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ABSTRACT

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CONSTRUCT VALIDITY OF THE RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT OF EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS (RAES)

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Abstract

Factor analyses identified three domains of resiliency with 11 separate factors involving 54 items for exceptional urban students based on 613 parent ratings of an initial pool of 94 items for an experimental Coping with Disabilities Scales. The factors were labeled: Knowledge of Exceptionality, Planning for Needs, and Alternative Thinking for the Exceptionality Problem Solving domain. For the Resilience Behavior domain, four factors were identified which were labeled: Modeling/Active, Self-Efficacy/Locus of Control, Positive Peer Relations and Positive Adult Relations. A Social Support domain included four factors labeled as Mother/Teacher, Nuclear Family, Extended Family and Community. The revised scale was named the Resilience Assessment of Exceptional Students (RAES) and a domain of stressors was revised and labeled Child Life Experience Checklist. Results are reviewed relevant to applications for assessment, intervention and research.

Introduction

The RAES was recently developed to provide an assessment of positive adjustment specific to exceptionalities. It is an extension of an earlier assessment that was pilot tested when reevaluating exceptional students entitled Coping with Disability Scales (CDS) developed by Perry and Bard (1992), which was found to have positive construct validity (Perry, Bard & Sullivan, 1995). The RAES was based on the selection of CDS items that matched theoretical and empirical descriptions of resilience for exceptional children (e.g., Brooks, 1999). These items were factor analyzed to investigate the construct validity of the RAES.

Definition of Resilience in Exceptional Students

Global resilience has been defined as being able to maintain personal adjustment (i.e., attachments, academic competence, and self-regulation) when experiencing "challenges to adaptation or development" (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Exceptional youth have been found to have increased risks for not maintaining personal adjustment (e.g., Brooks, 1999). Construct validity studies of the (RAES) Parent Report Form (PRF) has provided a broad, empirically-based definition of resilience for exceptional youth, which is supported by related research as briefly summarized below.

Exceptionality Problem Solving. This domain of the RAES provides factors identified as follows: Knowledge of Exceptionality, Planning for Needs, and Alternative Thinking. These constructs are similar to earlier research, which identified the resilience characteristics of "self understanding" (Beardslee, 1989), "capacity to plan" (Rutter, 1987), "generating alternatives" (Spekman, Herman, & Vogel, 1993), and "problem-solving abilities" (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Wolin & Wolin, 1994).

Positive Social Skills. Factors from the Resilience Behaviors domain of the RAES were found to include Modeling skills, Active Social Styles, Positive Peer Relations, and Positive Adult Relations. These types of social skills have directly been associated with resilience in prior research indicating that resilient children were able to model problem-solving skills of peers and parents through observation, empathy, role-taking and acting out positive behavior (e.g., Wills & Cleary, 1996). Positive social interactions with peers and adults has typically been identified as salient resilience factors (e.g., Wolin & Wolin, 1994).

Self-Efficacy/Locus of Control. This factor from the Resilience Behaviors domain reflects a child's initiative in addition to positive beliefs in their abilities and personal control, which have been previously indicated in the resilience research (e.g., Beardslee, 1989; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wolin & Wolin, 1994).

Social Support. This domain of the RAES includes not only support from parents and the extended family but also peers and adults in the school and community ecology, which has long been recognized as a critical factor for promoting resilience in exceptional youth (e.g., Werner, 1993).

Child Life Experiences. Selected life events and the child's needs to improve adjustment to these ecological events is provided in this domain of the RAES. To understand a child's resilience, it is critical to gain an indication of response to stressful and challenging events (e.g., Garmezy, 1983; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Academic Achievement. The RAES provides a general index of a child's academic success, which has been cited as a critical ingredient in resilience (e.g., Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Summary Definition

As indicated by the above domains, the research based definition that guided the development of the RAES was adaptable personal-social characteristics of children and their ecology rather than the more intractable characteristics of children (e.g., IQ, health and temperament) and sociodemographic variables (e.g., socioeconomic status). The three general domains of resilience and their respective factors are as follows: Exceptionality Problem-Solving (i.e., Total of Knowledge of Exceptionality, Planning for Needs, and Alternative Thinking), Resilience Behaviors (i.e., Positive Peer Relations, Self-Efficacy/Locus of Control, Positive Adult Relations, and Modeling/Active), and Social Support (i.e., Extended Family, Community, Nuclear Family, and Mother/Teacher).

Method

Subjects

The total sample was composed of 613 exceptional students from a large urban public school district in Northeastern Ohio. Multiple types of exceptionalities were represented with a distribution similar to the total school district's special education population. This sample included the following distribution of disabilities according to Ohio definitions: 41% Developmental Handicapped (i.e., DH, Mental Retardation and Borderline in Ohio), 37% Specific Learning Disabled (SLD), 13% Severe Behavioral Handicapped (SBH in Ohio and SED nationally), and 9% low incidence (i.e., Autistic, Hearing, Orthopedic and Vision disabilities). The students were placed in these special education programs for an average of 4.48 years (s.d. =3.74 years). Similar to the district's total special education population, the subjects were 68% males and 32% were females. The mean Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Third Edition (WISC-III) Verbal IQ was 79 (s.d.=32), Performance IQ 83 (s.d.=17), and Full Scale IQ 78 (s.d.=16).

This sample was similar to general demographics of the total school district reflecting a high proportion of diversity from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds. For example the race distribution was 65% African American, 29% Caucasian, 5% Hispanic, and 1% other in comparison to the total district's distribution of 70%, 24%, 5%, and 1% respectively. Low SES indicators included 64% of the sample receiving free and reduced price school lunches while 70% of the total district's population was below the poverty level. Other low SES indicators for the sample included 46% of the mothers and 48% of fathers not completing high school. Moreover, 70% of mothers and 40% of fathers were unemployed.

The initial sample was based on parent respondents to requests for participating in alternative reevaluations of special education students during the 1992-93 and 1993-94 school years. The 613 respondent's relationship to the child were comprised of 82% mothers, 15% guardians/relatives, and 3% fathers reflecting that about 70% of the total school district's population reside with mothers as single parents. The 613 students were the part of a total group of approximately 3,400 students due for reevaluation during the 1992-93 and 1993-94 years and a total school population of about 70,000 students. However, about 30% (1,020) of 3,400 parents could not be contacted through the mail since mailings were returned due to changes of addresses. The annual mobility rate annually for the district's school population was about 50%. Moreover, about 10% (340) of the students were "nonattendees" and could not be included. Hence, the return rate was estimated to be 30% or 613 of 2,040 students.

Several issues influenced the return rate. First, it is well established that low SES populations from diverse backgrounds are less likely to participate in research. Second, many low SES parents have limited educational backgrounds and probably had difficulty

comprehending the coping assessments. Third, due to financial restraints, the return envelopes were not stamped and it was necessary for parents to pay postage. Finally, the time requirements for conducting reevaluations limited follow-up for locating parents with changes of addresses. Despite the estimated 30% return rate, the sample of students was representative of the total school and special education population for major demographic variables as noted earlier.

Instrument

Resilience Assessment of Exceptional Students (Perry & Bard, 2001). This multimethod assessment includes a Student Interview Scale (RAES-SIS), Teacher Rating Form (CDS-TRF), and Parent Rating Form (RAES-PRF). Each form measures the same factors of: Exceptionality Problem-Solving, Resilience Behaviors, Social Support and Child Life Experiences. Structured guidelines for the administration and interpretation of the scale are provided for the examiner. The student interview may be administered by a school psychologist in approximately 35 minutes. The rating scales for parents and teachers require about 30 minutes to complete. Forms are provided for profile analysis of the results. Only the Parent Rating Form was currently analyzed and revised to a final form at the present time.

The RAES was based on a synthesis of the literature concerning resilience of exceptional students. The scale includes not only frequency ratings, but also the child's need to improve each item. Brief descriptions of the domains measured are summarized below.

Assessment of Education Program. This initial component provides a description of services and programs from teachers and parents. This section includes review of services, IEP goals, and interventions provided as well as outcomes for academic areas. Individualized re-evaluations can be developed with emphasis on curriculum-based assessment methods to evaluate the academic and instructional needs of students by using the RAES.

Part I – Exeptionality Problem-Solving. This factor of the RAES is composed of 15 items that measure the degree that students comprehend such concepts as exceptionality severity and definition in addition to program content, barriers, stigma, and transition issues.

Part II – Resilience Behaviors. This component assesses positive interpersonal relations with peers and adults, as well as modeling/active social skills. The items include such content as interaction ability, modeling, and prosocial behavior. There is also a measure of self-efficacy and locus of control.

Part III – Social Support. The frequency and type of social support systems available to the student is measured by this factor. This includes family members, peers, and others. Identifying support systems provides an ecological perspective of the systems that promote or impair resilience.

Part IV – Child Life Experiences Checklist. It is well established that students with exceptionalities experience more stresses than the typical student. Examples of stresses measured include: abuse, neglect, peer rejection and health problems. The frequency of stresses are assessed. Moreover, the student's need to improve adjustment to each stress is evaluated. This domain has not been factor analyzed.

Results

Tables 1, 2, and 3 include abbreviated item descriptions for each factor found through varimax rotation with their loadings and descriptive titles for the domains of resilience. The eigen value of 1 or higher was used as the initial cut off for factors and the factor load of greater than .35 was used for including items in the factors. Items that loaded on more than one factor to nearly equal values and those that did not load on any factor were eliminated.

Results generally indicated that the pool of items selected did produce factors with face likeness to the resilience domains measured, confirming the general construct validity of this instrument. The descriptive titles used to describe the items for each factor are similar to selected domains described in the literature concerning resilience reviewed earlier.

Table 1 indicates that three factors were found for the Exceptionality Problem-Solving domain, which were labeled Planning for Needs, Exceptionality Knowledge, and Alternative Thinking. Each factor had five items with high loads. It was hypothesized that resilience of students with disabilities included ability to accurately recognize the nature and severity of their disability in addition to alternative thinking and planning to meet their needs. The items of each factor reflected this type of content.

Results in Table 2 illustrates that four factors were found among items reflecting the Resilience Behaviors domain. These factors were labeled as Positive Peer Relations, Positive Adult Relations, Self-Efficacy/Locus of Control, and Modeling/Active. These factors included many of the characteristics of resilience described in the literature on this topic reviewed earlier.

Table 3 includes factor analyses of the social support domain. Four factors were indicated which were labeled Mother/Teacher, Immediate Family, Extended Family and Community/School. Considering that only two items were in the Mother/Teacher factor, there is a need to consider each item independently in addition to the total domain score for understanding social support of exceptional students.

Discussion

The results supported the construct validity of the RAES-PRF. This method will be replicated with results from field trials of the other RAES forms including the Self Report and Teacher Rating Scales. Revisions of the experimental edition of the RAES will be developed to include interventions and research implications.

The results are especially applicable to exceptional children from large urban settings. While this is a limitation, studies with this population are critically needed in view of the multiple mediators of school performance for youth in large cities. Future studies will also include subjects from other settings. Separate norms by type of exceptionality, age, and gender will be provided if relevant.

There are multiple implications of having a valid measure available to evaluate exceptional children's resilience. The RAES may be especially helpful for developing interventions that could promote the adjustment and school performance of exceptional youth. Current alternative approaches to traditional psychometric evaluations emphasize the academic domain through intervention based methods. The RAES could enhance this approach by identifying resilience and ecological considerations that may help to explain school performance beyond academic skills measured by intervention based assessment (Nastasi, 2000). Support personnel such as school psychologists could also provide direct intervention to promote the

adjustment of students as a related service. It is hoped that the RAES will promote an assessment and intervention approach that is relevant for exceptional students. At present, it suggested that the RAES be used with local norms.

This type of assessment could be applied in conducting Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA), Manifestation Determinations and developing Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIP) as required recent IDEA revisions (Kubick, Bard, & Perry, 2000). The RAES could help identify positive alternatives to problem behaviors relevant to FBA and these could serve as targets for interventions as is typically recommended for BIPs (Wright & Gurman, 1998). The section for identifying skills, behaviors, social support and adjustment to life events in regard to the need for improvement of the RAES could help target specific areas for intervention. Promoting the social support from family members is also salient (Fournier & Perry, 1999). Intervention handouts are available on these topics in a separate manual.

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Note: A copy of the RAES could be gained by contacting the author at the address listed below.

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Table 1

Factor Analysis: Disability Problem Solving Factors (Resilience Subdomains of Exceptionality Problem Solving, Parent Ratings)

Factor I Items – Planning for Needs	**Factor Loading**
• Capable of recommending IEP change	.67
• Aware of IEP content	.63
• Understands job-seeking needs	.63
• Understands realistic future job goal	.55
• Understands problems of exceptionality	.37

Factor II Items – Exceptionality Knowledge	**Factor Loading**
• Aware of regular/special education differences	.68
• Aware of special education placement program name	.54
• Discriminates regular vs. special education classes	.52
• Sensitive to stigma from peers	.43
• Knows how long special services received	.42

Factor III Items – Alternative Thinking	**Factor Loading**
• Aware of barriers to better school performance	.63
• Understands changes needed for improvement	.55
• Understands strengths for learning	.48
• Tries to complete difficult school work	.48
• Recognizes needs for assistive devices	.44

Table 2

Factor Analysis: Resilience Behavior Factors

Factor I Items – Positive Peer Relations	**Factor Loading**
• Starts conversations with peers	.72
• Stands up to bullies	.65
• Shows others how to do things	.62
• Shows leadership with peers	.59
• Able to introduce people to one another	.57
• Attends social events such as parties	.56
• Popular with peers due to friendliness	.52

Factor II Items – Self-Efficacy/Locus of Control	**Factor Loading**
• Completes homework independently	.70
• Seeks help only when needed	.68
• Shows enthusiasm about learning	.63
• Attributes grades to ability	.59
• Attempts new tasks without fear	.48
• Self-reliant in carrying out tasks	.44
• Self-confident about ability to learn	.39

Factor III Items – Positive Adult Relations	**Factor Loading**
• Helps family with daily living tasks	.72
• Volunteers to help parents	.69
• Follows parent's rules	.61
• Will attempt work such as running errands	.56
• Responsible for personal belongings at home	.52

Factor IV Items – Modeling Active	**Factor Loading**
• Acts as positive model of helpful behavior	.65
• Attempts to compensate for learning problems	.59
• Tries to stop arguments	.58
• Models or imitates positive behavior of others	.50
• Strives for perfection when completing tasks	.44
• Understands how others feel	.37

Table 3

Factor Analysis: Social Support

Factor I Items – Mother/Teacher	**Factor Loading**
• Mother Support	.75
• Teacher Support	.69

Factor II Items – Immediate Family	**Factor Loading**
• Sisters	.78
• Brothers	.78
• Birth Father	.49

Factor III Items – Extend Family	**Factor Loading**
• Grandfather	.75
• Uncles	.74
• Aunts	.73
• Grandmother	.67

Factor IV Items – Community/School	**Factor Loading**
• Adult Neighbors	.81
• Parents of Peers	.73
• Peers in Neighborhood	.68
• Peers at School	.49

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