

DESSA-mini: A strength-based universal screener of students' social-emotional competence.

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Recently, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the Institute of Medicine (2009) indicated that Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs promote positive academic, mental, emotional, and behavioral outcomes in children and adolescents. A critical first step in implementing school-based prevention/intervention strategies is to use a universal screener to evaluate the strengths and needs of the whole population (Baker et al., 2006; Institute of Medicine, 2009). Students with scores that fit the criterion for a concern are then given a comprehensive assessment to gather more detailed information. School Psychologists then use these scores to design prevention/intervention strategies at the school, classroom or individual student level.

The 72-item Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) (LeBuffe, Shapiro, & Naglieri, 2009), a strength-based, norm-referenced, behavior rating scale, was designed to provide information about students' using eight core social-emotional competencies and a composite score. Scores for each competence and the composite can then be categorized into one of three descriptions: *strength*, *typical*, or *need for instruction*. Unfortunately, using a 72-item rating scale to inform prevention/intervention strategies may not be practical when used at the school or classroom level. In response to this concern, the 8-item DESSA-mini was created.

Designed to be a universal screener, the strength-based DESSA-mini (Naglieri, LeBuffe, & Shapiro, In Press) provides school psychologists with an estimate of student's overall social-emotional

competence in 1-2 minutes - the total scale score. This score can be categorized similarly to the scores on the DESSA. Students with a total scale score that falls into the *need for instruction* category are then given the more comprehensive DESSA to provide greater detail about the students strengths and needs. Thus, the DESSA-mini addresses the need for a) promotion of school-based prevention/intervention strategies targeting social-emotional competence and b) promotion of effective and efficient universal screening and assessment of students' social-emotional competence.

To date, the DESSA-mini has not been used in research or educational settings. *The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999) states that data derived from a screener and used to make decisions should be tested for validity and reliability. Therefore, the researchers for this study aimed to establish the concurrent-criterion validity and the predictive validity of the DESSA-mini as a universal screener of social-emotional competence. Considering the information provided by the DESSA-mini is meant to be a predictor of students' social-emotional competence, it is necessary for the DESSA-mini to yield scores that are similar to scores yielded by a comprehensive assessment of social-emotional competency (concurrent-criterion validity). Similarly, it is necessary for the DESSA-mini to yield scores that can predict scores on a comprehensive assessment of social-emotional competence (predictive validity).

Therefore, it was hypothesized that:

1. Student's total scale score on the DESSA-mini would have a strong, positive, relationship with the composite score from the full DESSA.
2. Students DESSA-mini total scale score and their corresponding DESSA composite would consistently identify them within the *need for instruction* or *typical* category.

Project Design:

20 classroom teachers and their students (N = 377) were used in this study. Each teacher was asked to complete a DESSA-mini for all their students. The teachers were then asked to complete a full DESSA on three randomly selected students within their classroom. Using only the DESSA-mini and corresponding full DESSA scores of the randomly selected students in each classroom (n = 43), the scores were analyzed using correlation analysis and chi-square analysis.

Results

Using correlation analysis, a significant positive relationship was found ($r = .87, p < .01$) between students' total scale scores on the DESSA-mini and their composite on the full DESSA, indicating a strong relationship (Cohen, 1988). Using Chi-Square analysis, a significant concordant relationship was also found between students' scores on the DESSA-mini and the DESSA, $X^2 = 23.5$ (df = 1, $p < .001$), $\Phi = .74$, also indicating a strong relationship (Cohen, 1988). Moreover, the DESSA-mini and the DESSA yielded the same categorization (*need vs. typical*) 91% of the time (Please see Table 1).

Table 1. Contingency Table of DESSA-mini total scale T-score and DESSA Composite T-score categories.

		DESSA-mini total scale score T-Score category		Total
		Need	Typical	
DESSA Composite T-Score category	Need	8	2	10
	Typical	2	31	33
	Total	10	33	43

Conclusions and Implications:

These results provide evidence for the concurrent-criterion validity and the predictive validity of the DESSA-mini screener. By establishing the strong positive relationship and 91% concordance between scores on the DESSA and DESSA-mini, it can be concluded that that the two measures of social-emotional competence elicit similar results. More importantly, the 8-item DESSA-mini screener accurately predicts the results of the more comprehensive 72-item DESSA (e.g., *need* vs. *typical*) 91% of the time. Overall, the implications for these findings include promoting the use of effective and efficient methods for assessing students' social-emotional competence in order to inform prevention/intervention work within the schools. Secondly, these findings further promote the utility of strength-based assessment and prevention/intervention strategies to be used with school-age children and adolescents.

References:

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