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A Worthy Challenge: Assessing Child Developmental Growth in a Systematic Manner

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Let's suppose ... on a snowy afternoon in Minneapolis, two elderly gentlemen scholars have arrived at a local Starbucks to talk about a very important issue: How do you assess developmental and learning outcomes for children across the early childhood years? As they take their coffee and juice, respectively, to their table, both are perplexed by the task at hand. They each had generated great knowledge about child development and learning during their careers and people have used their work to produce valuable assessment tools and strategies. The first gentleman, Arnold Gesell (1949), had mapped child development for infants and preschool children, and his methodological descendents in early childhood education and special education, such as Sanford, Brigance, Furno and colleagues, Bricker, and Newborg and colleagues, had used his and other's work to design useful assessments of early development. The second gentleman, Ogden Lindsley (who graciously gave permission for me to use his persona in this scenario), had established an approach to precise measurement of behavior that allowed systematic and ongoing assessment of learning (Lindsley, 1972; 1992). Others, such as White, Haring, Cooper, Deno, and Fuchs, had adapted this approach to assess and monitor the changes in students' (primarily academic) learning that resulted from instruction and to make modifications in instruction when learning did not occur. With the first sip of their beverages, a lively exchange began between these two historic figures.

If these two pioneers would have had an afternoon to discuss this issue, they might very well have proposed an ambitious project like that undertaken by the investigators of the Early Childhood Research Institute on Measuring Growth and Development. In the feature article, Priest and colleagues (2002) described the first steps in this project. Basing their overall mission on the fundamental goal that all children will start school ready to learn, they plan to design a process (and eventually a tool for the field) for assessing children's developmental progress. Such a tool would be multifaceted in that it would measure the typical development of children, identify delays in developmental progress when they occurred, and sensitively assess changes in developmental growth that result from instruction or intervention. As they noted, it would be parsimonious, which could help practitioners use the assessment in their classroom and convey meaningful information to parents. This sounds like just the kind of thing we need in the field.

The Priest et al. paper allows us a glimpse of how these investigators began developing their instruments from the rationale, to the selection of items, and the analysis of social validity. The challenges were monumental. How does one select a relatively small number of indicators that would gauge development across the first 8 years of life? Their choice of focusing on function of behavior rather than form, when possible, was a wise one, yet we know that even function within develop-

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mental domains changes across the early childhood years, which makes the task harder. Despite these challenges, this research team appeared to follow systematic methods in identifying 15 growth outcome indicators. This process was well described in Study 1, and in Study 2, the investigators stepped outside their research group to establish the social validity of the outcomes they had identified. Using informed practitioners and parents was a logical and important next step in this program of research.

With every ambitious, worthwhile goal and subsequent project, concerns will arise. The theoretical diversity in the field of early intervention and early childhood special education will generate criticism of almost any position. For example, with this project, one criticism may be that it is atheoretical. The measurement of outcomes is not based on a theory of how children develop or learn. If we view Gesell as a developmental geographer and Lindsley as an atheoretical but pragmatic measurer of behavior, to some extent this criticism is valid. One would assume that the final assessment instruments will be based on measurement theory, in which the reliability and validity of the assessment approach is rigorously documented, even though this was not discussed in the article. Importantly, as a measurement instrument, the projected tool should be compatible with different approaches to instruction. For example, the assessment instruments will not be based on a Piagetian theory of child development but should still be useful for assessing outcomes of children receiving the High Scope curriculum.

In this initial article, it is unclear what form the assessment will take—that is, how the outcomes will be operationalized. My sense is that the final assessment tasks will be designed to assess *general* indicators of development, just as in a precision-teaching or curriculum-based measurement system the number of computational addition problems calculated correctly in a specific time might assess general math skills. A danger will exist, as it does with any assessment, if practitioners actually embed the operationalized tasks in their curriculum without provisions for generalization. Without knowing the operationalized tasks, it is impossible to give a specific example from the proposed assessment.

An issue that could haunt this project is related to the sample of respondents who assessed the importance of outcomes. The authors noted that the majority of respondents were white/Caucasian (92–93%), well-educated (93% above high school level), and female (79–90%). A theme for the last quarter century has been the emerging cultural diversity in young children with disabilities and their families in this country. It is possible that different cultural groups may have had different perspectives on the importance of specific developmental outcome indicators. When they saw that their sampling technique was not successful in representing perspectives of African-American, Asian-Pacific Islanders, Latinos/Hispanics, or Native Americans, it might have been possible to convene focus groups of individuals with these cultural heritages to review the outcome indicators, just to ensure that the investigators were on the right track. In fact, it might not be too late to gather such information. From their previous work, it is clear that the authors of this paper understand and value the importance of cultural diversity, and in the subsequent work that establishes the reliability, validity, and utility of this assessment approach, I predict that culturally diverse groups will be well represented.

The investigators in this project have established a challenging task for themselves. They have made the strong case that individual assessment of clearly defined developmental outcomes is critically important, provided a persuasive rationale for their approach to identifying outcomes, and assessed the social validity of the outcomes. It is now time to fulfill the promise of their program of research. To date, reports on the operationalization of indicators have only appeared in invited publications and technical reports. The important and convincing next step will be to provide public and empirical demonstrations (i.e., in peer reviewed journals) of the operationalization of outcome indicators, the reliability and validity of the assessment approaches, the feasibility and acceptability of

the assessment administration, and the utility in gauging development and learning and monitoring changes resulting from intervention. It is a huge task, but certainly one of the worthy challenges in the field.

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