General Growth Outcomes or Developmental and Readiness Domains? Naming Is Not Knowing!

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REACTIONS FROM THE FIELD

General Growth Outcomes or Developmental and Readiness Domains? Naming Is Not Knowing!

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The tendency has always been strong to believe that whatever received a name must be an entity or being, having an independent existence of its own. And if no real entity answering to the name could be found, men did not for that reason suppose that none existed, but imagined that it was something peculiarly abstruse and mysterious.

John Stuart Mill (as cited in Gould, 1996)

As an early childhood special educator who was asked recently to develop an evaluation to follow young children in state-funded preschools in South Carolina through the third grade, I read Priest and colleagues’ article with keen interest. I must be candid however; I have methodological concerns about their general growth outcomes (GGOs) survey. Specifically, I have questions about the representativeness of the sampling frame, which limits any generalizations to both early childhood special educators and parents of children with disabilities, and the low response rate with accompanying problems of nonresponse biases, which restricts generalization to even the two populations sampled (cf. Fowler, 2002). Nevertheless, with some familiarity of the efforts of investigators from the Early Childhood Research Institute on Measuring Growth and Development and with an understanding of the clear need for “... reliable and valid empirical data to guide the differential allocation of programmatic resources to promote the development of vulnerable children and the adaptation of their families” (Hauser-Cram, Warfield, Shonkoff, & Wymadaarden Krauss, 2001, p. 5), I believe that the manuscript serves as a useful springboard for discussion. Indeed, the authors’ paper has achieved that purpose with the editor’s requests for commentaries!

A pragmatic question emerges from my review of the Priest et al. article: How might GGOs assist me, or for that matter others, in both systematically following young children’s developmental and educational progress and determining which children might benefit from well-targeted interventions to improve their progress? My question might serve as a framework for a commentary on Priest et al. Perhaps, my comments might also apply more broadly to the recent and future efforts of investigators from the Early Childhood Research Institute on Measuring Growth and Development.

A contemporary definition of assessment for early childhood special educators is “... a generic term that refers to the process of gathering information for the purpose of making decisions” (McLean, 1996, p. 12). Moreover, assessment has four basic functions: screening, determining eligibility, planning programs, and evaluating child progress. It appears logical then to consider the explicit purpose of Priest and colleagues’ survey and how
the information gleaned from it is related to determining the nature and usefulness of GGOs.

As many readers of JEI know, assessment has had a relatively long albeit controversial history (e.g., Gould, 1996; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). In their introduction, after noting the nomothetic nature of Goal 1 of the National Education Goals Panel (1999), the investigators argue for the need for idiosyncratic assessment procedures. I doubt that the authors will receive appreciable argument from many early childhood special educators on that point. Nevertheless, I am compelled to remind them that Binet’s early assessment efforts were driven by a very similar, benevolent charge from the French Minister of Public Instruction to develop measures for identifying young children in need of educational assistance (Binet & Simon, 1916). Again, I must be forthright: the authors’ argument implying the effectiveness of the contemporary procedural safeguards of IDEA (1997) appears relatively naive. Legislative intent and regulations notwithstanding, I simply do not know of any compelling evidence that we have been doing a better job of safeguarding children and their families from inappropriate assessment and labeling practices than in previous years. Although anecdotal, my own experience in two states has suggested that children and their families continue to face many formal and informal barriers in obtaining meaningful assessments for their young children. I suspect that the problems are not restricted to South Carolina and Tennessee. If the authors have published information to the contrary, I welcome the chance to review it. My point is that in my professional experience, most often, it has been the misuse of particular assessments for inappropriate purposes that results in both assessment and service delivery problems for young children and their families (see Baglato, Neisworth, & Munson, 1997).

If I understand the investigators’ survey, they queried a sample of 1,275 professionals (53% return rate) and 1,099 parents (32% return rate) and obtained face, content, and social validity information (Baglato et al., 1997) on GGOs they extrapolated from the extant assessment literature for young children. For me, the authors’ second research question, Can a single, parsimonious set of outcomes be formulated to describe the growth of children between birth and age 8? (p. 10), represents the fundamental issue of their work with GGOs. I believe that their question is an important one. I consider the survey information presented as only a “baby step” in the difficult albeit worthwhile efforts needed to validate GGOs empirically. I want to be clear: the survey is a logical step to establish initial face, content, and social validity of GGOs. Nevertheless, consensus-driven methods are simply not sufficient to establish either the psychometric or functional nature of GGOs and their ultimate usefulness for early childhood special education (ECSE) practitioners and researchers (see Wolery, 1995). Without the necessary psychometric, feasibility, acceptability, and usability work on measures related to the outcomes, we are left with two problems: (a) How are GGOs different from or similar to existing developmental and readiness domains and milestones, and (b) How will GGOs be interpreted and used with young children and their families? I understand that Priest and colleagues argue that GGOs are different from developmental and readiness measures and that they believe the outcome measures will be more useful for the field. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced by their assertions and the data they provide from their survey.

In the remainder of my review, I will suggest several important lines of inquiry that the authors should carefully consider and address in their efforts to study GGOs systematically. I suspect from their professional presentations, several technical reports available through an Early Childhood Research Institute on Measuring Growth and Development website, and a published conceptual article (McConnell, 2000), that they have considered the issues and they are attempting to deal with them. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, information related to the recommended lines of research is not presently published. If I am incorrect, the authors ought to have discussed those findings and provided accompanying ci-
tutions in the Priest et al. article for interested professionals.

For GGOs to become meaningful for the field, four basic lines of inquiry need to be addressed. I view all four lines of inquiry as interrelated and especially important for establishing both the psychometric and functional nature of GGOs. First, psychometric examination of GGOs and the specific measures used to assess them should be performed to determine whether or not the measures and outcomes yield convincing interrater agreement, test-retest reliability, and internal consistency information. Similarly, concurrent validity investigations should be conducted to establish the relationship of the measures for GGO items and domains to other existing developmental, readiness, and achievement measures that are better known psychometrically. Second, GGOs and their accompanying measures should be demonstrated to be and not merely assumed to be useful outcomes for important stakeholders in early childhood special education. Specifically, the measures employed will need to be shown to be easily administered by and satisfactory to practitioners, parents, and researchers (i.e., feasible and acceptable). Third, even following determination of the psychometric nature and the feasibility and acceptability of GGOs, studies to assess the day-to-day usefulness of the outcomes and accompanying measures for practitioners and researchers will be needed. For example, whether or not GGOs and their measures are commonly used to make accurate decisions about further assessment (i.e., adequate sensitivity and specificity) and specific interventions will need to be carefully examined. Finally, although the authors imply that their efforts were primarily preventive (i.e., identifying young children in need of intervention), if GGOs are robustly related to readiness and early achievement, their use may also be directly linked to effective interventions and meaningful child developmental and educational progress (i.e., treatment validity). If these four lines of interrelated research are addressed and convincing evidence results in GGOs and their accompanying measures, particularly for those children who require effective interventions to resolve their developmental and readiness difficulties, our collective intervention expertise should be improved (see Curalnick, 1997). Hence, if GGOs fulfill their preventive purpose well (i.e., accurately identify children and hasten their participation in appropriate intervention), the outcome measures will also enhance their predictive validity with young children who have disabilities or who are at accelerated risk for school failure.

The recommended investigations and the difficult accompanying work are clearly a daunting challenge. If the investigators accomplish or have accomplished substantive parts of that much-needed work, they should be commended. Nevertheless, the psychometric and functional nature of GGOs appears to await additional investigations or at least dissemination of relevant information that will address the questions I raise. If the investigators have examined any of the issues, I encourage them to publish that information as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, although the outcome measures seem to have face, content, and social validity, at least for more than 50% of the professionals and 30% of the parents who responded to the survey, the usefulness of GGOs for the field of ECSE is yet to be determined. I respectfully submit that the authors’ second question, Can a single, parsimonious set of outcomes be formulated to describe the growth of children between birth and age 8? has not been addressed adequately. If the psychometric and functional nature of GGOs and their measures cannot be established with reliability and criterion-related validity investigations and subsequent demonstrations of treatment validity, then their usefulness for the field will be curtailed (see McConnell, 2000).

In the final analysis, “naming is not knowing”—at least not in a utilitarian sense. As B. F. Skinner (1945) pragmatically noted, “The ultimate criterion for the goodness of a concept is not whether two people are brought into agreement [i.e., analogous to face, content, and social validity—added by author] but whether the scientist who uses the concept can operate successfully upon his material—
all by himself if need be” (p. 293) [i.e., akin to effective assessment and intervention practices—added by author]. I understand that Skinner was referring to reliability issues or specifically interrater and interobserver agreement, but his thinking is generalizable to validity issues for educators. Without additional efforts focusing on the nature of GGOs and widespread dissemination of supporting evidence, the ultimate utility of the outcome measures, similar to a number of existing developmental and readiness milestones with unknown or insufficient psychometric qualities, will be limited. At this time, I am not convinced that GGOs will assist me in my professional endeavors to follow young children’s developmental and educational progress throughout early childhood systematically. I sincerely hope that the authors will demonstrate that my current scepticism is unfounded.

REFERENCES


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