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Personal Research Agenda

Currently, I have begun an investigation into the collection of norms for social behavior for potential use in the evaluation of behavioral programs in schools, specifically for those programs for children with autism. This is a critical extension in the application of RTI procedures for evidencing behavioral issues; such an extension has been advocated in the literature (Gresham, 2005) although the procedures for measuring behavior change have not always been clearly outlined..

When targeting reading through the use of a RTI framework, a universal reading program is provided to all students which targets all areas of the composite reading behavior (i.e., The Big Five Ideas). Should individuals not make progress in the composite reading behavior, then individual components would be targeted at subsequent tiers.

However, there are several problems evident when trying to extend this analogy to deal with behavioral issues. Many programs lack an explicit assessment regimen that would identify those students who are not progressing in the composite classroom behavior in question (e.g., social skills, classroom transitional skills, PBIS systemic programs or any other program which targets a set of related, but separate behaviors). Those programs that do have such assessment programs, often do not have a methodology developed to assess behaviors that is quick and efficient enough to accommodate all students at a particular level (i.e., class, grade level or school). Norms are also not available to compare component behaviors across students, and there is a paucity of techniques available to identify and select behaviors that would be available to monitor student progress towards meeting goals. Norms would allow the school psychologist to choose an appropriate socially valid criterion for an intervention (van Houten, 1979), but also

allows for an evaluation of continued growth after the achievement of the criterion as related to the group as a whole.

My focus is to identify component behaviors or dimensions of component behaviors that are sensitive and specific enough predict success or failure within the interventions.

Furthermore, I would like to begin to identify the means to collect norms for these behaviors. It may be better and more desirable to focus on a set of “Best Practices” to be used by practitioners and experimenters for the collection of local classroom and/or school based norms, as opposed to focusing energies on national norms.

Collaborative Multi-Site Research Program

Current Progress

The author has currently collected some preliminary data in three schools, one in New York City and two in a suburb of New York City; in each case, the author documented a raw number of words spoken in five minutes for a total of fourteen 2nd grade students. Seven classroom teachers nominated students. For each classroom, the examiner selected two students who the teacher referred to as “highly verbal” and two students that the teacher referred to as “not very verbal”. Data was collected during snack time over five continuous minutes. Initial attempts to collect data in one-minute intervals revealed that there is a significant variability from minute to minute in words spoken, and collected five minute data allows for a more accurate summation of verbalizations.

These data were then used in a variety of different methods. In one case, the author and colleagues used the data to modify a program for a child with autism (the program was designed to increase the number of words spoken by an identified child during snack time). When plotted against intra-individual performance, the data supported that the child was making progress. However, when compared against the median of words spoken by other children, these data did not seem convincing, and did not support that the intervention was working to successfully improve levels to those seen by typically developing children. In another case, the data was used by the staff of a self-contained class for children with autism and used to make large class-wide based modifications to programs, in preparation for eventual placement into typical classrooms.

Issues and Questions

There are many issues that need to be examined from multiple perspectives. First and foremost it is important to identify if there are other cusp behaviors that can be used to better

predict social functioning. A cusp behavior is one that improves the simultaneous as well as longitudinal functioning of other behaviors (Rosalez-Ruiz, J. & Baer, D.M.,1997). For example, phonemic awareness is a cusp behavior, as the ability to discriminate between sounds improves almost all other aspects of future reading performance. I hypothesized that the quantity of words spoken is a cusp for social functioning, but I have not yet proved if this is a cusp, or if there are other cusps associated with social functioning. Should the quantity of words spoken emerge as a valid cusp, an examination of the duration of time that is needed to capture an adequate sample should continue– while I chose 5 minutes, I would need to explore if less or more time was more appropriate.

Ethnic and racial differences would need to be considered as well, as these cusps may differ due to cultural variation.

Proposed Context and Participants

In an ideal situation, there should be a variety of settings across the United States to effectively deal with these issues. Specifically, there would need to be a variety of urban, rural, and suburban school settings, with a variety of students of various ethnicities. Initially, I would be interested in locating a few sites in an urban and suburban settings to carry out and extend this project.

Advantages and challenges of multisite research program

The challenges of a multisite program would be the differences in the school systems. The downstate New York area (where I am located) is notoriously difficult as systems have been inordinately resistant to the idea of the implementation of RTI; New York City presents a challenging bureaucratic experience, and is notoriously difficult to enter. Therefore, my urban experiences will need to be in another urban area, possibly in North New Jersey. Coordinating

with other individuals who are interested in taking this project and applying it in other areas would also be quite difficult as well. However, it would be most beneficial if the project could be applied in a variety of different setting, to allow for a discussion of how the same behaviors may differ across settings.

References

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