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Purpose

The Predictive Early Assessment of Reading and Language (PEARL) is a new kindergarten screener that identifies which children are at most risk of experiencing significant academic difficulty, in both decoding and language domains. The innovative dynamic assessment approach shows promise for excellent prediction of future reading problems and allows for earlier preventative intervention. The purpose of the featured study was to examine the utility of the PEARL to fulfill this purpose.

Summary

The results of the PEARL study indicated that it provides excellent classification accuracy for students at risk of decoding and/or language difficulties. The PEARL had outstanding reliability and fidelity scores demonstrating that it is easy to administer and score.

Implications

When earlier and more accurate identification of young children can be made, needed interventions can be put into place immediately. Thus, more effort can be focused on the prevention of significant learning problems.

Early and Accurate Identification of Kindergarteners with Language and Decoding Difficulties

By Levi Zitting

Introduction

Children who experience reading difficulties in kindergarten and do not receive early, intensive intervention may continue to have reading problems into adulthood. Early identification in kindergarten of difficulties or future difficulties could prevent delays (Denton, 2012). Despite the benefits of early identification, it can be challenging to accurately identify children who need intervention, without falsely qualifying students who do not need the intervention.

Decoding and language comprehension are two foundational skills needed for reading comprehension (Hoover & Gough, 1990). In schools, assessment and intervention are generally focused on decoding (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), but few resources are spent on the assessment and development of language. Language skills in kindergarten significantly predict reading comprehension skills in the second and eighth grade (Adolf, Catts, & Lee, 2010); therefore, there is a need to identify language difficulties alongside decoding difficulties as soon as children enter kindergarten.

Dynamic Assessment

Static measures, that assess a child's performance on a test at a single time point, are the most common method for identifying students with learning challenges. However, this method often identifies many children who do not necessarily have learning difficulties, but rather have had limited exposure to academic language and literacy tasks prior to entering school. In contrast, a dynamic assessment integrates teaching into the assessment procedures and measures performance before, during, and after teaching to estimate a child's response to instruction (Grigorenko, 2008). Dynamic assessment is a promising approach to earlier identification of students with learning challenges because it approximates and predicts how students will do in school (Petersen, Allen, & Spencer, 2014).

Implications

The Predictive Early Assessment of Reading and Language (PEARL; Petersen & Spencer, 2014) is a kindergarten screener designed to assist edu-

cators in differentiating between children who truly need intervention and those who will acquire the necessary skills through standard classroom instruction. It includes subtests for both language and decoding and takes between 5-20 minutes to administer. As a dynamic assessment, the PEARL uses a teach-test-teach format and the examiners report on each child's responsiveness to the teaching tasks in addition to his/her gains from pretest to posttest. The PEARL has easy to follow standardized administration and scoring procedures.

The PEARL was administered to 232 students at the beginning of their kindergarten year. Thirty-seven percent of the students (66 of the 232) were identified as needing intervention in either decoding or language domains, or both. Students were assigned to four intervention groups: 1) no intervention, 2) decoding intervention (19.4%), 3) language intervention (9.1%), and 4) both decoding and language intervention (8.6%). These students immediately began intensive interventions in their respective domains. The PEARL classified far fewer students than the traditional measures did (27% less) and very few children were falsely identified as needing intervention. Scoring reliability and administration fidelity were also excellent, indicating that it is easy to administer and score.

Implications for Practice

The PEARL was designed to be used at the beginning of kindergarten when it is most challenging to distinguish between true need and external factors. Traditional static measures of decoding work best when they are administered after several weeks of instruction. However, since learning delays worsen without intervention, this time would be better spent providing students in need with specialized instruction. The PEARL is not dependent on student's prior history and experience and therefore, can offer a more valid prediction of how well students will learn to read and acquire academic language. Schools and teachers can use the PEARL to hasten the identification of kindergarteners with language and decoding intervention needs and ensure that the language-basis of reading is not neglected.

About the Author

Levi Zitting is a doctoral student in the Educational Psychology Department at Northern Arizona University. He currently works on projects examining early identification and intervention methods at the Institute for Human Development's Child Development and Language Lab.

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