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Arthur C. Maerlender
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, amaerlender2@unl.edu

Joseph Palamara
Alfred University

Jonathan Lichtenstein
Geisel School of Medicine, Dartmouth College, Jonathan.D.Lichtenstein@Dartmouth.edu

The Global Assessment of School Functioning (GASF): Criterion validity and interrater reliability

Arthur Maerlender,[1] Joseph Palamara,[2] & Jonathan Lichtenstein[3]

1 Center for Brain, Biology and Behavior, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska
2 Department of School Psychology, Alfred University, Alfred, New York
3 Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, Lebanon, Hampshire

Corresponding author: A. Maerlender, Center for Brain, Biology and Behavior, East Stadium, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0156. Email: amaerlender2@unl.edu

Abstract

The Global Assessment of School Functioning (GASF) provides a robust estimate of a student's overall level of functioning within the school environment. It is intended to capture a global metric reflecting academic, social and general behavioral functioning within the school. It is a modification of the Global Assessment of Functioning and reflects functioning across academics, interpersonal relationships, school behavior, and school participation. It was developed to allow school personnel a means to communicate the general level of student functioning without reverting to specific issues or immediate concerns. This paper reports on the scale's criterion validity and interrater reliability. Confirmations of the scale structure and descriptors were obtained using subject matter experts, who confirmed descriptor's criterion validity. Vignettes were developed and then rated by 64 educators to establish interrater reliability. Strong intraclass correlations (ICC) were obtained supporting the GASF reliability (single measure absolute agreement ICC = 0.998, 95th percentile confidence interval = 0.994 to 1.00). With appropriate use, this tool has

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value for all school personnel as a general indicator of student functioning and as a point of student reference in school team considerations. Anecdotal evidence indicates it can be used for overall progress monitoring as well.

Keywords: functioning, global, school

1 Introduction

The assessment of student social and interpersonal behaviors, academic skills, and cognitive functioning have become commonplace in schools. While the need to focus on discrete behaviors has its place in this setting, it is sometimes difficult to give an estimate of functioning that captures the overall picture of a student. Indeed, there is a lack of valid and reliable indicators of a student's overall level of functioning across all domains. Such a tool would need to provide a reliable and valid indication of where a student functioned relative to developmental expectations and facilitate communication within the school and to clinicians outside the school.

In the mental health environment, the use of global scales for measuring functional behavior has provided researchers and mental health clinicians an efficient, valid, and reliable quantitative measure of behavior that is sensitive to change at a macro-level (Keraus, 1991). For years, mental health agencies utilized this model to report their findings via a multi-axial diagnosis summarized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) Axis V, Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). That approach allowed clinicians to provide numeric values that were linked to behaviorally descriptive anchor points, which also eschews subjective wording such as *better or worse*.

While the newest edition of the DSM eliminated the multi-axial format, the use of global assessments remains an active element of clinical practice (DiMaria, 2018). However, such a global index of student function related to the school environment does not exist.

Individualized Education Plans report a level of function. Often, an IQ score is used for this purpose, although it is well-known that an IQ score only reflects one aspect of a student's performance in school. Further, the component aspects of a comprehensive evaluation include academic skills that are assessed based on discrete functions such as reading and mathematics. Similarly, behavior-plans address narrowly focused behavioral excesses or absences that may or

may not be reflected in IQ scores. While these may all be worthwhile data points for describing a student, it can be challenging to capture the student as a whole.

Providing a context based on global functioning can enhance communication and help to focus on educational resources. Communication among school personnel and with outside agencies and clinical partners is also enhanced by representing the level of functioning in addition to the specific concerns of the referral or question.

As federal and state accountability standards mandate schools to report on the efficacy of their treatment efforts, and as greater attention from the medical community focuses on schools as a venue for prevention, school personnel need tools that are efficient for quantifying students' school-based behaviors.

This paper reports on the Global Assessment of School Functioning (GASF) and the establishment of the underlying psychometric structure for determining a student's level of general functioning. The goal of the study was to establish the criterion validity of the structure of the scales and then demonstrate interrater reliability in a sample of educators with varied roles. Psychologists in the school setting are often tasked with assessing behavioral and intellectual functions although other professions often add domain-specific assessment information regarding a specific student. While the use of this scale is intended for a wider school audience, the scale's proper use is the domain of psychologists to ensure fidelity, reliability, and validity in practice.

The GAF was an adaptation of the Global Assessment Scale developed by Endicott, Spitzer, Fleiss, and Cohen (1976). Several studies have demonstrated that the psychometric properties of the GAF support its reliability and validity (e.g., Rey, Starling, Wever, Dossetor, & Plapp, 1995; Schorre & Vandvik, 2004). Similarly, the Children's Global Assessment Scale (CGAS) was developed as a measure to assess child and adolescent global functioning (Shaffer et al., 1983). The CGAS takes into account child functioning in the home with family, with friends, at school, and during free time. Scores are reported as a single number that ranges from 1 to 100 with scores above 70 indicating normal functioning. The CGAS contains behavioral descriptors at anchor points that are intended to express levels of functioning ranging from superior to extremely impaired. In a study of 145 patients seen in a child and adolescent psychiatric hospital setting, the CGAS

showed similar interrater reliability coefficients to GAF among practicing child and adolescent psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and child psychiatry trainees (Dyrborg et al., 2000). Practicing child and adolescent psychiatrists evidenced the highest levels of agreement (r = .87). Combined ratings including raters from all levels of training demonstrated moderate agreement among all raters (r = .79).

The GASF used the scalar structure of the GAF translated into school-related behaviors. It is a unimodal measure reflecting several domains associated with school behavior (work completion, work quality, peer relationships, adult relationships, disruptive behavior, and attendance). These behaviors are operationalized as questions about the need for academic supports, interactions with peers and adults, attendance, and general behavior within the context of community and grade-level expectations. Thus, the ratings are developmentally anchored.

The GASF requires the rater to assign a numeric score that best describes a student's current functioning. It is structured in the same manner as the GAF with 10 ordinal categories of behavioral descriptors. Based on an adult observation of a student's general functioning, a knowledgeable teacher or group of teachers can use the descriptors to place a student along the continuum of general functionality by assigning a numerical value.

The scale was used for many years in clinical practice for both referral data and use in school-based team meetings with one of the authors (A. M.). In school meetings, each team member was given the scale and instructed in its use. Cases before the team were rated by each member on a sheet of paper. Results were shared and discrepancies in ratings were discussed until consensus on a final score was reached. Scores were recorded in the student file and compared at later meetings. Although no formal analytic data were collected, teams uniformly appreciated the scale and the process. As a referral tool in an outpatient clinic, teachers were sent the GASF in a packet that also included the Behavioral Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF), the Child Behavior Checklist, Teacher form (CBCL-T), and questions about teacher concerns. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained to use this referral data to assess the unimodality of the scale. Teacher ratings of general emotional and behavioral functioning (CBCL-T) and executive functioning (Teacher Report Form

of the BRIEF), with IQ scores from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 4th ed. (WISC-IV) obtained in the evaluation were analyzed to determine their relationships with GASF scores (Condiracci, Holcomb, Lichtenstein, Erdodi, & Maerlender, 2014).

Forty-two children aged 6–17 (M = 11.92, standard deviation [SD] = 3.04) were rated by their current teachers. Statistical modeling using these scores as predictors explained 46% of the variability in GASF scores. The most influential of the three predictors was the TRF-Total ($\beta = -.42$), followed by BRIEF-GEC ($\beta = -.33$), and FSIQ ($\beta = .15$); all p-values < .001. These findings indicated that teacher ratings of overall student academic and behavioral performances (GASF ratings) reflected a combination of general cognitive, behavioral, and executive functioning in these students. Importantly, the factor and sale scores did not correlate with the GASF, only the total scores, thus highlighting its unitary construct validity. Other studies in the use of the GASF are under way.

The current paper describes two studies: the validation of the scale descriptions (both the content and ordinality of the rankings), and the GASF's interrater reliability using validated vignettes taken from case discussions. The methods of each study are discussed separately, and then the results are presented for each study.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Study 1: Scale criterion validity

2.1.1 Participants

For this aspect of the project, four subject matter experts (SME) were selected as an expert panel to provide judgments regarding the adequacy of the GASF. The SME were chosen based on their roles and experiences in assessment, measurement, student and teacher behavior, classroom dynamics, and learning problems. They had a minimum of 6 years teaching experience (range: 6–22), three had Master's degrees and one had a specialist certification.

2.1.2 Procedure

There were two parts to Study 1: Parts A and B. The first aspect of this study (Part A) was to verify the ordinality of the descriptor bands and determine if the behaviors and functioning presented in the descriptors were hierarchically arranged appropriately. The second aspect (Part B) was to verify the agreement of the descriptors to real-world behaviors of children and adolescents in school.

For Part A, the SMEs were provided with the text of the descriptors without scaling and asked to arrange them in order of most functional to least functional. A descriptor validity rating form was adapted from the GASF scale to assess the criterion validity of the ordering of the descriptive anchors. After removing the scalar numbering from the GASF form, the un-numbered GASF statements (descriptive anchors) were placed on separate cards (one set for each SME) in random order. The SMEs each placed the descriptors in the order they felt appropriate (lowest to highest).

The ordinality of the ratings was determined by calculating the accuracy of rankings across the 10 categorical dimensions of the GASF. Perfect ordering would result in a total score of 40 points (four raters by 10 descriptors). The results of the four raters' ordering achieved a score of 38 points. One rater mis-interpreted the term *moderate* in one descriptor causing a mismatch.

For Part B, the accuracy of descriptor content was assessed by a survey administered to the SMEs after their rank ordering of descriptors. The survey asked the following questions: (a) Does the GASF contain an adequate content sample of student behaviors? (b) Are the behaviors defined in global terms (e.g., are the terms broad enough to allow the rater to consider a variety of behaviors representative of each of the anchor points)? (c) Do the groups as you ranked them appear to comprise a hierarchy of behavior (e.g., do behaviors reflect the incremental severity of the behavioral groupings)? SME survey responses were positive with 15 of 16 items rated as "yes." The one "no" response pointed out that one descriptor was not sufficiently grade-sensitive. That descriptor item was adjusted. **Table 1** presents a sample of two scale bands with descriptors.

Table 1 Examples of Global Assessment of School Functioning ratings and descriptors

Rating Band	*Descriptor*
71–80	Some occasional difficulties in schoolwork or behavioral regulation (may be due to psychosocial stressors); occasionally falls behind in schoolwork; demonstrates ability to make and maintain positive peer relationships typical for age; Participates in some activities. If identified as a special education student, is nearing exit based on remediation of skills deficits. Minor attendance problems.
21–30	Severe academic difficulties. Identified with a disability (receiving special education services) but services and interventions having no positive impact; failing in several academic subjects despite interventions and behavioral problems—at serious risk of being placed out of district due to behavior; multiple behavior problems per week.

2.2 Analysis

SME ratings were compared to the target rating. A 95% accuracy rating was set as the criterion. A Pearson correlation matrix was calculated comparing mean SME scores to the original (target) scores. Intraclass correlation (ICC) with two-way random effects model, with absolute agreement was then computed. Finally, a survey of SME's was conducted regarding their agreement or disagreement with the wording of the vignettes. The goal was to establish reasonable, life

2.3 Study 2: Interrater reliability

2.3.1 Participants

The 64 school professionals were comprised of general education teachers (n = 36), special education teachers (n = 10), school psychologists (n = 15), and those who identified as *other* (n = 3; one was a counselor/behavior specialist, one was a Response to Intervention coordinator, and one was an elementary school principal). Participants were primarily female (85.9%). The average age of participants was between 36 and 40 years old. The modal school/teaching experience was between 6 and 10 years (33%), and no participant had less than 3 years of experience.

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations of vignette ratings by role.

Table 2 Intraclass correlations and confidence intervals

Sample	*Intraclass Correlation*	*95% confidence interval*	
		Lower bond	*Upper bound*
Full sample (*N* = 69)	0.998*	0.994	1.00
General education (*N* = 36)	0.999*	0.997	1.00
Special education (*N* = 15)	0.992*	0.974	1.00
Psychologists (*N* = 15)	0.997*	0.992	1.00
Other (*N* = 3)	0.989*	0.93	1.00

*$p < .001$

Table 3 Means and standard deviations (SD) of vignette ratings (criterion score in parenthesis)

Vignette no	*1 (77)*		*2(45)*		*3(15)*		*4(73)*		*5(98)*	
Role	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*
General education (*N* = 38)	76.68	5.70	45.32	11.06	15.00	8.07	74.16	7.51	97.21	4.50
Special education (*N* = 10)	80.40	5.72	52.30	14.86	17.00	8.38	70.70	8.96	99.00	1.49
Psychologist (*N* = 14)	75.57	4.86	45.50	8.05	19.00	8.09	70.07	4.32	98.43	1.91
Other (*N* = 3)	80.00	5.00	39.67	7.57	6.33	4.16	77.33	10.79	97.00	1.73
Total (*N* = 65)	77.17	5.63	46.17	11.18	15.77	8.27	72.89	7.46	97.74	3.66

SD = standard deviation

2.3.2 Procedure

The rater-participants were provided with standardized instructions on the use of global assessment measures to quantify current functioning. Interrater reliability was measured using five of the study vignettes. Five practice trials using other vignettes were conducted before the index rating was conducted.

Reliability training began with a description of the background of the GASF development, potentials for use, and then provided directions for assigning a GASF score to an individual case. The directions were: "identify the band you feel best captures the student's functioning; read the bands above and below to make sure you feel you are in the correct band (change bands and repeat if necessary); then choose a single value in the selected band to quantify the overall degree of similarity to the descriptors."

The participants used an electronic copy of the GASF to score practice vignettes on a Moodle page that was secured and housed on the local intermediate school district website. After reading each vignette,

participants were asked to provide a rating score using the GASF. Immediate feedback was provided for both correct and incorrect answers. Correct was defined as ±10-points from the target score. Incorrect answer feedback included a reminder to read the directions carefully and try again. In the event that scores were still incorrect, the correct score was provided, and the respondent advanced to the next vignette. Next, participants followed an electronic link to surveymonkey.com where the five vignettes for rating were located.

The survey was comprised of a demographics section, the vignettes section, and a feedback section where participants were asked to provide feedback on the instructions, the measure's vocabulary, ease of use, efficiency, and whether this brief global measure would be useful in helping them quantify student behavior.

2.3.3 Measures

The GASF

The GASF contains 10 hierarchically arranged descriptions of typical school behaviors ranging from the inability to participate in school to a superior level of performance and function. Each descriptor is represented by a 10-point band. See the supporting information for the full GASF.

Vignettes

Ten vignettes were selected from a set of previously developed case scenarios taken from actual school consultations. The 10 vignettes were divided into two comparable groups of five each (one group for practice and one for the final rating). Each group had one vignette rated below 30, one rated above 71, and six between 31 and 70. The word count for vignettes ranged from 68 to 360 with a mean word count of 157.

2.3.4 Analysis

Data were collected and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.22, IBM, Chicago IL) software. After a practice-run of rating four vignettes, followed by discussions to clarify scoring rules, the validity for the five study vignettes was established by calculating Pearson correlations of the SME the five study vignette ratings.

A target score was included that was provided by the author of the vignettes (J. P.). If a correlation above 0.50 was obtained, a "gold standard" rating was established for the vignette as the mean of the four ratings by the SME. In addition, interrater reliability statistics were also calculated ICC using a two-way random, absolute agreement, single measures ICC (McGraw & Wong, 1996).

For the experimental group of raters Pearson's correlation of rater, score agreement was calculated comparing raters scores to the gold standard established by the SMEs. The same model was used to calculate interrater reliability of the final study rating by the 64 educators. A one-way analysis of variance was then calculated to determine if there were significant differences in ratings by occupation.

3 Results

3.1 Study 1: SME vignette ratings

All SME ratings were within 10-points of the original target score, set by one author (J.P.) with an average standard deviation across all ratings and vignettes = 3.5 (range: 1.9–5.0). The Pearson correlation of the mean SME scores and the original (target) score was r = .990, p < .001. They achieved 95% accuracy with the only errors due to one teacher misinterpreting a descriptor. Some text was also adjusted based on qualitative feedback. The ICC was also strong (ICC = 0.981, confidence interval (CI): 0.988–0.999, p < .001).

3.2 Study 2: Interrater reliability

The educators achieved a high degree of agreement assigning GASF scores to study vignettes, with 87.7% agreement of the ratings met criteria. For the full sample across all five vignettes, the ICC was very strong (ICC = 0.998). Further, all occupational subgroups had a single measure ICCs above 0.963. **Table 2** summarizes the calculated ICCs.

Due to the small sample sizes for occupation, the Special Ed and Psychologist groups were combined and then compared with General Education (two groups by five vignettes). The multivariate effect was significant: F(5, 56 = 2.671, p = .031. The only between subjects (vignette) effect was for Vignette 4: F(1, 60)= 4.229, p = .044. Visual inspection of the means of the General Education group (mean = 74.16,

SD = 7.51) and the combined Special Education and Psychologist group (mean = 70.33, SD = 6.485) shows little absolute difference.

4 Conclusion

This set of studies documents the validation of the scale criteria and structure, and the use of vignettes to establish interrater reliability. The structure of the GASF, modeled after the well-validated GAF, allows clinicians and school personnel to quantify school-related student behavior efficiently without the need for technically cumbersome scoring procedures. The descriptors represent school-related behaviors in academic, social and behavioral realms with the aim of capturing global functioning and not specific problem areas. When used according to instructions, the GASF provides a valid and reliable index of global school-related functioning.

The criterion validity of the GASF descriptors, as well as the ordinality of the scaling were demonstrated by strong subject matter expert agreement (Study 1). Survey responses were uniformly positive for proper wording of descriptors, accurate hierarchy of descriptors, and that the descriptors provided a sufficient range both within and between levels, and the intensity, frequency and severity of behaviors were accurately placed.

In the reliability study (Study 2), substantial interrater reliability was obtained by 64 experienced educators through ratings of validated student-profile vignettes. The high ICC values provide evidence of the reliability of the instrument. Some expected statistical differences in occupational rating biases were noted; however, absolute values were quite similar.

The GASF is not intended to assess specific aspects or patterns of behavior, cognition, or academic skill. It establishes a level of function against which more fine-grained assessments or activities can be understood. The value of this tool lies in its global nature, its simplistic structure and its intuitive content. While it is not a specific assessment of any particular function, it captures a level of functioning that is important for school-based programming, referral information, and outcome assessments. As a global screening tool, the GASF may bring some balance to student measurement with the potential to serve as

an evidence-based, quantitative measure of the whole child within the school environment, that can be incorporated into standard intervention processes (e.g., Response to Intervention, Positive Behavior Support Plans, Individualized Education Program documents, 504 Plans, and behavioral interventions).

Further, because improvement in one area of function through remediation often has a salutary effect on the student's general level of function, the GASF may be effective to document global change over the course of a year of specific or targeted intervention.

Since the genesis of the GASF is rooted in mental health progress monitoring and closely conforms to the framework of the GAF, the GASF represents an opportunity for schools and mental health care providers to communicate student status between professionals in a manner that is meaningful to both entities. Our clinical experience confirms this as many times referral questions are focused on the acuity of a problem that colors the presentation material as more dysfunctional than is actually the case.

In a similar manner, establishing this global level of functioning within a school team-meeting has helped to keep the discussion focused on a more accurate "picture" of the student's problems. The acuity of a specific behavior can blur the treatment needs by focusing too narrowly on the immediate problem. In addition, anecdotal case reports suggest its use as an empirical progress monitoring tool following intervention is positive. Further study on this aspect is needed.

4.1 Limitations

When using the GASF, it is important to remember that the "scores" obtained are ratings and not formally standardized. The reliability reported here was based on vignettes that were judged to be accurate and not actual cases. While this may limit the psychometric reliability, this has not proven to be a problem in practice: establishing local reliability is felt to be important. Further, the large number of raters likely inflated the correlations, but samples of smaller subgroups provided comparable results. In the team setting, interrater agreement of scores should be by consensus on each case, thus ensuring reliability within that context. Experience with this process has been very positive. Reliability training remains an important part of the process and the corresponding author is willing to provide directions for local

reliability assessments or completion of the study reliability process upon request to the corresponding author. The GASF is also available from the corresponding author.

Conflict of interests — The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

Supporting information — A copy of the *Global Assessment of School Functioning: GASF 3.2* follows the References; a MS Word version is also attached to the repository record.

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Global Assessment of School Functioning: GASF 3.2

Instructions: 1. Rate student over the past month; 2. identify numeric range that captures his/her functioning, and estimate within the range to assign a single numeric rating; 3. circle descriptors that are most appropriate; 4. read descriptions above and below chosen range to verify placement. Note: reliability training is recommended for valid use.

91-100
Meets all academic and social expectations; a model student. Superior functioning day in and day out. No attendance or truancy problems.

81-90
Completes work with no reminders, quality of work is good, does not get upset when making mistakes, takes correction easily, and meets most social expectations; OR meets most academic expectations and all social expectations (is polite, raises hand, considerate of others); participates in wide range of activities. No problems with attendance or truancy.

71-80
Some occasional difficulties in schoolwork or behavioral regulation (may be due to psychosocial stressors); occasionally falls behind in schoolwork; demonstrates ability to make and maintain positive peer relationships typical for age; Participates in some activities. If identified as a special education student, is nearing exit based on remediation of skills deficits. Minor attendance problems.

61-70
Mild academic difficulties (occasional truancy, gets in some trouble, poor grades in one or two classes), but produces adequate academic work; if identified as a special education student, is making good progress toward goals; OR behavior generally appropriate with occasional difficulty (may have to leave room or be disciplined once a quarter at most). Absences or tardies may be affecting performance.

51-60
Moderate academic difficulty and at risk for educational failure – could be failing several classes but never identified for special education classes; if identified as a special education student, passing most classes only with support OR; has few friends; conflicts with peers; behavior may require some form of intervention due to weekly behavioral disturbances. Rare school-activities participation (may play on a sports team). Attendance problems may be affecting ability to learn.

41-50
Academic performance is more than one grade level behind current grade level placement in more than one subject area; if identified with a special education disability, is making modest gains toward goals; OR Social, behavioral, academic difficulties may be attributed to poor attendance. Demonstrates difficulty making and maintaining positive peer relationships. AND/OR: Attendance severely impacting school performance. Is at-risk for retention based on truancy or absences.

31-40
Requires significant intervention for academics (1:1) AND behavior; behaviorally has good days and bad, with academic skills very fragile, slow progress; OR frequent behavioral outbursts requiring out of classroom time or in-class discipline (several times a week) AND dropping grades. OR Demonstrates weekly absences or more than 12 absences in a semester (7 to 8 in a trimester).

21-30
Severe academic difficulties. Identified with a disability (receiving special education services) but services and interventions having no positive impact; failing in several academic subjects despite interventions AND

behavioral problems - at serious risk of being placed out of district due to behavior; multiple behavior problems per week.

11-20
Inability to function in school; educational needs cannot be met due to significant handicaps, severe impairments, or behavior that is out of control; impairment renders child unresponsive to interventions in present setting.

1-10
Institutionalized: assessed to be unable to benefit from structured academics or academic instruction beyond purely functional skills.

STUDENT	DATE	RATING