

Remember the Relationships

The Missing Link that Makes Measures of Students' Social and Emotional Learning More Understandable and Actionable

Peter C. Scales and Kent Pekel
Search Institute

Even a cursory scan of the field of social-emotional learning (SEL) demonstrates that attention to building and measuring students' SEL skills is extensive and growing. New assessment tools are being designed, and federal law now has opened the door for school districts to measure SEL as part of their compliance standards. That's all good—researchers and educators have understood for many decades that school is as much if not more a social challenge than a cognitive one, and helping students marshal their social and emotional capabilities, and measuring how we're doing at that, is a sensible way to support student engagement and motivation.

But here's the rub—there is a missing link in most approaches to SEL and SEL measurement. In all the focus on students' interpersonal capacities and intrapersonal self-regulation, we have not, for the most part, paid adequate attention to the relationships between teachers and students through which social and emotional skills can be powerfully enhanced.

That doesn't mean that student-teacher relationships aren't mentioned or measured. Indeed, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) challenges educators to envision schools in which positive, respectful relationships are a core element: "imagine a school where leaders...focus on relationships."

But notwithstanding that vision, the focus of most SEL measures is on the individual student's social-emotional *knowledge and skills*, not on describing their actual *relationships with teachers*. For example, the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington

identified 74 SEL measures for use at the middle school level (Haggerty, Elgin, & Woolley, 2011), found that only 10 could be recommended based on scientific merit and ease of use, and that just three of those included any measures of student-teacher relationships (the National School Climate Center's Comprehensive School Climate Inventory, the Communities That Care survey, and our own Developmental Assets Profile).

In both the formal SEL literature and in decades of school climate research as well, even when student-teacher relationships are addressed, the focus most often is on the caring, supportive, or positive aspects, without further elaboration of more multi-dimensional elements of those complex relationships, beyond caring. And yet it is through the full experience of a developmental relationship, including not only caring but also other important relational elements, that students are most likely to develop the individual capacities SEL frameworks emphasize.

In a wide-ranging scan of 136 SEL frameworks and associated measures, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) recently concluded that "school climate reflects and creates the conditions for the development of SE competencies...At the heart of both building SE competencies and positive school climates are safe, supportive, respectful, and trusting relationships that are supported by characteristics of students and schools that include feelings of engagement, support, and connectedness, safety; cultural competence and responsiveness; collaboration between and among school staff, students, families, and communities; strength-based approaches; inclusivity; and challenge" (p. 74). This is

why the researchers at AIR recommended “developing measures that capture aspects of schools at the intersection of school climate and SE competence building” (p.84). We have tried to do just that in creating our measures of developmental relationships.

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Where Policy Comes into Play

Over the last two decades, measurement in education has functioned primarily as an accountability tool, largely due to the ways that federal, state, and local policy advanced and interacted during the years when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was the law of the land. Looking back on that era with the benefit of hindsight, one of the lessons we can draw from the implementation of NCLB is that data are a powerful driver of improvement if and only if those data are actionable. Far too often during the decade defined by NCLB, educators found themselves staring at mountains of data from standardized tests that did not inform classroom, school, or district improvement. The percentage of students who score proficient on a standardized test is an important measure of progress, but it does not tell you what to do to improve student skills in reading, math, or other subjects

Today the policy pendulum in education has swung back to the center from an almost exclusive focus on accountability for performance in reading and math as measured by standardized achievement tests. An important example of that pendulum shift is the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which requires states to include a “nonacademic” measure of school quality in their accountability systems. That provision of ESSA has helped to produce a surge of interest in measuring school climate, mindsets, grit, and other factors that influence students’ social-emotional learning.

As the policy pendulum swings from test-based accountability to social-emotional learning, it is

important that we learn the lesson of NCLB. We must do everything we can to provide schools and programs with data on SEL that is not only important but also actionable. In the same way that standardized tests are useful but incomplete guides to action, existing measures of SEL provide some clues for how to build SEL by focusing on the individual student's knowledge and skills, but generally overlook one of the most powerful vehicles for improving not just SEL but student engagement and motivation more broadly, the student-teacher relationship.

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Using Surveys to Assess and Strengthen SEL

The method of measuring SEL that is most widely used at present is self-report surveys on which students assess their social and emotional skills and other factors. Despite the fact that self-report surveys have important limitations as measures of SEL (such as social desirability bias that causes students responding to the surveys to provide answers that they think people want to hear or that they wish were true), self-report surveys have an important role to play in both research and practice as the SEL movement advances in the years ahead. In brief, the argument for self-report surveys rests upon two primary pillars. First, well-designed self-report surveys powerfully influence and correlate with important educational outcomes such as grades, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates (as work from RAND (Stecher & Hamilton, 2018) to the Consortium on Chicago School Research shows (Farrington et al., 2012). Second, they are efficient and cost-effective when compared to other ways of measuring SEL (such as new “direct assessments” of attitudes and skills that CASEL’s recent design competition generated (McKown, Read, & Bookman, 2017), including guessing people’s inner feelings from watching videos, or solving puzzles to measure persistence, or seeing how younger students respond to animation sequences that tap into communication and self-regulation skills).

That said, just like data from standardized tests during the era of NCLB, data from self-report surveys are not, in themselves, obviously actionable. For example, data from a good self-report survey can tell you that your students do not believe they are good at persisting in the face of distractions and difficulties, but those

data probably won't tell you much about how to strengthen your students' grit.

And so the measurement challenge before us is this: how can we ensure that the self-report surveys that many schools and districts currently use to assess SEL provide educators with data that not only describe students' SEL but also tell educators cost-effective ways for how to strengthen it?

Applied research that Search Institute is currently conducting suggests that one of the most powerful and immediate things we can do to advance toward that objective is to combine data from students' self-assessments of their social and emotional skills with data on the relationships they experience with their teachers. It is important to note that the type of the relationship that our studies show correlates with students' (and parents') reports of key SEL skills goes beyond familiar notions of a caring interpersonal connection. Caring is unquestionably necessary, but it is certainly not sufficient.

Through our ongoing research we are learning that relationships that help young people be and become their best selves are characterized by five essential elements:



Our work to date has identified a set of specific actions through which each of these elements is experienced. Challenging growth, for example, is operationalized by expecting young people to do their best, pushing them to go further, insisting they take responsibility for their actions, and helping them learn from mistakes and setbacks. To review the full Developmental Relationships Framework, please visit our web site at searchinstitute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/.

Students do not need to experience all five elements of a developmental relationships through their interaction with every teacher all the time. Our ongoing work suggests, however, that it is beneficial (and perhaps essential) for every student to experience each of these elements through a combination of relationships over the course of their time in school. Why? Because the evidence is clear that students who have higher levels of developmental relationships also are more likely to be successful at school and in other ways. Our studies show that students who experience higher levels of developmental relationships report:

- ✓ Having higher levels of social-emotional skills (i.e., care more for others, manage their emotions better, communicate and work better with diverse others).
- ✓ Having a stronger motivation to learn, better engagement in school, and, according to school records, fewer suspensions and other behavior problems at school, as well as higher GPAs.

- ✓ Volunteering more, serve as leaders more, resolve conflicts more peacefully, and attempt suicide less often (data summarized in Pekel et al., 2018, and Roehlkepartain et al., 2017).

Helping Students REACH to Be and Become Their Best Selves

In an effort to provide schools with data on students' social and emotional skills and developmental relationships, Search Institute has created the REACH Survey, which describes students' experience with and self-assessment of five factors that influence motivation and other features of social-emotional learning: *Relationships, Effort, Aspirations, Cognition, and Heart*.

More specifically, the REACH Survey provides educators with data on the degree to which their students:

- Experience concrete aspects of developmental **R**elationships with their teachers
- Understand how **E**ffort can increase intelligence
- Connect their current actions to their future **A**spirations
- Know how to use **C**ognition to defer gratification and achieve goals
- Know and feel known at school for the deep interests and values in their **H**earts

Essentially, the R(elationships) end up predicting the rest of the EACH in REACH, which serve as an omnibus measure of motivation. For example,

in a Spencer Foundation-supported study we conducted over the last two school years, we found that middle-school students with high levels of developmental relationships with their teachers were nearly 8 times more likely than other students to have high levels of motivation, as measured by the remaining REACH elements of Effort, Aspirations, Cognition, and Heart.

In addition, students with higher overall REACH scores that combine measures of relationships with measures of social and emotional skills were more likely to:

- ✓ Rate their school climate more positively
- ✓ Report a higher sense of belonging or connectedness to their school
- ✓ Feel more culturally included and report less discrimination
- ✓ Rate the quality of the instruction they receive as significantly higher
- ✓ Have significantly higher GPAs
- ✓ Have fewer disciplinary suspensions or other referrals for misconduct.

These conclusions connecting quality relationships to educational outcomes are just as strong for students eligible for free or reduced price lunch and students feeling financial strain as they are for students from more affluent families. That finding is especially critical, because financially-strained students were lower on most of the academic outcomes as well as on their motivation scores.

Data from the REACH Survey are also showing that relationships can help stem the decline in motivation that studies have shown takes place over the course of the school year. For

example, in that longitudinal study funded by the Spencer Foundation, we have found that the quality of student-teacher relationships dropped significantly from fall to spring (especially for financially-strained students), along with declines or stasis in Effort, Aspirations, Cognition, and Heart. But, for the small minority of students -- just 12% -- who reported improved student-teacher relationships over the school year, these academic success outcomes were significantly higher at the end of the school year.

Unfortunately, many students do not experience such positive relationships in school. The average student in our research scored an underwhelming 67 out of 100 on the REACH scale. Overall, only 29% of the middle school students say they have truly developmental relationships with their teachers, and only 43% have an adequate level of academic motivation. And yet, the quality of student-teacher developmental relationships is strongly correlated with academic motivation, both at the beginning and end of the school year. Moreover, those relationships directly predict students' ratings of belonging, school climate, and instructional quality, and indirectly predict misconduct and GPA, through developmental relationships' effects on motivation (Scales et al., 2018).

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Empowering Educators

Informed by the lessons of NCLB, we have designed the REACH Survey so it provides educators with actionable data they can use to improve the relationships they build with and among students. The survey items suggest concrete actions teachers and other school adults can take. For example, in the category of Expand Possibilities a sample item is *“My teachers help me imagine different kinds of possibilities for my future.”* In the category of Share Power an item is *“My teachers take time to consider my ideas when making decisions.”* These are actions educators can take without changing their schools or the systems within which they operate. They are immediately actionable for all who want to act.

To make data from the REACH Survey even more understandable and actionable, we have created supplementary resources that enhance the capacity of schools to build relationships and strengthen motivation and other SEL focuses. Schools that administer the REACH Survey also receive the REACH Strategies Guidebook, which includes twenty Anchor Activities, which are lessons and projects meant to strengthen relationships and help students keep getting better at the competencies contained in the REACH Framework. The REACH Guidebook also provides educators with twenty REACH Techniques, which are approaches educators can use to help students transfer what they learned through the REACH Anchor Activities to how they think and act in and outside of school.

Still further, Search Institute has created a series of professional development workshops that introduce educators to the REACH Framework, help them interpret the data they receive from

the REACH Survey, and prepare them to use the Anchor Activities and REACH Techniques. Over the past three years, approximately 125 educators from a diverse group of schools participated in the workshops, used the REACH Survey, and implemented some of the Anchor Activities and the REACH Techniques (more broadly, more than 18,000 educators and positive youth development professionals have participated in our workshops on developmental relationships, and almost 60,000 young people in their schools, programs, and communities have completed the surveys on the impact and outcomes of developmental relationships).

In order to evaluate the impact that the use of the REACH resources had on teachers' capacity to strengthen student motivation, Search Institute developed and administered a survey to teachers who participated in the initiative during the 2016-17 school year. 78 teachers responded to the survey out of the 125 staff who were the most active participants in the project.

Taken together, the teachers who participated in the REACH Process project reported that participation in the initiative improved their ability to achieve the objectives below quite a bit or a great deal:

Help students see mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow: **64%**

Teach students practical “struggle strategies” so that they know how to keep working when learning becomes difficult: **62%**

Know students' deep talents and interests: **56%**

Help students understand how their performance in school today will influence their future: **50%**

Know the values that matter most to students: **48%**

Teach students to reframe tasks and situations they feel negatively about in more positive ways: **45%**

Challenge students to continually improve their performance in school: **44%**

Let students know they care about them: **42%**

Help students develop positive visions of themselves in the future: **41%**

Teach students to think about their thinking (i.e., practice metacognition): **37%**

In addition to those quantitative indicators of the quality of the REACH resources, we have also conducted interviews and focus groups to hear the ideas of educators who have used those resources. For example, Jacob Mongon is the Dean of Students at Pine River-Backus High School in Pine River, MN. That school has sought to integrate REACH into everything they do with and for students. As Mr. Mongon describes it: “One teacher has entered information from REACH Activities into shared spreadsheets. This has allowed me and others some insight into some of our students’ Sparks (from the REACH Framework’s ‘Heart’ category), providing instant tips about how to connect with some kids we might not have otherwise.” Mr. Mongon often has to deal with students when they are

involved in the disciplinary process, and he told us that “can make building positive connections difficult”. But the REACH activities have given him ideas for turning those moments into opportunities for bonding and growth: “Some of my favorite moments this year have been when, having done a little REACH homework on a particular student, I’ve brought up something they aren’t aware I know about them. In those moments, watching their eyes light up, I’m confident those relationships are already moving to different levels.”

Three Critical Questions

Whether schools and districts use the REACH Survey and its supporting resources or another source of data on relationships and social-emotional skills, there are three critical questions that educators should seek to answer using those data and other sources of information:

- 1. Equity** Are all groups of students, not just the more affluent and higher-achieving ones, reporting similar levels of high-quality developmental relationships with their teachers, and of effort, aspirations, cognitive skills in dealing with challenge, and how they connect learning to the things they are intrinsically passionate about? If our research results are typical, finding that financially-strained students have both poorer-quality relationships with teachers and lower academic motivation, then most schools don’t pass this equity test.
- 2. Impact** Are those levels of relationally-based motivation high enough in absolute terms to make a difference in how connected students feel to school, how

much they believe they're getting high-quality instruction, how they conduct themselves, and the grades they earn? Again, both our Spencer Foundation study, and a new longitudinal study we're conducting funded by the U.S. Institute of Education Sciences show that, on average, students report just "okay" relationships with their teachers, not good or great ones. If that finding is typical, then most schools don't pass the impact test.

3. Improvement And where do those data show the leverage points are in our school for making small but meaningful changes in areas such as student-teacher relationships, how students think about their capacity for growth, and how they connect their current interests, values, and future goals to learning actions they take right now? We're trying to use these data to help the schools and districts in our studies pass the improvement test, by translating the data into concrete actions that make a difference, in relationships, in academic motivation, and in results.

It is time to make building those developmental relationships with *all* students a priority in all of our schools. It's as important as improving

curriculum and instruction, and may be the single most important ingredient for activating students' engagement with curricular content. Building student-teacher developmental relationships is important not only or even primarily for external accountability. Rather, it matters most for the central purpose of educators getting better every day, not only in how we teach our students, but in how we create the best conditions in which they can learn and grow. That purpose can be more powerfully addressed when combining data on students' relational *skills*—SEL data— with data on their relational *experience*—developmental relationships data.

Albert Einstein once said, "I never teach my pupils. I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn." Following Einstein's advice, research strongly suggests that the quality of student-teacher relationships is catalytic for creating great places to learn and to teach, places where students learn to maximize their social-emotional capacities, grow their academic motivation and engagement, and achieve. If that is true, then we have to measure those relationships better than we do now. Otherwise, we're not measuring what really matters.

Peter C. Scales is Senior Fellow, and Kent Pekel is President and CEO of Search Institute, a non-profit organization that studies and works to strengthen youth outcomes in schools, families, out-of-school time programs, and communities.

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