Convergent Validity of the Finnish Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale-2 with Teachers and Parents as Raters

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Abstract
In previous research the Finnish version of the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale-2 (Epstein, 2004) has demonstrated adequate internal consistency and reliability. The purpose of the present study was to examine the convergent validity of the Finnish BERS-2 by comparing it with the Finnish version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, with teachers and parents as the raters. The results add to the research base to suggest that the Finnish BERS-2 is a valid and reliable instrument for assessing the emotional and behavioral strengths of children and youth.

Key Words Behavioral and Emotional strengths; Behavioral problems; Convergent validity

Tiivistelmä
Sammandrag


The assessment of emotional and behavioral deficits is essential in the identification of children who may require special education or mental health services, however there is a potential problem that an over emphasis on deficits may ignore specific strengths, competencies, skills, and resources that an individual may possess. In a strength-based approach to assessment, practitioners measure a range of emotional and behavioral skills, competencies, and characteristics that contribute to pro-social relationships with family, peers, and adults (Epstein, 2004). In fact, the particular set of skills, competencies, and resources that a child possesses may be more important to identify than their lack of abilities (Meisels, 1994). Identifying and assessing strengths is significant as they are important variables that may affect a child's interactions with parents, peers, and teachers, which may in turn impact the child's emotional and behavioral development (Brofenbrenner, 1979). Recently, the value and importance of strength-based assessment has received considerable recognition in education, child welfare, family services, and mental health service delivery (Albrecht & Braaten 2008; Drolet, Paquin, & Soutyrine 2007; Lappalainen, Savolainen, Kuorelaiti, & Epstein, 2009).

Recognizing and identifying the strengths and competencies within an individual is an important part of the process in designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions for children. For instance, strength-based measures can be used to assist in intervention planning by identifying areas of strength that can be utilized to improve deficit areas. In addition, strength-based assessments can be used to monitor student progress on interventions to determine their effectiveness over time and to evaluate program outcomes (Buckley & Epstein, 2004; Epstein et al., 2003; Trout, Ryan, La Vigne, & Epstein, 2003). Furthermore, increased emphasis on the strengths and competencies of an individual can lead to increased rapport and improved communication between students, families, and school personnel (Buckley & Epstein, 2004; Epstein, 2004). When professionals and parents focus on the positive traits of an individual child it can lead to increased motivation to provide services to the child by the professionals (Rhee, Furlong, Turner, & Harari, 2001), and promote the overall well-being of family members (Epstein, Nordness, Nelson, & Hertzog, 2002).

Recent research on strength-based assessment has demonstrated its utility in therapeutic and educational settings. In a study conducted by Oswald and colleagues (2001) children’s strengths were found to mitigate the negative impact of psychiatric symptoms. In another study, consistent use of a strength-based assessment protocol was found to be associated with higher rates of parent satisfaction with services and lower rates of missed appointments (Cox, 2006). In addition, researchers have demonstrated that when the therapist or interventionist has been committed to a strength-based approach, outcomes of therapeutic support were found to be better for youth receiving strength-based assessment vs. the traditional deficit-based assessment (Cox, 2006). Finally, multiple studies have demonstrated that when student strengths and competencies are emphasized during the treatment process, children are more likely to feel empowered and motivated to improve their social and emotional well-being (Cox, 2006; Epstein et al., 2003; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004) and their families are more likely to become engaged participants in the service delivery (Cox, 2006; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004).

Internationally the value of strength-based assessment has received considerable recognition (e.g., Lappalainen et al., 2009; Obel et al., 2004; Rothenberger & Woerner, 2004). For instance, European special education programs have been moving away from deficit-based assessments towards a more positive, interactive approach to assessment that takes student strengths into account. European communities have recognized that strength assessments can be useful in planning interventions for teaching and learning, and it enhances the potential for students with disabilities to be educated in general education settings (Watkins, 2007). The value of strength-based assessment has been emphasized, for example, in Finland where the Finnish Ministry of Education (2007), the Law of Basic Education (Finnish Law 642/2010), and National Curriculum Guidelines (Finnish National Board of Education,
2010) have mandated that decisions regarding student placement in special education or other support services need to consider the strengths of individual students as well as their difficulties. This increasing trend towards a more strength-based approach to educational and therapeutic service delivery in Scandinavia and Europe has underscored the need for standardized, psychometrically sound assessments that measure individual strengths.

In the United States, one of the most widely used strength-based assessment instruments in educational and mental health service delivery is the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale-2 (BERS-2; Epstein, 2004; Epstein & Sharma, 1998), which is a standardized, norm-referenced assessment that measures the strengths of children 5 to 18 years of age. The BERS-2 is a re-standardized version of BERS that includes separate rating scales for youth, parent, and teacher respondents (Epstein, 2004). The three rating scales are similar but contain minor wording alternations in some items to better reflect either the perspective of the youth, parent, or teacher. The BERS-2 contains 52-items which are organized into five subscales of emotional and behavioral strengths and an overall strength index. The interpersonal strength subscale consists of 15 items that measure a child’s ability to interact with others in social situations (e.g., Accepts criticism). The family involvement subscale includes 10 items that assess a child’s relationship with their family (e.g., Participates in family activities). The intrapersonal strength subscale includes 11 items that focus on how a child perceives his or her own functioning (e.g., Talks about the positive aspects of life). The school functioning subscale includes 9 items that assess a child’s performance and competence in school (e.g., Completes school tasks on time). The affective strength subscale includes 7 items that measure a child’s ability to give affection to and receive affection from others (e.g., Expresses affection for others; Epstein, 2004). The scale can be completed in approximately 10 minutes. Numerous studies have been conducted to demonstrate the reliability and validity (Benner, Beaudoin, Mooney, Ubing, & Pierce, 2008; Epstein et al., 2002) and the factor structure of general strength index with five subscales of the BERS-2 (Buckley, Ryser, Reid, & Epstein, 2006; Epstein, 2004, Lappalainen et al., 2009).

In response to the increasing recognition of the value of strength-based assessment and the need for standardized measures internationally, the BERS-2 was translated into Finnish. In spite of the extensive research literature on the psychometric properties of the BERS, when assessments are translated from one language to another language or used in another country or culture, the psychometric properties must be re-established, specifically the reliability and validity must be determined (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). The psychometric properties of the Finnish version of the BERS-2 (Epstein, 2004) have been examined in a number of recent investigations. In the first study, Lappalainen et al. (2009) found that the factor structure of the Finnish BERS-2 was similar to the original five-factor structure reported in the U.S and had acceptable internal reliability coefficients ranging between .71 to .93. Second, a study investigating the cross informant reliability of the Finnish BERS-2 found moderate to large correlations (ranging between .35 and .51) in ratings between teachers and students, with higher agreement on externalizing behaviors than internalizing (Sointu, Savolainen, Lappalainen, & Epstein, 2012a). In a third study, an examination of cross informant agreement across parents, teachers, and students with and without special education supports, the researchers found the Finnish BERS-2 to be a reliable measure for assessing student strengths across informants. The mean convergent correlations (.33, .31, .40) were clearly larger than the mean divergent correlations (.20, .19, .31) respectively for the three informant dyads of parent-teacher, parent-students and teacher-student. The convergent correlations were large particularly in ratings of students with disabilities and receiving special education services (ranging between .44 and .61) (Sointu, Savolainen, Lappalainen, & Epstein, 2012b).

The previous research demonstrated that the Finnish version of the BERS-2 is a structurally sound and reliable instrument for assessing the strengths of children; however, research on the validity of the Finnish version of the BERS-2 needs to be examined. Validity refers to the accuracy of conclusions or interpretations one can make based upon the scores obtained from a test (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Validation of an assessment always requires an empirical investigation, depending upon the type of validity (Nunnally, 1978). One type of validity is convergent validity, which refers to the relationship between measures of the same construct using different assessment measures (Crocker & Algina, 1986; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2007). The larger the relationship between the two tests, the more confident we can be of its convergent validity.

The most efficient approach for determining the convergent validity of an assessment instrument is to compare it with another assessment that measures similar or related constructs and has demonstrated high rates of reliability and validity in previous research. One instrument that has achieved acceptable levels of reliability and validity, particularly among Finnish children and adolescents, is the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). The SDQ is an instrument used to screen emotional and behavior problems among children and adolescents and has demonstrated strong convergent validity with Achenbach’s Child Behavior Checklist (convergent correlations ranging between .34 and .70) and the Youth Self Report (convergent correlations ranging between .43 and .68) (Koskelainen,
Parents and teachers observe daily children’s behavior in school and at home and they are undoubtedly the most important adult informants for emotional and behavioral situation of school-age children. The purpose of this study was to assess the convergent validity of the parent and teacher version of the BERS-2 with the SDQ.

METHODS

Participants

The participants were a group of fifth grade students from 30 schools and 57 classrooms in Eastern Finland. These participants were part of a larger study that included 588 students and was designed to examine school inclusion in Eastern Finland. The students ranged in age from 11 years to 12 years, and the informants were teachers and parents. The teacher data was collected by providing teachers with a list of six students who were randomly selected from a classroom in which parent consent and student assent to participate had already been obtained. In classrooms where the number of consented and assented students was less than six, all of the eligible students were included in the sample. This procedure resulted in 54 teachers rating 281 students, with an average of 5.2 students per teacher. The parent data was collected from parents whose children participated in the larger study on school inclusion. This resulted in 328 students who were rated by their parents for this study. The students reflected the ethnic composition of the region that was overwhelmingly of Finnish origin with less than 5% other ethnicities. This sample drawn from 30 schools is well representative of the Eastern Finland region and with some confidence also nationwide as PISA studies (OECD 2009) show that the between school variance of student academic performance is one of the smallest in the world in Finland (about 5% of the variance).

Measures

Students’ behavioral and emotional strengths were assessed on the Finnish Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale-2, (BERS-2) that has separate rating scales for teachers (Teacher Rating Scale - TRS) and parents (Parent Rating Scales – PRS). The BERS-2 contains 52 items that factor into five subscales (interpersonal strength IS, family involvement FI, intrapersonal strength IaS, school functioning SF, affective strength AS) as well as an overall Strength Index score. The two rating scales are similar but contain minor wording alternations in some items to reflect better either the perspective of the student or the teacher. For example, the item “The student participates in community activities” of the TSR is written as “My child participates in community activities” in the PRS. Individual items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (from 4 to 1; 4: if the statement is not at all like the child/you; 1: if the statement is not at all like the child/you). The original versions of the BERS-2 were translated into Finnish independently by the research team and an authorized English language translator. The researchers discussed the translation with the authorized translator and agreed on the final, linguistically and culturally correct wording of each item. The Cronbach’s alphas for the TRS were for IS (x=.96), FI (x=.87), IaS (x=.89), SF (x=.89), AS (x=.88); and for the PRS IS (x=.90), FI (x=.80), IaS (x=.81), SF (x=.83), AS (x=.76).

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) is a brief screening instrument that contains 25 items, which detail positive and negative behavioral traits of children and adolescents. The SDQ was chosen as the validity instrument because of its widespread use in research, its excellent psychometric properties (Goodman & Scott, 1999; Koskelainen et al., 2000) and the availability of a Finnish version of the SDQ. The 25 items are divided into five scales of five items: the hyperactivity scale, emotional symptoms scale, conduct problem scale, peer problem scale and prosocial scale. The hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct problems and peer problems scales total 20 items to which raters score 0 for “not true”, 1 for “somewhat true” and 2 for “certainly true”. The prosocial scale includes 5 items, which are worded positively and in this study scored similarly as the problem scales. The prosocial scale gives a score for positive prosocial behavior and is expected to correlate negatively to problem scales. The questionnaire has been carefully translated into Finnish and demonstrated adequate reliability and validity (Koskelainen et al., 2000).

Procedures

Data were collected from April-May 2010 across seven municipalities in eastern Finland as a part of the Eastern Finland Education Development (ISKE) project funded by the Finnish National Board of Education. In each participating municipality a coordination team contacted the schools to identify teachers that would be willing to participate. With the approval of the school administration, a letter describing the research project was sent home to the parents and caregivers of all the children in the classes of the teachers who agreed to participate in the project. The letter described the purpose of the study, the research scope, what was asked of participants, and how the project would benefit the schools and students. Finally, all of the parents and caregivers were asked to sign a written consent of participation.

To collect the data, the research team delivered the BERS-2 TRS and PRS as well as the SDQ to the schools. In addition, the team explained the details of the study and instructions for completing the questionnaires to school administrators and teachers. Each participating teacher was given a list of six, or less, pre-named teacher questionnaires that included the names of six randomly selected students.
Table 1
**Correlation Coefficients Between Subscales for the Finnish BERS-2 and the SDQ with Teachers as Responders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Prosocial Scale</th>
<th>Hyperactivity Scale</th>
<th>Emotional Problems</th>
<th>Conduct Problems</th>
<th>Peer Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Strengths</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>-.62</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>-.70</td>
<td>-.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Strengths</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.40</td>
<td>-.40</td>
<td>-.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Involvement</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>-.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Functioning</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>-.65</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>-.54</td>
<td>-.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Strength</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>-.35</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>-.41</td>
<td>-.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Strength Index</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>-.58</td>
<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.63</td>
<td>-.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All correlations were statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level.

From their class. The teachers were provided instructions on how to complete the questionnaires and instructed to contact the project coordinator if they had any questions. The teachers were instructed to complete the questionnaires within five school days. For the parents or caregivers, the questionnaires were sent home with the students as part of a larger packet that included a response letter, return envelope, and detailed instructions for completing the questionnaires along with contact information for additional questions or clarifications.

**RESULTS**

To determine the convergent validity of the BERS-2, Pearson’s product moment correlations were calculated for each Finnish BERS-2 subscale and overall strength index and the five SDQ scales across parent and teacher ratings. Correlation coefficients between the teacher ratings for the Finnish versions of the BERS-2 and the SDQ are reported in Table 1. All of the correlations were statistically significant ($p < .01$). According to Hopkins (2006), correlation coefficients between .10 and .29 are considered small, between .30 and .50 are considered moderate, between .50 and .70 are large, and those between .70 and .90 are very large. Based on these criteria, criteria, 28 of the 30 correlations (93%) were moderate to very large. As expected, most of the largest correlations were between the BERS-2 subscales and the SDQ Prosocial Scale. More specifically, the largest correlation for the teacher ratings was .73 for the BERS-2 Affective Strength subscale and the SDQ Prosocial Scale. The lowest correlation was -.22 for the BERS-2 School Functioning subscale and the SDQ Peer Problem Scale.

Correlations between the parent ratings are reported in Table 2. All of the correlations were statistically significant ($p < .01$). According to Hopkins (2006), criteria, 18 of the 30 correlations (60%) were moderate to large. As with the teacher ratings, the largest correlations were between the BERS-2 subscales and the SDQ Prosocial Scale. Specifically, the largest correlation was .62 for the BERS-2 Interpersonal Strength subscale and the SDQ Prosocial Scale. Similar to the teacher ratings, the lowest correlation for the parents was -.06 for the BERS-2 School Functioning subscale and the SDQ Peer Problem Scale.

In summary the convergent validity results from teacher and parent ratings are very similar although the parent rating correlations between most BERS-2 and SDQ subscales are somewhat smaller than in teacher ratings.

**DISCUSSION**

This study represents the fourth in a series investigating the psychometrics of the Finnish BERS-2 (see Lappalainen et al, 2009; Sointu et al, 2012 a, b). The purpose of this study was to examine the convergent validity of the Finnish version of the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS-2) with teachers and parents as raters. All of the correlations for both parent and teacher ratings were significant. As would be expected, the strength-oriented subscale (Prosocial Subscale) of the SDQ was positively correlated with the BERS-2 subscales, whereas all of the deficit-oriented subscales of the SDQ were negatively correlated with the BERS-2 subscales. The teacher ratings had moderate to very large correlations in 96% of the cases, whereas the parent ratings were moderate to large in 60% of the cases. There were a number of similarities across teacher and parent ratings. For instance, the lowest correlation for both raters was the BERS-2 School Functioning subscale and the SDQ Peer Problem scale. The low correlations for these scales suggest these two scales measure somewhat different constructs. For instance, questions related to school functioning very likely have little relationship to questions asked to assess peer relationship problems. Also, the subscales that demonstrated the strongest relationship besides the prosocial scales for the two instruments were the BERS-2 interpersonal subscale and SDQ conduct problems scale (-.58) and the BERS-2 school functioning and SDQ hyperactivity scale (-.57). These findings would be as expected as the former subscales measure attributes of self-control and self-management whereas the latter subscales measure attributes of attention and school organization skills.
Table 2
Correlation Coefficients Between Subscales for the Finnish BERS-2 and the SDQ with Parents as Responders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Prosocial Scale</th>
<th>Hyperactivity Scale</th>
<th>Emotional Problems</th>
<th>Conduct Problems</th>
<th>Peer Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Strengths</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>−.42</td>
<td>−.25</td>
<td>−.58</td>
<td>−.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Strengths</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>−.30</td>
<td>−.43</td>
<td>−.39</td>
<td>−.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Involvement</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>−.30</td>
<td>−.22</td>
<td>−.54</td>
<td>−.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Functioning</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>−.57</td>
<td>−.25</td>
<td>−.42</td>
<td>−.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Strength</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.17</td>
<td>−.28</td>
<td>−.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Strength Index</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>−.45</td>
<td>−.33</td>
<td>−.57</td>
<td>−.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All correlations except * were statistically significant at the p < .01 level.

The findings from this study provide evidence to support the validity of the Finnish version of the BERS-2. A comparison of the data in the present study with the convergent validity studies of the BERS-2 in the U.S. demonstrates similar findings. Specifically, in the U.S. studies assessing the relationship of the BERS-2 with other widely accepted scales such as Achenbach’s Teacher Rating Form (Harniss, Epstein, Ryser & Pearson, 1999; Trout et al., 2003), the Social Skills Rating Scale (Trout et al., 2003), the Systematic Screening for Behavioral Disorders (Epstein et al., 2002), and the Scale Assessing Emotional Disturbance (Epstein et al., 2002), the correlations were in most cases as expected, all significant, and ranging in magnitude from moderate to very large. Given the increasing emphasis in Scandinavian and European communities on incorporating a strength based approach to education, mental health, and social service, the need for standardized measures to assess strengths and competencies has become paramount to service delivery. With the findings of the present and previous studies, the Finnish BERS-2 appears to satisfy this need.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study that should be noted. First, the participants consisted primarily of fifth grade Finnish students from a single region in Finland. Future research should continue to examine the psychometrics of the BERS-2 with a broader sample of younger and older Finnish students from throughout Finland. Related to this point is that the students were evaluated as a single homogeneous group; however, it is important that researchers demonstrate the convergent validity with other student groups such as students at-risk of disabilities and students who receive full or part-time special education services. Second, the present study assessed the convergent validity of the BERS-2 with only one instrument, the SDQ. Future research should continue to examine the convergent validity of the Finnish BERS-2 with other assessments that have been translated into Finnish. Third, the teachers and parents who participated were volunteers. Ratings by volunteer teachers and parents may differ in specific and meaningful ways from ratings of those who did not volunteer. Finally, all the measures used were rating scales, and thus validity was not established with an external criterion measure such as observable behavior or school permanent products. All of these limitations can be addressed in future research of the Finnish BERS-2.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Given the increasing calls for a strength-based approach to service delivery in Scandinavian and European countries, there is a clear and compelling need for valid and reliable instruments that can be translated and applied on an international scale. The results of the current study, and previous research, suggest that the Finnish BERS-2 has acceptable psychometric properties and can be considered a valid and reliable measure for assessing the emotional and behavioral strengths of students and making important service delivery decisions on students. Although additional research should continue to be conducted to fully understand any potential cultural issues that may be involved in strength-based assessment, the BERS-2 appears to be an acceptable instrument for use in Finland, the US and internationally.

As a strength-based assessment for Scandinavian and European countries, the BERS-2 can serve a number of important uses for teachers, parents, practitioners, and service delivery agencies. For teachers, the BERS-2 can be used to identify children with limited strengths who might be at-risk for school failure. This may include children who display a persistent pattern of externalizing or internalizing behaviors that limit their ability to develop or maintain socially appropriate relationships, or their ability to display socially appropriate behaviors within school settings. Moreover, to compare and contrast a child’s emotional and behavioral strengths across home and school settings, parents and teachers can complete the BERS-2 independently. This could help promote enhanced communication and collaboration between parents and teachers, increase parental engagement in school supports and services, and...
lead to interventions that might improve a child’s social and emotional functioning across settings. For school psychologists or special education teachers, the BERS-2 can be an excellent tool for developing strength-based goals and interventions. For instance, a student who scores high on the interpersonal subscale, but low on the school functioning subscale may benefit from an intervention that incorporates peer tutoring as part of the treatment plan for improving school performance. By using the child’s strong interpersonal skills, the staff may be able to enhance the child’s school performance by supporting him with positive peer supports that may help improve the child’s performance at school. Finally, with the increased demand given for schools for showing evidence on children’s responsiveness to educational interventions in Finland and other European countries, the BERS-2 can be used by education and service delivery agencies as an evaluation and progress monitoring measure to determine the effectiveness of an intervention on an individual child or group of children. For example, to determine the effectiveness of a school-wide, tiered support system, such as response to intervention or positive behavioral interventions and supports, teachers, parents, and students could complete their respective versions of the BERS-2 at the beginning of the school year to identify potential emotional and behavioral variables that may need additional attention. For instance, if a large number of students score low on the family involvement subscale, school administrators together with multidisciplinary pupil welfare teams could develop an action plan at the start of the school year to increase parent participation and collaboration within the school setting. In addition, the BERS-2 could be given at end of the semester and school year to determine the effectiveness of the school-wide program over time as a group and on an individual basis.

REFERENCES


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