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Original Purposes and Expanded Uses of AEPS^{®1,2}

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² This paper is designed to support the use of the AEPS eligibility cutoff scores with for those who use AEPS, both in print and electronically with AEPSinteractive[™] (AEPSi[™]).

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this particular paper is to clarify the initial purposes or uses of the *Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System for Infants and Children (AEPS®)* and what we believe will be its changing role in the field of early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) (Bricker, 2002). We begin by reviewing the initial and primary purposes of AEPS, followed by a discussion of the contemporary pressures that have required considering an expansion of the uses of this measure.

I. THE ORIGINAL PURPOSES OF THE AEPS

Initial work on the forerunners to AEPS was begun in the early 1970s. Over the years a range of developmental and educational experts have contributed to its evolution, which has also been affected by a series of empirical investigations that examined the psychometric properties of this criterion-referenced curriculum-based assessment–programming–evaluation tool. In addition, AEPS authors and experts have provided thousands of hours of training on how to use AEPS with a range of children who participate in a variety of service programs. For a detailed discussion of its history, the reader is referred to Bricker, 2002.

AEPS is divided into two developmental levels: birth to three years of age and three to six years of age. The format and method of collecting information are the same, but the item content is different for each level. Level I contains developmental content appropriate for the birth to three year range, while Level II contains developmental and early academic content appropriate for the three to six year range. Both levels of AEPS address six developmental areas: fine motor, gross motor, adaptive, cognitive, social-communication, and social. Each area contains a series of items, called goals, with accompanying objectives, arranged hierarchically and written in objective language with specific performance criteria. The preferred method of data collection is observation of children in their usual environments. Goals or objectives (i.e., items) not observed while children participate in play and other daily activities can be assessed through direct test or report.

Development of the measure that was to become the AEPS was begun in the early 1970s. The major impetus was the recognition that few, if any, functional assessment measures existed to assess the development of young children with disabilities. Most evaluation and service delivery personnel had to administer norm-referenced, standardized assessment measures for programmatic purposes and to establish eligibility. Outcomes from these measures were used to develop goals and intervention content. This process often resulted in targeting inappropriate, non-functional goals and intervention content

(Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004), which likely resulted in poor quality intervention services for children. Clearly, alternatives were needed.

The original purpose of AEPS was to be a programmatic assessment/evaluation measure. AEPS was designed to be used by service delivery personnel to develop functional and developmentally appropriate goals and associated intervention content. That is, AEPS was specifically developed to assist in designing and delivering quality intervention content that address children's educational and developmental needs. As noted, this important purpose was particularly targeted by AEPS authors because in the 1970s, when work was initiated on its creation, the field lacked any curriculum-based assessments that were designed to focus on yielding outcomes to be used specifically to develop functional and developmentally appropriate goals and/or objectives and intervention content. In addition, from its inception, AEPS was designed to serve a second purpose: evaluation. That is, children's progress toward targeted goals and objectives could be systematically monitored by re-administering AEPS at appropriate intervals.

AEPS became commercially available in 1994, and since then, there has been steady progress in its adoption and use by personnel who work in a range of service delivery programs (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] Part B and C, Head Start, community-based preschools). Increasingly, personnel are recognizing that administration of a tool specifically designed to yield appropriate and functional information about children's developmental profiles and next developmental targets is enormously important to the delivery of quality intervention services.

Having achieved, at least to some extent, a cadre of experienced personnel who value appropriate assessment and evaluation, recent pressures—in particular government requirements—are causing the possible slowing of progress toward the use of curriculum-based assessment and evaluation measures for programming purposes. In the following section, we review the current pressures and conditions that are requiring careful rethinking and reformulation of approaches to assessment and evaluation.

Historical Pressures

Having service personnel use measures only for their designed purpose is an important advance in the fields of EI/ECSE and early childhood. Historically, several powerful reasons have combined to create the practice of using one measure to meet multiple purposes. That is, program personnel use a measure designed to meet one purpose for other purposes. For example, the use of a screening measure such as the Ages & Stages Questionnaires[®] (Bricker & Squires, 1999) to both screen children for services and to monitor child progress or the use of outcomes from norm-referenced standardized tests

such as the Bayley Scale of Infant Development (Bayley, 1993) to establish eligibility for services and to develop intervention goals and content. There are at least three reasons this practice has evolved.

The first and perhaps the most salient reason that evaluation and service personnel use one measure for multiple purposes is lack of resources. Most service programs do not have sufficient staff to easily administer an array of measures for different purposes and, consequently, personnel try to husband their limited resources by using one test to meet multiple purposes. A second reason is that many test developers' state in their administration guides or manuals that their test can be used for multiple purposes. These claims are often made without adequate empirical support that would qualify a test to legitimately serve multiple purposes. The third reason is more speculative, but likely accurate; it focuses on service personnel's attitude toward assessment and evaluation. Some personnel appear to believe that the administration of assessment and evaluation measures is not a good use of their time. These individuals are not convinced of the worth and value of appropriate assessment and evaluation and, consequently, are likely to devote little quality time to the administration of measures and little credence to their outcomes.

Over time many service personnel have come to understand and appreciate the need to use the appropriate tool to meet the different purposes of screening, eligibility determination, programming planning, and progress monitoring. This often means that different tools have been used to address a specific purpose. However, contemporary pressures are calling into question this practice. Two recent changes outlined below are likely to have significant effects on future EI/ECSE measurement practices.

Contemporary Pressures

The first contemporary pressure or change is the growing discontent with the use of norm-referenced standardized tests to determine eligibility. The second pressure is being spurred by the new federal government accountability mandate directed to EI/ECSE programs. Interestingly, these pressures have the potential to produce differential effects in that the movement away from the use of norm-referenced tests to establish eligibility is likely to produce highly positive outcomes (e.g., better quality goals) while the federal accountability mandate may lead to highly negative changes in measurement practice (e.g., service delivery personnel may focus on using only measures for accountability).

Determining Eligibility

According to a number of EI/ECSE experts (e.g., Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Bricker, Yovanoff, Capt, & Allen, 2003) as well as the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002), much of the traditional assessment process for determining eligibility does not enhance services to children and their families. Historically, the purpose of traditional eligibility assessment has been to document a delay or disability and produce a label or diagnosis with little, if any, attention given to the relevance of the findings for the development of quality services. Further, traditional eligibility assessment is a costly enterprise because it generally requires the time and effort of a cadre of highly trained professionals to complete the process. The hallmarks of significant cost with little useful data has resulted in many authorities arguing that traditional eligibility determination for services requires major change if the process is to contribute to the development of quality intervention services (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004).

EI/ECSE services can be divided into two distinct phases: a) evaluation to determine eligibility and b) the delivery of intervention services. In most states, systems have been developed that require an evaluation team to assess children to determine if they meet the criteria for publicly funded services. Although requirements differ (Danaher, 2001; Shakelford, 2002), most states currently require the administration of a standardized norm-referenced test as well as information gathering from other sources. As noted, the cost of this evaluation process is significant and might be justified if the outcomes could be used to formulate high quality goals and intervention content. However, in most cases, the data that have been gathered using standardized tests cannot be used for developing appropriate and functional IFSP/IEP goals or intervention content, and consequently, the use of standardized tests with populations of children who have disabilities is a target of growing criticism. (See Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004 for a discussion of the problems associated with the use of standardized norm-referenced tests with children with disabilities). Today many experts and professional organizations argue that the use of standardized tests is counter to best practices (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2005; Macy, Bricker, & Squires, 2005).

An appealing alternative to the use of norm-referenced standardized tests for determining eligibility is the use of curriculum-based assessment (CBA) measures, such as AEPS (Bricker, 2002). AEPS is designed to produce a comprehensive and detailed picture of children's behavioral profiles by gathering observational data as children play and participate in daily activities. Gathering information in this manner permits the development of a clear and accurate picture of what children can and cannot do. This gathered information then can be used to formulate developmentally appropriate goals and/or objectives and intervention content. AEPS is particularly useful when determining

eligibility for children because test items were included only if they address important developmental skills, and therefore each item has the potential to serve as a legitimate educational goal. In addition, the first assessment, used for eligibility determination, can also serve as a baseline to evaluate developmental progress and the effectiveness of intervention at a later date. Finally, modifications can be made to test items (e.g., using language or communication boards rather than words or using a child's favorite toy or game) to accommodate children's disabilities and interests.

The use of AEPS to replace standardized tests for eligibility determination produces two important benefits. First, AEPS outcomes can be used for the dual purposes of establishing eligibility and developing educationally and therapeutically relevant goals and intervention content. This first benefit means that the time and efforts of caregivers and service delivery personnel can be directed to more important activities (i.e., intervention). A second benefit is that outcomes from AEPS are functional, thus permitting closer adherence to the IDEA guidelines and best practice recommendations made by the Presidents' Commission on Excellence in Special Education (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2002) as well as the Division of Early Childhood (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005).

Accountability

The second event that has created a climate requiring change is the relatively new accountability mandate issued by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). More details of the federal mandate are discussed in the final section of this paper. The development of accountability mandates is being fostered by the Office of Management and Budget who is requiring IDEA services to demonstrate a specific type of accountability (i.e., child progress) in order to maintain federal funding.

Webster defines accountability as "subject to the obligation to report or justify something; responsible; answerable." Most personnel working with young children believe that they should be responsible and answerable. By and large, professionals are committed to determining the "value" of interventions being conducted—that is, EI/ECSE personnel should be accountable. Therefore, most personnel who work with children support the need for program accountability. However, the current federal mandate has associated requirements and timelines that cannot be met in scientifically defensible ways by test developers, state agency personnel, or service delivery personnel.

The federal OSEP accountability mandates, as well as other accountability mandates (e.g., Head Start, professional organizations), raise several important issues that we

believe have serious implications for the future assessment strategies that are adopted and followed by service delivery programs. These issues include unconnected dual measurement systems, multi-population programs, and authenticity of assessment. A final issue is the unrealistic federal timeline for establishing systems to meet the accountability mandate.

Unconnected Dual Measurement Systems

Currently, states are being required to adopt measures that can offer information on children's status in three outcome areas and eventually to be able to report progress by children on these three outcomes: children develop and use positive social-emotional skills, children acquire and use knowledge and skills, and children use appropriate behaviors to meet their needs. Although there may be value in assessing these areas, once they have been adequately defined, the assessment of these outcomes appears to be forcing program personnel into adopting unconnected dual assessment systems: one measure to address accountability and one measure to address intervention goals and content. The need for a dual system is occurring because, currently, no curriculum-based assessment evaluation measure is designed to provide data or information to specifically address only the accountability areas identified by OSEP. In turn, most accountability measures (i.e., norm-referenced standardized tests) are not designed to yield information relevant for programmatic purposes.

Program personnel who chose to use a measure to address the OSEP areas may be repeating the process similar to that which uses standardized tests to determine eligibility. That is, enormous resources may be expended to produce outcomes whose sole purpose is to report status and progress. Because of time and cost constraints, accountability measures do not produce data, information, or outcomes that teachers, therapists, and interventionists can use to develop appropriate developmental goals or intervention content. This reality requires that service delivery personnel create a dual system in which at least two measures are administered: one for accountability reporting and one for programmatic purposes. Such an approach is problematic because of the cost and time required to administer two separate measures to groups of children repeatedly. A solution, of course, is the use of one measurement tool such as AEPS that can legitimately address accountability requirements and also produce outcomes that can be used to develop appropriate and functional goals and intervention content.

Multi-Population Programs

In addition to the issue of using different measures for accountability and programmatic purposes, service delivery programs are increasingly serving diverse populations of

children. Children who qualify for specific services may have a set of accountability requirements that differ from those of children who qualify for other services. For example, children who qualify for Head Start have different requirements than the requirements for children eligible for IDEA services. These different requirements may become extremely challenging in programs that serve multiple groups because program staff may have to administer several different accountability measures and perhaps different programmatic measures as well. Thus, service personnel may be required to learn and use a range of measures. The tracking and administration of multiple measures may be particularly challenging to service delivery personnel who have had limited preparation and experience with test administration and interpretation. This tracking and administration of multiple measures also brings up the important issues of time and cost. Time and resource limitations may force program personnel to adopt and use assessments that are quick and easy to administer rather than valid and reliable measures that yield useful outcomes.

Authentic Outcomes

During the last 10 years, there has been a major move in the EI/ECSE field to develop and adopt assessment measures and intervention approaches that target “real” behaviors in “real” surrounds (i.e., authentic). The soundness of unfamiliar people assessing children in small, unfamiliar test rooms has been repeatedly questioned, as has the use of standardized procedures and materials that maybe meaningless to children (Macy, Bricker, & Squires, 2005; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Grisham-Brown, Pretti-Frontczak & Hemmeter, 2005). To counter these questionable assessment strategies, alternative approaches have been developed that collect data largely through observation of children during their daily, meaningful activities (e.g., administering the AEPS).

This important forward step of assessing functional behavior in usual settings may be threatened by the new OSEP accountability standards that require the assessment of children repeatedly to monitor their progress. The accountability requirements appear to add significant work to the already busy schedules of service delivery personnel; therefore, in order to meet these requirements in an efficient manner, program staff may adopt assessment procedures that eschew the observation of how children navigate their daily activities and rather rely on direct test in order to use their limited resources efficiently. Although such assessment may be more efficient, its value is questionable if the results do not accurately reflect children’s behavioral accomplishments.

Unrealistic Timelines

One final condition that is placing heavy pressure on test developers, state agency personnel, and service delivery staff is the speed with which they are being expected to address federal accountability requirements. Currently, no assessments exist that were designed to specifically focus on the three OSEP outcome areas. Most states do not have the time, resources, or expertise to develop new tests (California is an exception), and consequently, agency personnel are exploring how existing measures might be modified to meet federal accountability requirements. Test developers are also attempting to address the accountability requirements by creating crosswalks between their existing test items and the designated OSEP outcomes; however, to our knowledge, no test developer has had adequate time to conduct comprehensive, empirical investigation of the validity of the crosswalks and whether they do reflect accurate child change.

The historical and contemporary pressures discussed above present serious challenges to curriculum-based assessment evaluation measures such as AEPS. To meet the many mandated and best practice requirements that exist, agency personnel as well as test developers are faced with some significant decisions that are requiring considerable compromise. In particular, test developers are grappling with the need to expand the functions of their tools so that multiple purposes can be accommodated.

The following section of this paper outlines new directions we foresee for AEPS. In large measure, we are proposing that with certain modification, the purposes of AEPS be expanded from programmatic and evaluation to include eligibility determination and accountability. Let us emphasize that these expanded purposes have been forced by contemporary pressures and would not be pursued by the AEPS authors in an ideal world.

II. AEPS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The initial section of this paper described the original purposes of the AEPS. The second section offered a rationale for why measures like the AEPS need to expand their purposes to include the other vital areas of eligibility determination and accountability. This final section first presents the foundational reasons for the expansion of AEPS purposes in conjunction with descriptions of the empirical work that has been planned and completed in these new areas.

Eligibility Determination

As noted earlier, if curriculum-based assessments like the AEPS could replace standardized tests to determine eligibility, benefits would accrue. Outcomes could be used for the dual purposes of establishing eligibility and developing educationally and therapeutically relevant goals and intervention content, meaning that time and efforts of

caregivers and service delivery personnel could be directed to other important activities (i.e., intervention). Also, outcomes from curriculum-based assessments are functional, permitting closer adherence to best practice guidelines.

The need to find functional alternatives to the use of standardized assessments to determine eligibility provided the developers of AEPS with a strong impetus to explore ways that AEPS might serve to establish eligibility for services. Rather than assigning chronological ages to items, we decided to develop empirically derived cutoff scores based on the performances of typically developing children. The cutoff scores provide benchmarks so that if a child's area score fell at or below the cutoff score at his or her age interval, he or she would be eligible for services. Consequently, we embarked on a line of research to explore the use of AEPS cutoff scores to determine eligibility. The research had two purposes. The first was to modify the AEPS by establishing empirically derived cutoff scores for specific age intervals based on the performance of typically developing children. The second purpose was to determine empirically if the cutoff scores produced valid classifications of children who were and were not eligible for IDEA services. Two studies have been completed that address these purposes (Bricker, Yovanoff, Capt & Allen, 2003; Bricker, Clifford, Yovanoff, Waddell, Allen, Pretti-Frontczak, & Hoselton in review).

In the first study, a sample of typically developing children participated. A Rasch one-parameter dichotomous measurement model was used to establish cutoff scores for 6-month age interval on AEPS for the total test. The resulting cutoff scores were then used to evaluate their accuracy with a group of IDEA-eligible children and typical children. Results from this first study were very promising in that the cutoff scores correctly identified all IDEA-eligible children as being eligible. In addition, use of the cutoff scores resulted in only a small percent of typical children being over-identified (Bricker, Yovanoff, Capt & Allen, 2003).

Given these results, a second study was undertaken with a large sample of typically developing and IDEA-eligible children (Bricker, Clifford, Yovanoff, Waddell, Allen, Pretti-Frontczak, & Hoselton in review). However, two important changes were made. For Level I the age intervals were changed from six to three months, and cutoff scores were developed for each of the six developmental areas rather than for the total Test for both Level I and II. Results from this study were similar to those of the first investigation (Bricker, Yovanoff, Capt, & Allen, 2003). The cutoff scores were highly accurate in identifying children who were eligible for services. The cutoff scores also were moderately reliable in not identifying typical children as being eligible.

The outcomes from the two investigations reported above have offered adequate support for the AEPS developers to expand its original purposes to include using the test as one source of information to determine eligibility for services. By using the AEPS to assist in determining eligibility, program personnel will likely have a more accurate picture of how children negotiate their daily environments and an array of developmental information that can be used directly to formulate appropriate and functional goals/objectives and intervention content. This outcome means that limited resources will be used more effectively to benefit children and their families.

Accountability

In 2005, OSEP, the federal office responsible for overseeing the implementation of IDEA, set forth a mandate regarding state accountability reporting. The federal mandate requires the collection of specific accountability data and is directed to state agencies overseeing IDEA Part C EI programs and IDEA Part B, Section 619 preschool special education programs. In particular, states must report how children from birth to age five receiving EI/ECSE services are performing across three broad child outcomes. The outcomes identified by OSEP include: 1) positive socio-emotional skills, including social relationships; 2) acquisition and use of knowledge and skills; and 3) use of appropriate behaviors to meet needs.

Data addressing the following categories must be reported at entry time:

- a) Percentage of children who are performing as same age peers
- b) Percentage of children who are not performing as same age peers

Data addressing the following categories must be reported at exit time:

- a) Percentage of children who did not improve functioning;
- b) Percentage of children who improved functioning but not sufficient to move nearer to functioning comparable to same-age peers;
- c) Percentage of children who improved functioning to a level nearer to same-age peers but did not reach it;
- d) Percentage of children who improved functioning to reach a level comparable to same-age peers; and
- e) Percentage of children who maintained functioning at a level comparable to same-age peers.

States are free to select from a variety of assessment methods to meet the reporting requirements. Regardless of methods used, it is important that the assessment strategies

chosen permit addressing accountability requirements and producing data that can be used directly to improve services to children and families.

The usual approach to measuring child outcomes where the charge is to determine whether progress has been made relies on the use of standardized, norm-referenced assessments (e.g., Head Start's National Reporting System). This type of assessment yields data that can be used to report a child's performance in relation to same-age peers; however, importantly, data from such measures do not address other vital assessment needs, including the development of high quality goals and objectives and intervention content. Using an assessment strategy that permits reporting valid performance data on the three mandated outcomes and that also yields data that permit addressing programmatic needs would seem a far better choice. We believe that the use of curriculum-based assessments like AEPS addresses both of these important requirements.

As noted, the AEPS Test is a criterion-referenced, curriculum-based assessment that is designed to produce a comprehensive and detailed picture of children's behavioral profiles by gathering observational data as children play and participate in daily activities. The AEPS Test is particularly useful because items were included only if they addressed important developmental skills that can serve as educational goals. Importantly, modifications of items can be made (e.g., using sign language or communication boards) to accommodate children's disabilities and interests. Further, the AEPS Test a) covers critical areas of early development; b) has enough items to detect small increments of change/progress; and c) has been developed and tested on young children with disabilities (i.e., the population of children OSEP requires assessing performance and progress toward child outcomes).

To use AEPS to address the OSEP accountability mandate, we first aligned the AEPS Test items to the three OSEP child outcomes: 1) positive socio-emotional skills, including social relationships; 2) acquisition and use of knowledge and skills; and 3) use of appropriate behaviors to meet needs. To begin, EI/ECSE and AEPS experts independently aligned AEPS Test items with the three OSEP child outcomes. Items that did not address one of the outcomes were placed in a non-applicable category. These alignments were examined and a master crosswalk was developed and again underwent expert validation. This crosswalk alignment permits measuring children's progress on the federally designated outcomes. Finally, the internal consistency of the alignment was calculated and items addressing each specific outcome were found to be highly related.

For AEPSi users, a second action was the development of same-age peer benchmarks that can be used to address the OSEP reporting categories listed earlier. The second action of creating same-age benchmarks was addressed using a sample of typically developing

children. Using a Rasch modeling procedure, mean scores for specific age intervals were derived. These mean scores became the same-age benchmarks that can be used for comparison purposes for AEPSi users only. If a child's AEPS Outcome Raw Score is at or above a benchmark, it indicates a child's performance is similar to same-age peers on a targeted OSEP child outcome, while if an AEPS Outcome Raw Score is below a benchmark, it indicates the child's performance is below that of same-age peers.

SUMMARY

The initial purpose of the AEPS developers was to create an assessment system that could be used to garner reliable and valid information about how young children conduct themselves as they engage in daily routines, play, and obligatory activities. This essential behavioral information about children's skills and abilities is, in turn, tied to a set of goals and intervention activities (i.e., curriculum). Using AEPS permits targeting children's developmental skills, then linking their current level of performance to goals and activities that will move them to the next level of competence and finally to the periodic re-administration of AEPS to monitor child progress. This process creates a system that links assessment outcomes directly to goals and intervention activities and to the evaluation of children's progress toward selected goals and objectives. In large measure, we believe that AEPS does meet the initial purpose for which it was developed.

Unfortunately, reaching the initial purposes of AEPS has provided somewhat short-lived satisfaction, because contemporary pressures require already overburdened caregivers and service delivery personnel to meet an increasing array of state and federal accountability mandates. We believe that to lay yet another set of assessment tasks onto personnel without some significant modifications will yield poor outcomes. Thus, in an attempt to assist state agency and service delivery personnel, we have embarked on strategies designed to expand the purposes of the AEPS to include eligibility determination and accountability monitoring. Importantly, we are determined to collect objective information to ensure that AEPS can reliably meet these additional purposes or functions.

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