decisions that were made at the group and systems levels. Terry B. Gutkin, Editor of *School Psychology Quarterly*, recently announced the addition of a new section for the journal titled, Empirically Supported Interventions, to be co-edited by Thomas Kratochwill and Karen Stoiber (Gutkin, 2000). A primary purpose of the addition is to strengthen the connection between research and practice in the schools so as to increase the likelihood that an intervention or prevention program will be effective.

In 1999, Division 16 of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Society for the Study of School Psychology (SSSP)

created a task force devoted to empirically supported interventions and will coordinate efforts with APA Divisions 12, 17, and 53.

Finally, school psychologists “should be expected to be called upon by school administrators to help in assessment practices designed to meet general public accountability responsibilities” (Ysseldyke, et al., 1999, p. 7). The mandate to include special education students in large-scale testing programs is being implemented in school districts everywhere. Both general and special educators have a greater responsibility to demonstrate student growth through program effectiveness. Although some special education students will require alternate assessments, the majority of students can participate with appropriate and reasonable accommodations.

Assessment tools like the *Dynamic Assessment of Test Accommodations* (DATA: The Psychological Corporation, in press), will empower schools to use research-based, empirical evidence to assign appropriate testing

accommodations that will provide identified students the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned without unfair testing advantages.

The role of school psychology is evolving. There is a growing emphasis on accountability in education, and school psychology must be able to meet the challenges. The demands for early identification of, and intervention for, children at risk for failure, the directives for research-based instructional programs, and the inclusion of all children in activities that evaluate program effectiveness, require new tools, additional training, and unwavering support for the school psychologist who will rely on empirical evidence to support decision making.

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## Research-Based Intervention Planning and Implementation

Denise Hildebrand, PhD and Mary Pinon, PhD

Research-based intervention programs have distinct advantages over other approaches in the school setting, including (a) allowing a greater understanding of interventions evaluated under research conditions, (b) identifying those conditions under which the intervention was effective, and (c) identifying whether an intervention is likely to benefit a student with a particular difficulty (Kratochwill & Stoiber, 1999). From a research standpoint, empirically based evaluations of intervention programs are perceived as the standard against which other programs are compared.

When educators and school psychologists implement an intervention program, they are often uncertain regarding the program's effectiveness with their students. Consequently, intervention programs may be selected and implemented based upon informal judgments of a plan's effectiveness.

It is apparent that education personnel responsible for selecting intervention programs need a quick, reliable method with which to make their decisions. In the role of intervention planning, adopting a program that has been established as having effective outcomes for students with particular needs provides both

cost-effective and educational advantages. Unfortunately, at this time, empirically supported intervention programs are limited in number and scope.

In response to increasing interest in research-based intervention, the American Psychological Association (APA) created a Task Force on Promotion and Dissemination of Psychological Procedures (1995) in order to facilitate the development of a database of empirically supported interventions. Around the same time, the *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* published a special issue called “Educational Intervention Research.” Its contributors voiced their positions on the optimal characteristics of intervention research (Zigmond, 1996), barriers to conducting intervention research and disseminating findings (Torgeson, 1996), children's development in relation to educational intervention (Morris, 1996), and other related issues. Since then, a movement has grown to examine the role and scope of research in intervention (Lonigan, Elbert, & Bennett Johnson, 1998).

In response to a clearly growing need, The Psychological Corporation has made it a goal to develop programs that have educational relevance and are grounded in sound empirical research. One of our published intervention programs, the *Process Assessment of the Learner* (PAL): *Guides for Intervention* (Berninger, 1998), is based upon a longitudinal

research program conducted by author Dr. Virginia Berninger of the University of Washington. PAL *Guides for Intervention* is designed to teach reading skills (e.g., phonological awareness) and writing skills (e.g., spelling; handwriting automaticity) to children in kindergarten through grade six who are experiencing learning difficulties. The upcoming PAL: *Test Battery for Reading and Writing* (in press) has been developed to assist school psychologists in assessing student strengths and weaknesses in key reading and writing processes and will link directly to the PAL *Guides for Intervention* as part of the empirically validated assessment-intervention model.

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# Helping Schools Formulate Decisions about Test Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Lynn S. Fuchs, PhD

Is it fair for an individual with a disability to take a nonstandard administration of the state or district achievement test when students without disabilities don't have this option? If so, should all students with the same disability get the same accommodation? How do we know we are choosing the right accommodation for any one student with a disability?

Such questions are important to school personnel across the United States because the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require states and districts to include students with disabilities in accountability programs with appropriate accommodations. Appropriate accommodations produce scores for students with disabilities that measure the same constructs as standard assessments measure in nondisabled individuals. The purpose of identifying appropriate accommodations is to achieve valid, not optimal, scores. A major premise in the validity of test accommodations is the notion of differential boost, whereby students with disabilities must demonstrate substantially stronger performance as a function of accommodations than would be expected among nondisabled students (Phillips, 1994).

Unfortunately, policymakers and test experts do not agree on which accommodations preserve the meaningfulness of scores for students with disabilities. In fact, some states prohibit the very accommodations that other states recommend (Thurlow, Seyfarth, Scott, & Ysseldyke, 1997). Without clear guidelines, the responsibility for deciding which accommodations are meaningful falls on the child's teacher, who may not have the appropriate resources, experience, and/or information needed to make the best decision. Problems with formulating sound accommodation decisions are especially difficult for students with learning disabilities (LD), who constitute more than half the population of students with disabilities. This is the case for several reasons. Research on this topic is lean. Students with LD are a dramatically heterogeneous population, making conceptual analysis of meaningful test accommodations impossible. And the nature of these students' disabilities, involving reading and math deficits, is intertwined with the constructs measured on large-scale assessments.

These considerations support two major assumptions about the validity of test accommodations for students with LD. First, as with all students with disabilities, accommodations must produce differential boost. Second, specifically for students with LD, the appropriateness of a test accommodation must be determined by individual diagnosis rather than by the LD label.

Relying on these two assumptions, a measure recently has been developed to help schools identify appropriate accommodations for students with LD. This objective diagnostic procedure, which is designed to supplement teacher judgments, is called the *Dynamic Assessment of Test Accommodations* (DATA). With DATA, teachers administer brief tests, with and without accommodations. They then calculate the performance boost associated with each accommodation for an individual student. Teachers compare the size of these boosts to normative information indicating the effect the different test accommodations typically have for students without LD. In this way, teachers identify individual children with LD whose performance boosts substantially exceed those of nondisabled students.



Consider Bobby, a fourth-grade student with LD. Using DATA to assess his response to accommodations on mathematics tests, his teacher administers four 25-item tests:

- A standard test (no calculator; no reader),
- A test with extended time,
- A test with a calculator; and
- And a test with an adult reading non-mathematical content.

Total time is about one-half hour across the four administrations, and all tests are group administered. With extended time, Bobby's score remained the same; with a calculator, his score increased by five problems; and with an adult reader, his score increased by 19 problems. Bobby's teacher compares these boosts to fourth-grade norms and finds that Bobby's boost exceeds normative criteria with the adult reader accommodation.

Based on these comparisons, in combination with her observations of Bobby's classroom performance, the teacher recommends that Bobby be provided with a reader for mathematics concepts/applications tests that are administered as part of the regular instructional program, as well as those that are used in the statewide assessment.

In this way, teachers use DATA to determine which students with LD warrant which test accommodations. Research (Fuchs et al., in press; Fuchs et al., 2000) shows that DATA-based methods are a better predictor of students' actual performance boosts on standardized achievement tests than other methods. For example, in a study conducted with 400 students with and without LD in reading, the average accommodation boost on the standardized reading comprehension test was larger for students to whom teachers had denied accommodations than it was for students to whom they had awarded accommodations.

By contrast, accommodation boosts were statistically significantly larger for students to whom DATA had awarded accommodations compared to students to whom DATA had denied accommodations. Consequently, DATA dramatically strengthens teachers' judgments about which students with LD benefit from accommodations.

As schools comply with the 1997 IDEA amendments, they must formulate decisions about which students require which accommodations for participation in state and district assessments. With the use of DATA and other objective methods for identifying valid accommodations, decisions about test accommodations should become more sound, and the whole issue of test accommodations should become less controversial.

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On the heels of interest in formalizing functional assessment strategies, and based on recent legislation through IDEA (1997), many professionals working in applied settings are interested in designing intervention programs based on the functions of behavior (see Schill, Kratochwill, & Gardner, 1996). Public Law 105-17 mandates that students with disabilities who demonstrate behaviors that either interfere with their own learning or the learning of others must receive a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). The FBA must be conducted in the setting in which the behavior occurs within 10 days whenever a disciplinary decision has been made that relates to a child's behavior. The law also states that (a) an intervention must be implemented based on the results of the FBA; and (b) the outcomes associated with the behavioral intervention plan must be monitored. Thus, the school must document that the intervention was implemented as intended and whether or not the intervention is working as planned.

By design, then, functional assessments should gather information using procedures aimed at understanding the reason for the challenging behavior and then link this understanding to an effective behavioral intervention plan.

Typically, functional assessment strategies involve examining both performance and skill deficits that are identified in the student's behavior. For example, a student might exhibit problematic behaviors in which environmental functions, such as the child's avoidance of a difficult task or a need for attention during large group instruction, can be identified. In addition, the functional assessment may target a student's social deficits that interfere with the development of prosocial behaviors in the school setting.

### Addressing the Need

However, what has been missing in the area of functional assessment is a well-developed set of social competencies, which can be linked to the various functions of behavior. Two new products published by The Psychological Corporation will address these needs in several ways.

The *Social Competency Intervention Planner: A Functional Assessment of Behavior* has been developed to help psychologists and educators design interventions based on the functions or intents of both socially

competent and challenging behaviors. The *Social Competency Intervention Planner* is designed specifically to incorporate a functional assessment guided by specific social competency domains that can be used to develop, implement, and monitor various prosocial intervention foci. Social competence refers to an individual's capacity to develop and function successfully in personal, social, and work-oriented situations. We know that such social competencies are critically interrelated with a child's development of academic and cognitive competence. The *Social Competency Intervention Planner* involves several different social competency dimensions including the following components:

- General guidelines for understanding children's behavioral challenges and for promoting children's social competence in school and other related settings.
- An elaboration of comprehensive social competence goals that underlie the system (e.g., subgoals and performance indicators identifying the types of behavior, skills, and accomplishments that children can demonstrate to reflect comprehensive social competence goals).
- A specific protocol for documenting and using performance-based information about children's challenging behaviors and social competencies as part of an ongoing process of designing and refining intervention strategies.
- Guidelines for how various mediators or consultees can engage in collaborative discussions about children's social competence.
- A detailed list of resources and materials related to promoting social competence in applied settings.

Clearly, the *Social Competency Intervention Planner* extends traditional functional assessment by providing a well-defined linkage with specific social competency domains. It offers an explicit methodology for teachers, other educational professionals, and parents to set and evaluate functional goals and fits within a solution-focused model of psycho-educational services. It also promotes intervention strategies that can be implemented to increase children's social competence performance along with strategies that correspond to more traditional functional aspects of their challenging

behavior in both performance and skill domains. Perhaps most importantly, the *Social Competency Intervention Planner* offers a systematic structure for assuring empirically based decision making for individual and classroom interventions, which should lead to optimal outcomes for children and adolescents.

Individuals implementing empirically supported interventions also are interested in making decisions about the outcomes of the intervention program. Although the *Social Competency Intervention Planner* incorporates a specific component for monitoring outcomes, The Psychological Corporation is also developing a more comprehensive instrument called the *Outcomes PME* (Planning, Monitoring, Evaluating) that is designed to allow education and mental health professionals to set, monitor, and evaluate intervention outcomes of academic and social programs with a system that incorporates an emphasis on benchmarks or indicators for academic and social performances and goal attainment scaling activities. In recent years, the need to document the progress of children, especially those with disabilities or who are considered at-risk for developing disabilities, has become prominent in school and mental health settings. With the advent of the 1997 IDEA, the movement toward accountability and standards, and recent managed care policies, there is considerable interest in evaluation of outcomes in mental health and educational practice (see Hayes, Barlow, & Nelson-Gray, 1999).

Considerable interest has occurred in the development of standardized procedures to evaluate intervention outcomes. *Outcomes PME* can be used to help educators develop functional, teacher- and/or parent-valued competencies, which are connected to the essential skills children need to succeed in school and community settings. *Outcomes PME* also provides a framework to teach progress monitoring to staff within school and community settings, and to address outcomes of interventions established across a wide range of issues at the individual case, group or classroom, and system levels. It is recommended for recording and documenting progress (or lack of progress) toward a goal target. It provides an authentic measurement of children's performances over time through the use of repeated observation and recording in naturalistic or "real life" contexts.

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# The Academic Competence Evaluation Scales: A New Instrument for Assessing Academic Competence

James C. DiPerna, PhD and Stephen N. Elliott, PhD

The *Academic Competence Evaluation Scales* (ACES) is an efficient, psychometrically sound instrument for assessing the academic functioning of students in grades K-12 or college. ACES also is a useful tool for planning and evaluating classroom-based interventions for students experiencing academic difficulty. Academic competence, as measured by ACES, is defined as a multidimensional construct composed of the skills, attitudes, and behaviors of a learner that contribute to academic success in the classroom. Figure 1 displays the skills, attitudes, and behaviors contributing to academic competence.

Educators and instructional support staff are expected to make judgments about students' academic competence almost daily; however, these professionals, as well as educational researchers interested in students' learning, have not had a systematic method for assessing academic competence or conceptualizing interventions to improve it. As a result, one of the primary goals for the development of ACES was to provide educators with an assessment tool that would help them: (a) develop classroom-based interventions and (b) refine comprehensive assessment plans for students when special education services are considered.

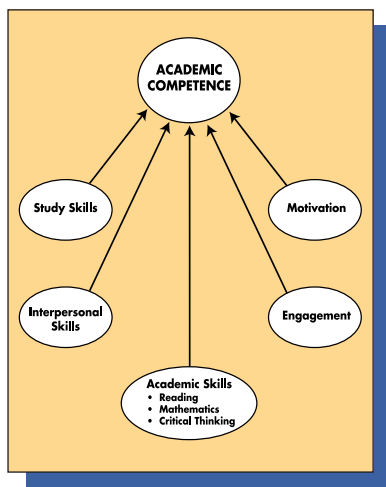


Figure 1.  
The skills, attitudes, and behaviors contributing to academic competence.

## Key Features of ACES

ACES is part of a unique system designed to facilitate assessment and intervention with students who are experiencing academic difficulties.

- The use of ratings of academic competence by both a teacher, who knows a student well, and the student, provides valuable information and opportunities to increase a student's role in assessment and intervention planning.
- The Academic Skills Scale of the ACES teacher form uses criterion-referenced ratings based on grade-level expectations in the student's school. Teachers provide ratings on a 5-point scale ranging from Far Below to Far Above grade-level expectations. Such a criterion-referenced approach to characterizing a student's functioning is consistent with many school-wide and state assessment systems.



- Following from the work of Gresham and Elliott (1990), importance ratings are used on the ACES teacher form as a tool for prioritizing target behaviors for intervention. These ratings use a 3-point scale ranging from Not Important to Critical.
- Three competency levels, Developing, Competent, and Advanced, are used to facilitate communication about a student's scores in both the academic skills and academic enablers domains. The terms emphasize a developmental perspective and help frame student concerns in a constructive, positive way. These competency levels also provide a framework for initial decisions regarding types of skills that are in need of intervention.
- Optional computer software is available that provides users with scoring assistance, as well as monitoring change in ACES scores over time. The scoring assistant also provides detailed graphical displays of ACES scores and generates basic descriptive reports the user can modify to generate a more comprehensive report regarding a student's skills.
- The use of Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS: Kiresuk, Smith, & Cardillo, 1994) provides a practical and efficient tool for monitoring the effectiveness of interventions. The ACES teacher form includes a detachable page that provides practitioners with a work sheet to develop GAS along with a template to graph change in performance of the skill targeted for intervention. The use of GAS ties the ACES and AIMS system together.
- Although ACES can be used as a stand-alone assessment instrument, a companion resource was developed, the *Academic Intervention Monitoring System* (AIMS), to provide users with strategies to facilitate the design, implementation, and evaluation of classroom-based interventions for academic skills and academic enablers.

Collectively, these seven features make ACES a unique assessment tool and assist users in developing classroom interventions. In addition, the features of AIMS help users monitor a student's progress and determine if the intervention is in need of revision. As such, ACES represents a versatile assessment tool that focuses on the academic functioning of students and fits well within the problem-solving assessment model used by many school-based instructional support teams throughout the country.

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### Summary

In summary, a variety of empirically supported interventions are increasingly being used in applied settings. Among the various ways interventions can be designed and empirically supported, functional assessment is a prominent methodology for psychologists and educators working in school and community settings. The *Social Competency Intervention Planner* is specifically designed to facilitate empirically based problem solving given consideration of the functions of behavior. However, in contrast to traditional functional assessment systems that rely heavily on operant procedures for intervention planning and monitoring, the *Social Competency Intervention Planner* incorporates a social competency focus that allows individuals to assess specific skill deficits and links intervention tactics designed specifically for this domain. Complementary to this new product is a system called *Outcomes PME* that incorporates a focus on the use of goal attainment scaling technology to monitor outcomes from educational and psychological intervention programs. Benchmarks are established in the domains of educational and psychological interventions with the intent of developing specific procedures to clearly define problems, construct rating technology using goal attainment tactics, and implement procedures for monitoring outcomes. Both new measurement tools incorporate a computer-based program to help in the application of the technology in diverse settings.

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## Conventions

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- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), New Orleans, booth #40 . . .3/28-4/1/00
- Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE)/Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), Vancouver, Canada . . . . .4/3-4/9/00
- Nelson Butter's West Coast Neuropsychology Conference (WCNP), San Diego . . .4/28-4/30/00
- American Psychiatric Association**, Chicago, booth #917 . . . . .5/13-5/18/00
- American Psychological Association (APA), Washington, booth #520 . . . .8/4-8/8/00
- Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CH.A.D.D.) Chicago . . . . .10/26-10/28/00
- National Academic of Neuropsychology (NAN), Orlando . . . . .11/15-11/18/00

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