



**Examining the Contextual Validity of the DESSA and DESSA-mini for use in Primary and Middle
School Settings**

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According to Doll and Cummings (2008), school-based universal screening and assessment of social-emotional competence can facilitate data-based decision-making consistent with the three-tier model of Response to Intervention (RTI). Such decision-making methods can have positive implications for school-based prevention/intervention work. However, in order to implement a school-wide approach, such as RTI, it is important to a) have a contextually valid instrument to base decisions on and b) have teacher “buy-in” for using data-based decision-making. Therefore, researchers examined teachers’ feelings toward the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment-mini (DESSA-mini) and the Devereux Students Strengths Assessment (DESSA) when used in a school context. Since both instruments were designed to be used by teachers and other child-serving professionals in order to inform prevention/intervention strategies, it was hypothesized that teachers would show an overall high level of satisfaction toward both instruments.

Methods

Participants, Materials, and Procedures

Teacher satisfaction data were collected from several schools within the Spokane, Washington School District (one school) and Anchorage, Alaska School District (N = 23) following their participation in a pilot research study of the DESSA and/or the DESSA-mini. After completing the data collection for the pilot research study, the teachers (N = 75) who participated were asked to fill out a teacher satisfaction survey about their experience with the DESSA-mini and/or full DESSA. Items on the survey included demographic information such as grade(s) taught and number of years of teaching experience. Teachers were prompted to rate their level of agreeability with statements such as *the*

DESSA-mini was easy to use. Teachers responded using a likert scale from 1-*Strongly Disagree* to 5-*Strongly Agree*. Other questions were open-ended and asked teachers to provide information such as *How did you use the classroom profile?*

Results

A total of 16 teachers provided surveys after completing the pilot study within the Spokane School District, indicating an 80% return rate. These teachers were comprised of 14 females and 2 males. Their average amount of experience was 14.5 years and the majority held master's degrees at the time of the study. A total of 47 teachers provided surveys after completing the pilot study within the Anchorage School District, indicating an 85% return rate. These teachers were comprised of 40 females and 7 males. Their average amount of experience was 14 years.

To appropriately analyze the likert-scale data of the satisfaction surveys, the mode was used as the measure of central tendency to examine patterns in the teachers' responses to questions regarding the DESSA-mini. Most importantly, 81% of teachers agreed with the statement *the DESSA-mini was easy to use* and 88% agreed with the statement *the DESSA-mini was brief*. Interestingly, 63% of teachers *agreed* with the statements *the DESSA-mini helped me identify students who are at-risk*. The researchers expected this percentage to be higher considering the DESSA-mini was designed to identify students at-risk for social-emotional concerns. However, due to the limited number of participants in the study, the three participants who disagreed with the statement brought down the average. Finally, 55% of teachers agreed with the statement *I would feel comfortable discussing the results of the DESSA-mini with a parent/guardian*. Implications for these findings will be discussed in the conclusion of this paper.

Teacher satisfaction was also generally high for the full DESSA. Seventy percent of teachers felt that the full DESSA was easy to use. Additionally, 68% of teachers felt that the DESSA gave them new

or unique information about the students in their classes. In order for the DESSA to be a valuable tool for teachers to use, it must tell them new information beyond what they can gather strictly through observation and interaction with a child. In these two districts where there is a strong emphasis on social-emotional learning, there was still a majority of teachers who felt that the DESSA was value-added. One of the primary goals of the DESSA is to increase parent-professional collaboration. Seventy-three percent of teachers felt that they would be comfortable discussing DESSA results with the parents. In fact, in Anchorage several of the teachers utilized DESSA results in student-led conferences. The DESSA helped these teachers to connect the most important collaborator—the student—into the conference discussion.

Also in Anchorage, 68% of teachers felt that the full DESSA helped them identify students who are at risk for developing emotional-behavioral disorders. Because identifying at-risk students is the first step in designing targeted interventions, this finding is very critical in terms of the contextual validity of the DESSA. One of the most critical tools that the DESSA provides is the classroom profile; 70% of teachers in Anchorage found it to be useful. In a short answer response, teachers gave suggestions about how they would utilize the profile. One teacher suggested using the profile in team meetings and mentor sessions to allow all members of the team to quickly see a clear picture of where her students are at in terms of SEL.

Discussion

Primarily, these findings all provide evidence for the contextual validity of the DESSA-mini and the DESSA. The majority of teachers felt that the DESSA-mini was a brief and easy-to-use instrument. The teachers also felt the instrument was efficacious in identifying students at-risk for developing social-emotional deficits. While some of the proportions were statistically low (e.g., 50-60%), bear in mind that

only 16 teachers used the DESSA-mini as part of the pilot study. Thus, variance in agreeability substantially impacted the proportions of responses. Similar to the DESSA-mini, the majority of teachers felt the DESSA provided unique information about their students and that it provided information consistent with their perceptions of the child's social-emotional strengths and needs.

Overall, these findings provide evidence that the DESSA-mini and the DESSA are effective and efficient tools for providing teachers with valid data regarding children's social-emotional competence within the school environment. The information provided by the DESSA-mini and DESSA has the ability to facilitate more data-based decision-making when creating school-based prevention/intervention strategies or IEPs consistent with the recommendations of Doll and Cummings (2008).

References

Doll, B. & Cummings, J. (2008) *Transforming School Mental Health Services*. National Association of School Psychologists Publication: Bethesda, MD.