



# INSIGHTS & EVIDENCE

THE INTERSECTION OF  
DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS,  
EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENTS, AND SEL



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# INTRODUCTION

Nearly a decade ago, an important meta-analysis showed that implementing high-quality social-emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools can lead to significant increases in students' academic and behavioral outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). Partly as a result of that study and others like it, thousands of schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs have since adopted SEL curricula and programs to strengthen young people's social and emotional competencies (Boston Consulting Group, 2018; Domitrovich et al., 2017). There is growing consensus, however, that implementing structured programs and curricula is only part of a successful strategy for strengthening young people's social-emotional competence. Beyond adopting programs, educators and youth program staff need to take a systemic approach to SEL, integrating it into every aspect of the school and program day and also into what happens in lunchrooms, during extracurricular activities, and on playgrounds (Mahoney et al., 2018; National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2019). They contend that it is when organizations fully integrate SEL into everything they do that the full promise of the process can be achieved.

**But how, in practice, can a youth-serving organization integrate SEL into everything it does?** The answer, Search Institute contends lies in relationships. Relationships are a critically important mechanism by which youth learn about themselves and about how to communicate and connect with another person. And, when these relationships develop in a context that supports and celebrates diversity, equity, and inclusion, they have the potential to be truly transformative.

As an applied research organization, Search Institute is committed to sharing insights as they emerge from our research in a way that is responsive to the work of the many practitioners who serve young people. The purpose of this brief is to showcase descriptive information about the landscape of developmental relationships, equitable environments, and social-emotional competence from a large, demographically diverse sample of middle and high school students who participated in Search Institute's recent Developmental Relationship Survey project.

This brief is organized in a way that provides a descriptive snapshot of young people's experiences of developmental relationships, equitable environments, and social-emotional competence, as well as how these experiences vary across settings and among young people with different racial backgrounds.



# PARTICIPANTS

Data come from a diverse sample of 12,796 youth in grades 6-12 enrolled in schools (81%), OST programs (12%), and student support programs (7%). Participants were middle- (52%; Mean Age = 12.4) and high-school aged (48%; Mean Age = 15.6). About half of the sample identified as female (51%) or male (47%); 2% identified as transgender. Participants self-identified as White (63%), Black or African American (12%), Asian or Pacific Islander (5%), Native American or Alaskan Native (3%), multiracial (12%), or as another race (5%). About 19% of participants identified as Latinx.

Participating sites had the option of opting into a survey for program staff or teachers as well. Staff data consist of 1,206 individuals who work with youth in grades 6-12 in schools (70%), OST programs (23%), and student support programs (7%). The majority of the sample was female (69%). Staff self-identified as White (82%), Black or African American (10%), Asian or Pacific Islander (2%), Native American or Alaskan Native (0.3%), multiracial (3%), or as another race (2%). About 6% identified as Latinx.



# METHODOLOGY

Data come from young people and staff who took Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Survey between October 2019 and April 2020. The core survey consists of 67 items. These data were independently collected in schools and OST organizations across the United States by organizations and community coalitions who responded to a call for pilot test partners. Data were collected in three important youth development settings: schools, OST programs (e.g., supervised programs in the school or community that youth attend outside of the regular school day), and student support programs (e.g., programs that are separate from school but provide support to students during the regular school day).



# DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

The following highlight emerging findings from the Developmental Relationships Survey Project about how youth experience developmental relationships.

## BOX 1 / DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Developmental relationships (DR) were assessed with a 20-item scale capturing the five elements of Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework: express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities.

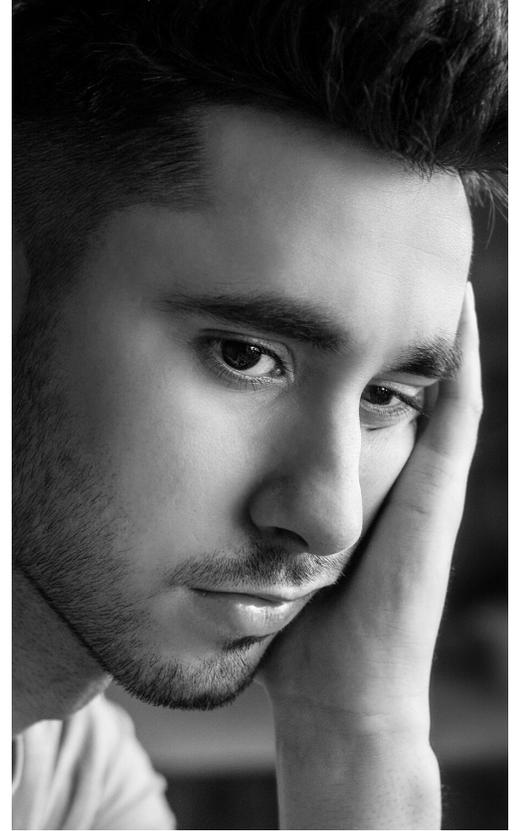
Participants responded to each item using a 4-point agreement or "like my teacher/program staff" scale. An overall DR score was calculated by averaging all items ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Scores were also calculated for each element. DR scores were transformed onto a 100-point scale and categorized into three levels:

- Weak (0 to 33.32)
- Moderate (33.33 to 66.66)
- Strong (66.67 to 100).

Over the past decade, Search Institute has carried out an effort to better understand the role relationships play in positive youth development. This work led to numerous studies to inform our understanding of the power of relationships that youth have with parenting adults, educators, program staff, mentors, and each other.

It is through this work that Search Institute has defined these high-quality relationships as **developmental relationships (DRs)**: close connections through which young people discover who they are, gain abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to interact with and contribute to the world around them.

Research has shown that when young people experience DRs with caring adults, they tend to report a wide range of positive outcomes (Pekel et al., 2018; Scales et al., 2019).



**LESS THAN HALF OF  
YOUTH EXPERIENCE  
STRONG DRs WITH  
TEACHERS AND  
PROGRAM STAFF**

**45%** STRONG

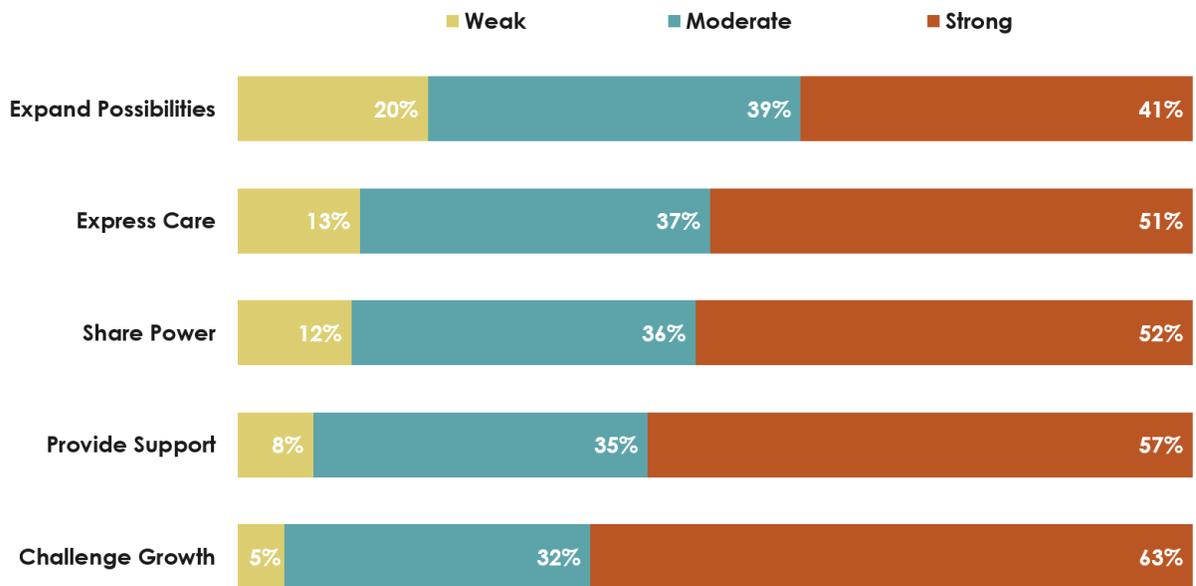
**45%** MODERATE

**10%** WEAK

Equal proportions of youth in this sample report experiencing moderate and strong developmental relationships (DRs) with teachers and program staff. Only 1 in 10 youth report having a weak DR.

More middle school youth report having a strong DR with teachers and program staff than high school youth.

# YOUTH EXPERIENCE “CHALLENGE GROWTH” THE MOST



The five elements of DRs are best understood as conceptually connected and overlapping. However, it is useful to understand what is happening at the element level when it comes to informing practice. Young people tend to experience “expand possibilities” (i.e., actions that connect young people with people, places, and ideas that broaden their worlds) the least and “challenge growth” (i.e., actions that push young people to keep improving) the most.



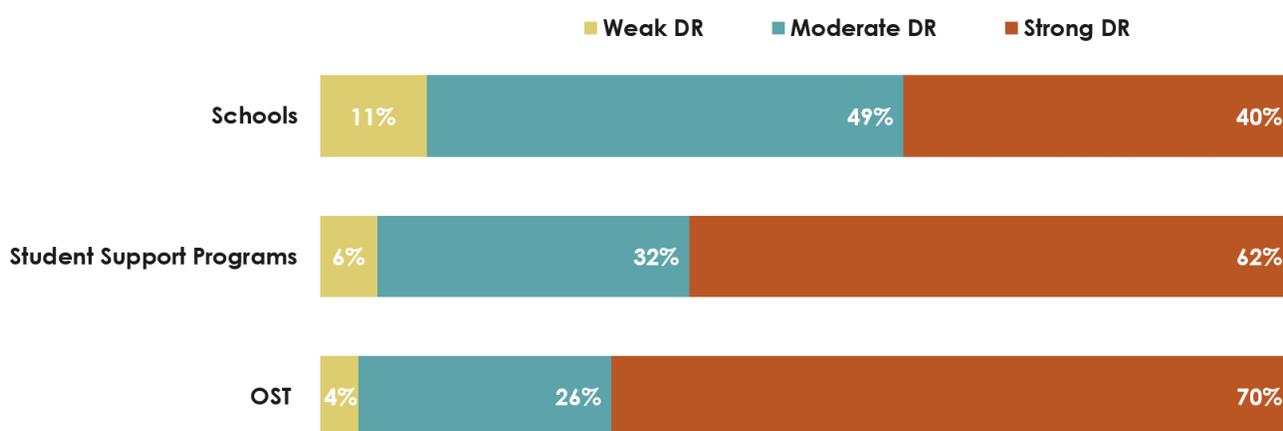
# "STAFF MAKE ME FEEL LIKE I MATTER WHEN THEY..."

...be kind and notice me."

...have REAL conversations."

...help me no matter what."

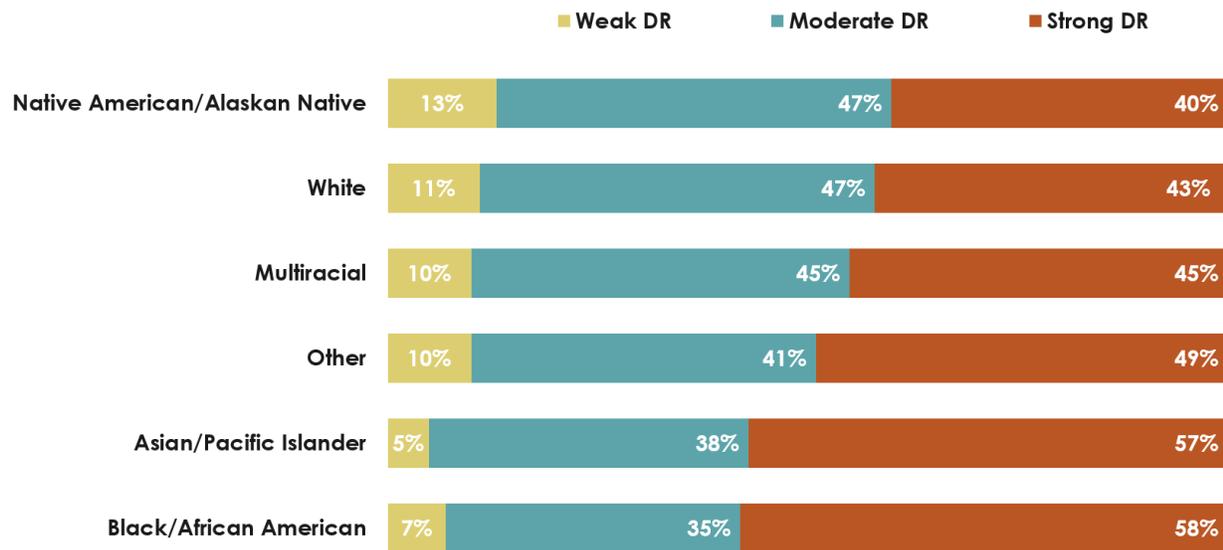
# YOUTH IN OST PROGRAMS REPORT STRONGER DRs WITH STAFF THAN YOUTH IN OTHER SETTINGS



Young people need different things from different people. As such, the DRs youth have often look different across settings (e.g., schools, OST programs).

Young people in the current study report on their relationships with either teachers within a school setting or with program staff in student support or OST programs. Findings show that more young people in OST (70%) and student support programs (62%) indicate having strong DRs with program staff than young people report in a school environment with their teachers (40%). See Endnote 1 for additional statistical information.

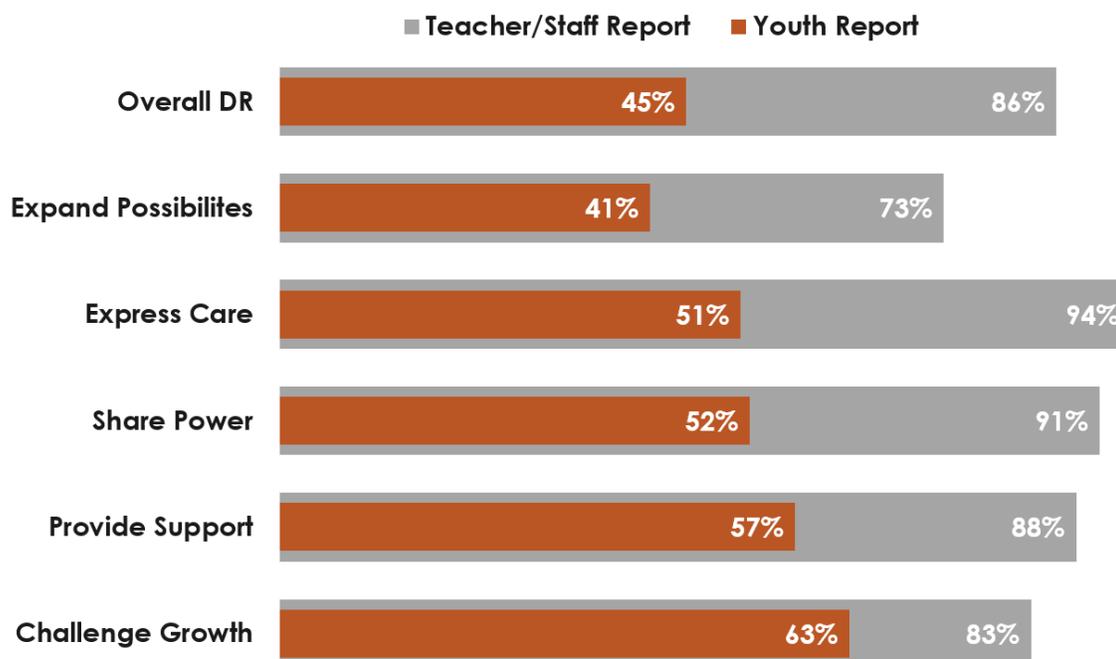
# YOUTHS' EXPERIENCES OF STRONG DRs VARY BY RACE



Youth who identify as Black/African American or Asian/Pacific Islander tend to experience stronger DRs with teachers or program staff relative to youth who identify as Multiracial, White, Native American/Alaskan Native, or as another race. See Endnote 2 for additional details.

Tests of racial differences within school and OST program settings shows that young people who identify as Black/African American or Asian/Pacific Islander report stronger DRs with teachers than youth who identify with other racial backgrounds. There were no statistically significant differences in the strength of DRs by racial group in OST programs. The sample size was too small to test for racial differences in student support programs.

# YOUTH AND STAFF EXPERIENCE DRs WITH EACH OTHER DIFFERENTLY



In addition to surveying youth, teachers and program staff were asked about their use of DR actions in their exchanges with students and the youth they work with. The chart above shows the percent of youth and teachers/staff who report "strong DRs".

Findings show that staff report a much higher level of all five elements of a DR compared to the levels youth report. The largest discrepancy is with "express care" (Youth: 51% vs. Teachers/Staff: 94%; 43% difference) and the smallest discrepancy is with "challenge growth" (Youth: 63% vs. Teachers/Staff: 83%; 20% difference).

# EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENTS

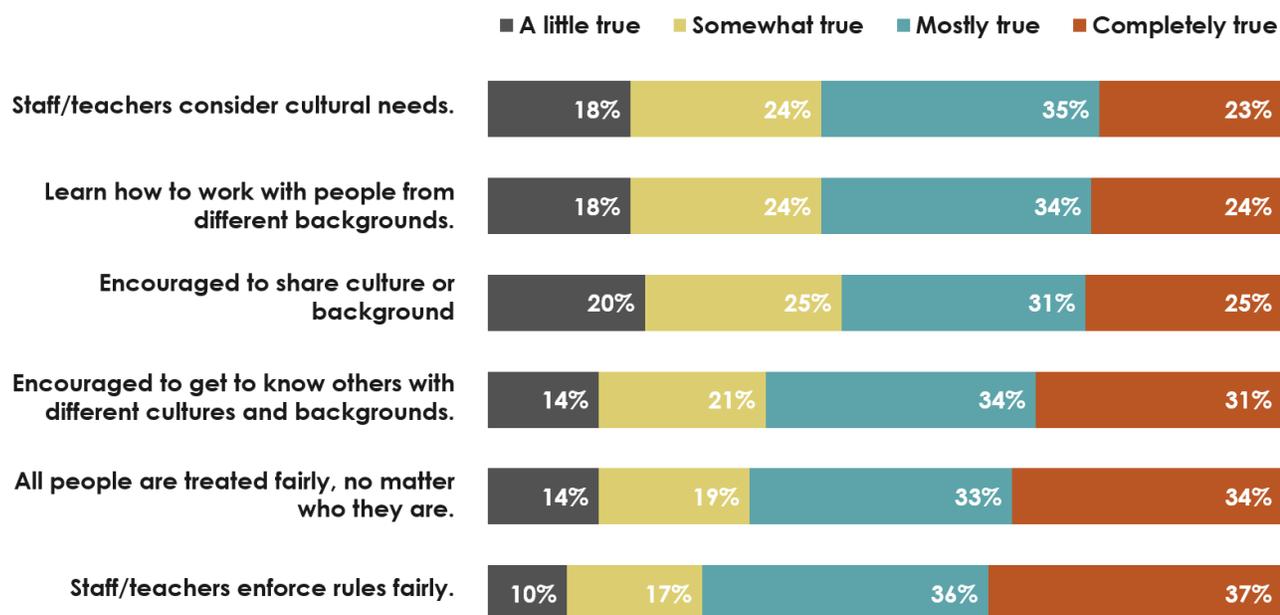
- How welcome youth feel
- Perceptions of fairness
- Openness to sharing and learning about each other's culture and background

## BOX 2 / DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

A 6-item scale was used to assess youth, teachers, and program staff's experience of their school or program setting as committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Example items include: "When I'm at [NAME], we learn how to work with people of different backgrounds," and "When I'm at [NAME], all people are treated fairly, no matter who they are." Responses were scored on a 4-point scale ranging from "a little true" to "completely true." Responses on all six items were averaged to get a DEI Climate score ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

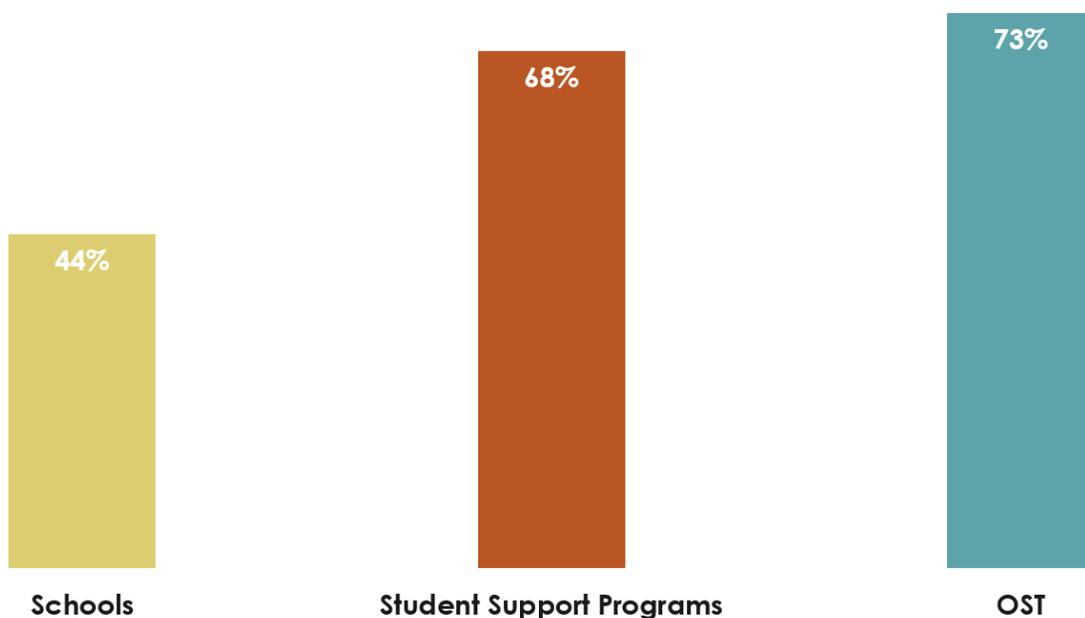
Young people's perceptions of their environment as being welcoming and inclusive directly impacts the quality of their school and program experiences. In addition to understanding young people's experiences of DRs, the current study also examines how young people experience diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in school and program settings.

# ABOUT A QUARTER (OR, MORE) OF YOUTH SAY STAFF ENGAGE IN A RANGE OF DEI-PROMOTING ACTIONS



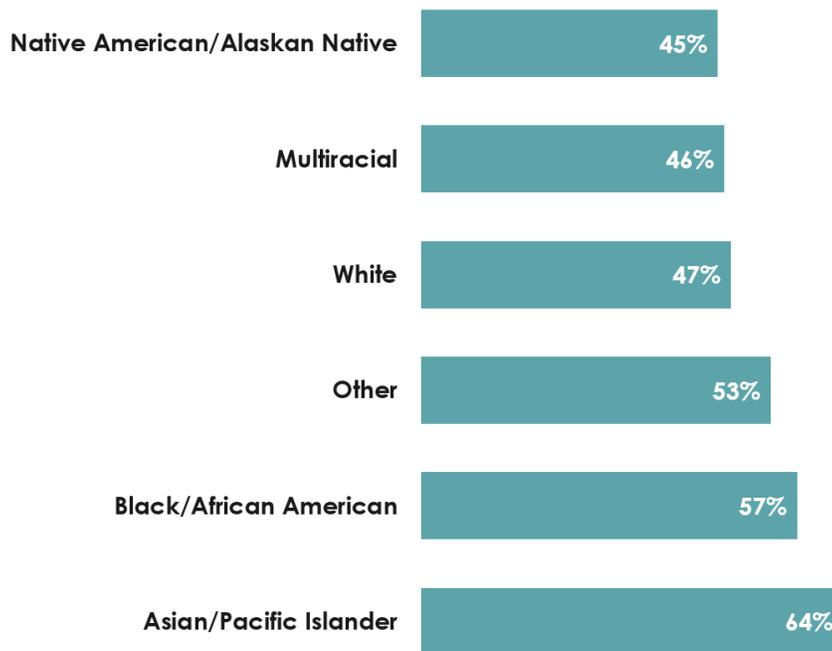
Young people were asked to report how true it was for them to experience actions that are consistent with a DEI conducive climate (e.g., encouraged to share culture or background, staff or teachers enforce rules fairly). Roughly a quarter of youth report that it was "completely" true for them to experience each of the DEI actions. Young people report that program staff or teachers "enforced the rules" most often and "consider cultural needs" the least often.

# YOUTH IN OST AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS EXPERIENCE DEI ACTIONS MORE OFTEN THAN IN SCHOOLS



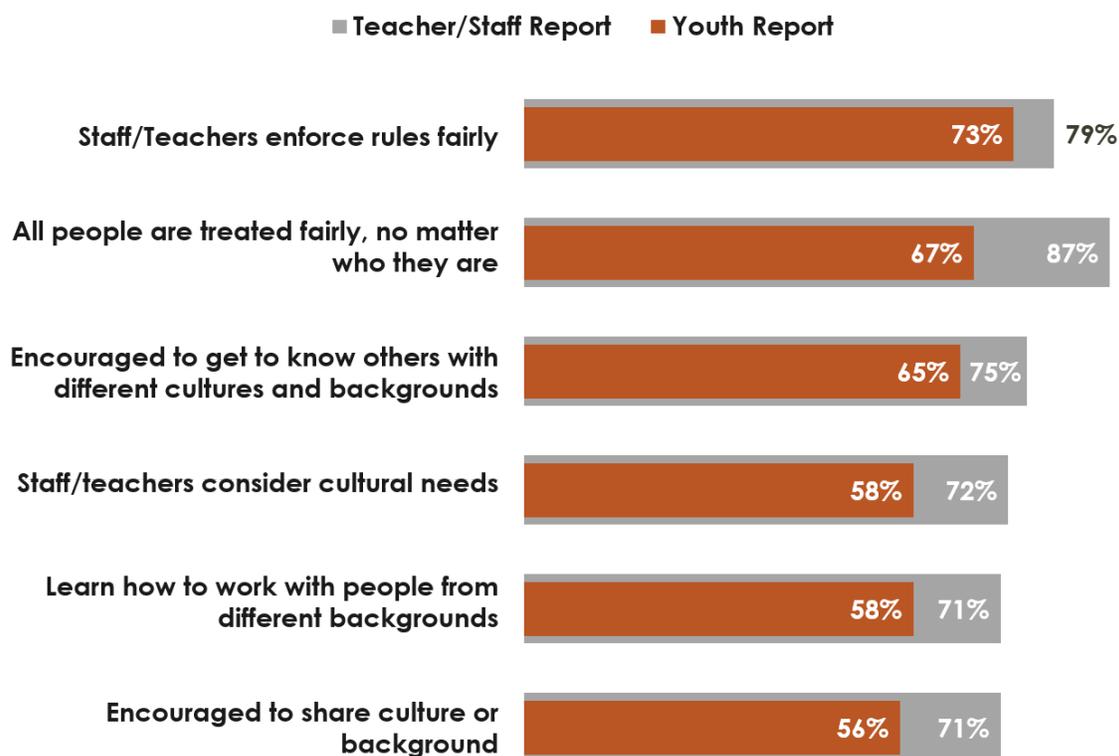
Young people’s experiences of DEI vary across settings. The columns represent the percent of youth who, on average, indicate the DEI items are “mostly” or “completely” true of staff or teachers. Findings show that young people in OST and student support programs tend to report experiencing more DEI actions than young people in schools (see Endnote 3).

# YOUTHS' EXPERIENCES OF DEI ACTIONS VARY BY RACE



The bars represent the percent of youth by race who, on average, indicate the DEI items are “mostly” or “completely” true of staff or teachers. Young people who identify as Black/African American or Asian/Pacific Islander or as another race tend to experience greater commitment to DEI in their schools and programs relative to young people who identify as Multiracial, White, or Native American/Alaskan Native (see Endnote 4).

# YOUTH AND STAFF SEE THE DEI CLIMATE OF THEIR SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS DIFFERENTLY



Teachers and program staff were also asked about their use of actions consistent with a DEI climate. The chart above shows the percent of youth and teachers/staff who indicate these actions are "mostly" or "completely" true.

Teachers and program staff report providing each of the DEI actions more than young people report experiencing them. The largest discrepancy is on the action, "all people are treated fairly, no matter who they are" (20% gap) and the smallest discrepancy is on the action, "staff or teachers enforce rules fairly" (6% gap).



# SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

The following highlight key findings related to social-emotional competencies that are emerging from the Developmental Relationships Survey Project.

## **BOX 3 / SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES**

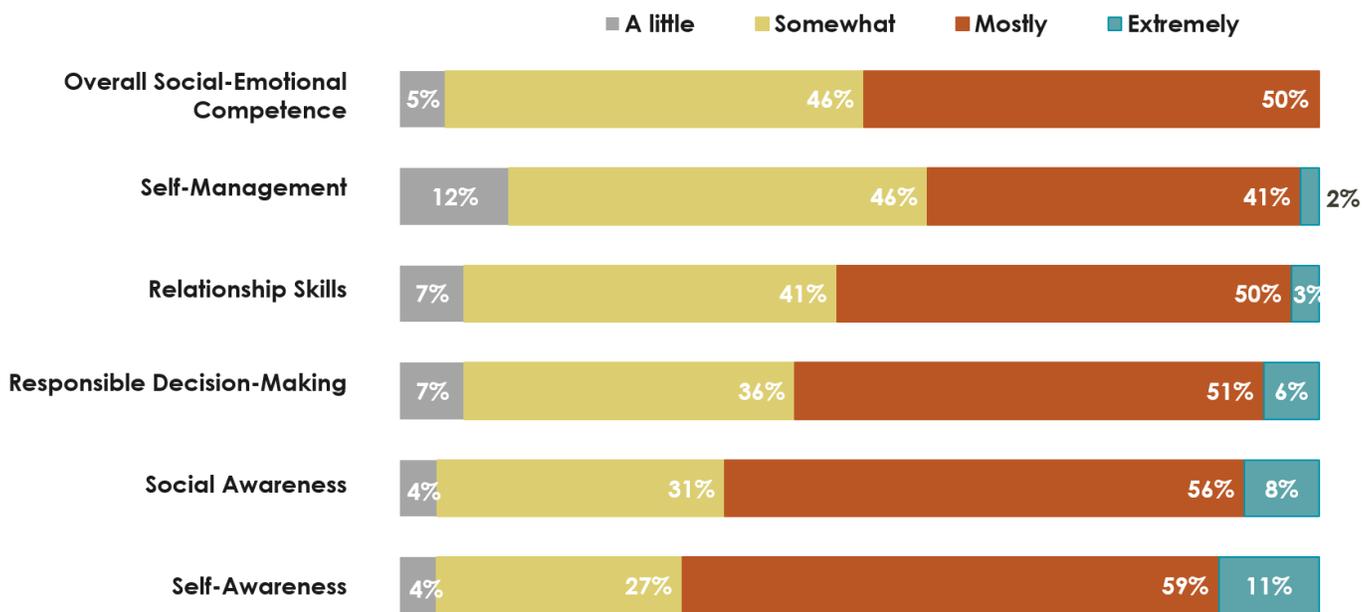
Social-emotional competencies were measured with a 19-item scale capturing the five core SEL constructs named in CASEL's SEL Framework: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills.

Participants used a 4-point scale to indicate how much "like me" each of the competence-focused items were. Responses were averaged to get a social-emotional competence score ( $\alpha = .89$ ), as well as subscales for each of the five competencies.

Social-emotional competence is at the heart of all human interaction; it involves how we relate to others, manage our emotions and behaviors, and make decisions. A rich and growing body of research has established associations between young people's levels of social-emotional competence and both adolescent thriving and risk reduction.

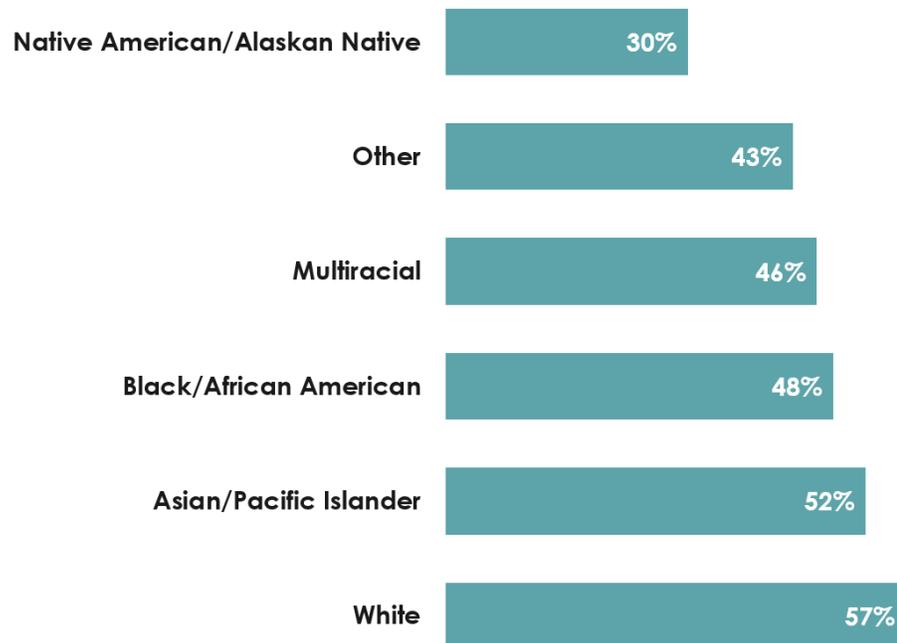
The current study asked young people a series of questions aimed at tapping key social-emotional competencies. Aligning with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) SEL Framework, young people were asked to report on their overall social-emotional competence, as well as social-emotional domains including self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills.

# HALF OF YOUTH REPORT HIGH LEVELS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE



Overall, 50% of youth report that, on average, the social-emotional competence indicators are “mostly” like them. Young people tend to report higher levels of self- and social awareness, and the lowest levels of self-management skills.

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE VARIED BY RACE



The bars represent the percent of youth by race who, on average, indicate the social-emotional competence items are “mostly” or “extremely” like themselves. White and Asian/Pacific Islander youth report higher overall social-emotional competence, on average, relative to Black/African American, Multiracial, Native American/Alaskan Native youth and youth of another race (see Endnote 5). This pattern also holds across the five social-emotional subscales.

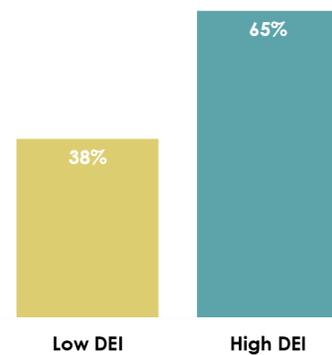
**The lower social-emotional scores reported by youth of color must be interpreted cautiously and within the social and political contexts these young people are living in (Madda, 2019).** This includes systemic oppression that has resulted in intergenerational cultural trauma, racism, and the under-funding of schools and OST programs in communities of color and low-income communities. Young people's development of social, emotional, academic, and other competencies is powerfully influenced by inequities in society. As such, these data should not be viewed as indicators of deficiencies in the young people themselves.

# RELATIONSHIPS AND DEI MATTER

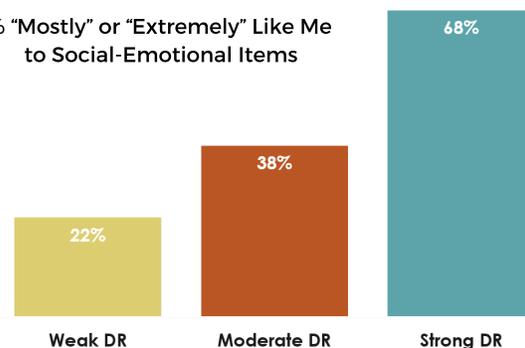
## FOR BUILDING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Youth with stronger DRs and higher levels of DEI in their school and program settings tend to also report high levels of social-emotional competence

% "Mostly" or "Extremely" Like Me to Social-Emotional Items



% "Mostly" or "Extremely" Like Me to Social-Emotional Items



The social-emotional competence differences by the strength of DRs are significant: 68% of youth with a strong DR indicate that, on average, the social-emotional items are "mostly" or "extremely" like me, compared to 38% of those with moderate DRs, and only 22% with weak DRs. This finding holds consistently across all five of the social-emotional competence subscales (see Endnote 6).

This same pattern holds for DEI experiences. Youth who rate their school or program as having a robust DEI climate score higher on social-emotional competence (65%) compared to youth in settings with a poor or low DEI climate (see Endnote 7). This pattern is consistent across all five social-emotional subscales.

# CONCLUSION

Emerging findings from the Developmental Relationships Survey Project reinforce that developmental relationships and diversity, equity, and inclusion are critical factors that underpin social-emotional learning. These findings build upon previous Search Institute studies that have established associations with other important youth outcomes, such as academic motivation and grades (e.g., Scales et al., 2019). While these trends are promising, they are also correlational and so we cannot conclude with certainty that investing in DRs and DEI will lead to stronger social-emotional competence. Further exploration is warranted.

Search Institute is in the early stages of a multi-year, multi-method program of applied research that aims to do just that. Through previous projects, we have developed a wide range of relationship-building tools and we are beginning to assess the degree to which their use in schools and OST programs produces improvements in social-emotional competence and other important youth outcomes. In addition, we have conducted foundational research on the characteristics of relationship-rich organizations, and commitment to DEI emerged as a key element of such organizations. We will be deepening and ultimately testing that work on organizational structures and cultures in the years ahead.

Programs and curricula that explicitly address SEL are a powerful resource, but they are not the only approach schools and OST programs can and should take to meet the needs of the whole child. Indirect efforts focused on building developmental relationships and creating equitable environments for learning and development are additional tools that can be used to construct the foundation on which a thriving future for all young people can be built.



# ENDNOTES



(1) A one-way ANCOVA showed a significant difference in how youth experience developmental relationships (DRs) in different settings,  $F(2, 6,520) = 155.42, p < .001$ . This, and all subsequent, ANCOVAs controlled for: youth gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, English language learner status, and Individualized Education Plan status. On average, youth reported stronger DRs with program staff in both OST ( $M = 3.25$ ) and student support programs ( $M = 3.18$ ) relative to youth surveyed in schools reporting on their relationships with teachers ( $M = 2.83$ ). There were no statistically significant differences between youths' experiences of DRs in OST and student support programs.

(2) A one-way ANCOVA, including the covariates outlined above, showed a significant difference in how youth from different racial backgrounds experience DRs,  $F(5, 6,522) = 18.13, p < .001$ . On average, youth who identified as Black/African American ( $M = 3.09$ ) or Asian/Pacific Islander ( $M = 3.05$ ) experienced stronger DRs relative to youth who identified as Multiracial ( $M = 2.89$ ), White ( $M = 2.87$ ), Native American/Alaskan Native ( $M = 2.75$ ), and who identified as another race ( $M = 2.91$ ). There were no statistically significant differences between youth who identified as Black/African American or Asian/Pacific Islander in their experiences of DRs. Youth who identified as Native American/Alaskan Native reported significantly weaker DRs to youth from all other racial backgrounds.

(3) A one-way ANCOVA, including the covariates outlined above, showed a significant difference in how youth experience DEI in different settings,  $F(2, 6,436) = 200.05, p < .001$ . On average, youth reported experiencing greater DEI in both OST ( $M = 3.27$ ) and student support programs ( $M = 3.22$ ) relative to youth surveyed in schools ( $M = 2.74$ ). There were no statistically significant differences between youths' experiences of DEI in OST and student support programs.

(4) A one-way ANCOVA, including the covariates outlined above, showed a significant difference in how youth from different racial background experience DEI in their schools and programs,  $F(5, 6,438) = 12.77, p < .001$ . On average, youth who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander ( $M = 3.02$ ) or Black/African American ( $M = 3.02$ ) reported experiencing a stronger DEI climate relative to youth who identified as White ( $M = 2.79$ ), Multiracial ( $M = 2.79$ ), Native American/Alaskan Native ( $M = 2.67$ ), and another race ( $M = 2.90$ ). There were no statistically significant differences in youths' experiences of DEI among youth who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander or Black/African American.

(5) A one-way ANCOVA, including the covariates outlined above, showed a significant difference in how youth from different racial backgrounds experience overall social-emotional competencies,  $F(5, 6,532) = 20.18, p < .001$ . On average, youth who identified as White ( $M = 3.05$ ) or Asian/Pacific Islander ( $M = 3.08$ ) reported experiencing greater social-emotional competencies relative to youth who identified as Black/African American ( $M = 2.95$ ), Multiracial ( $M = 2.95$ ), Native American/Alaskan Native ( $M = 2.72$ ), and another race ( $M = 2.90$ ). There were no statistically significant differences in youths' experiences of social-emotional competencies among youth who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander or White. Youth who identified as Native American/Alaskan Native reported significantly lower social-emotional competencies relative to all other racial identities.

(6) A one-way ANCOVA, including the covariates outlined above, showed significant differences in youths' overall social-emotional competence by the strength of their DRs teachers/staff,  $F(2, 6,506) = 623.18, p < .001$ . On average, youth with strong DRs reported greater overall social-emotional competencies ( $M = 3.20$ ) relative to youth with moderate ( $M = 2.88$ ) and weak ( $M = 2.64$ ) DRs. This finding was consistent across all of the social-emotional subscales.

(7) A one-way ANCOVA, including the covariates outlined above, showed a significant difference in young people's overall social-emotional competence by the strength of their school or program's commitment to DEI,  $F(1, 6,846) = 839.42, p < .001$ . On average, youth who experienced high levels of DEI reported greater overall social-emotional competencies ( $M = 3.17$ ) than youth who experienced low levels of DEI ( $M = 2.85$ ).



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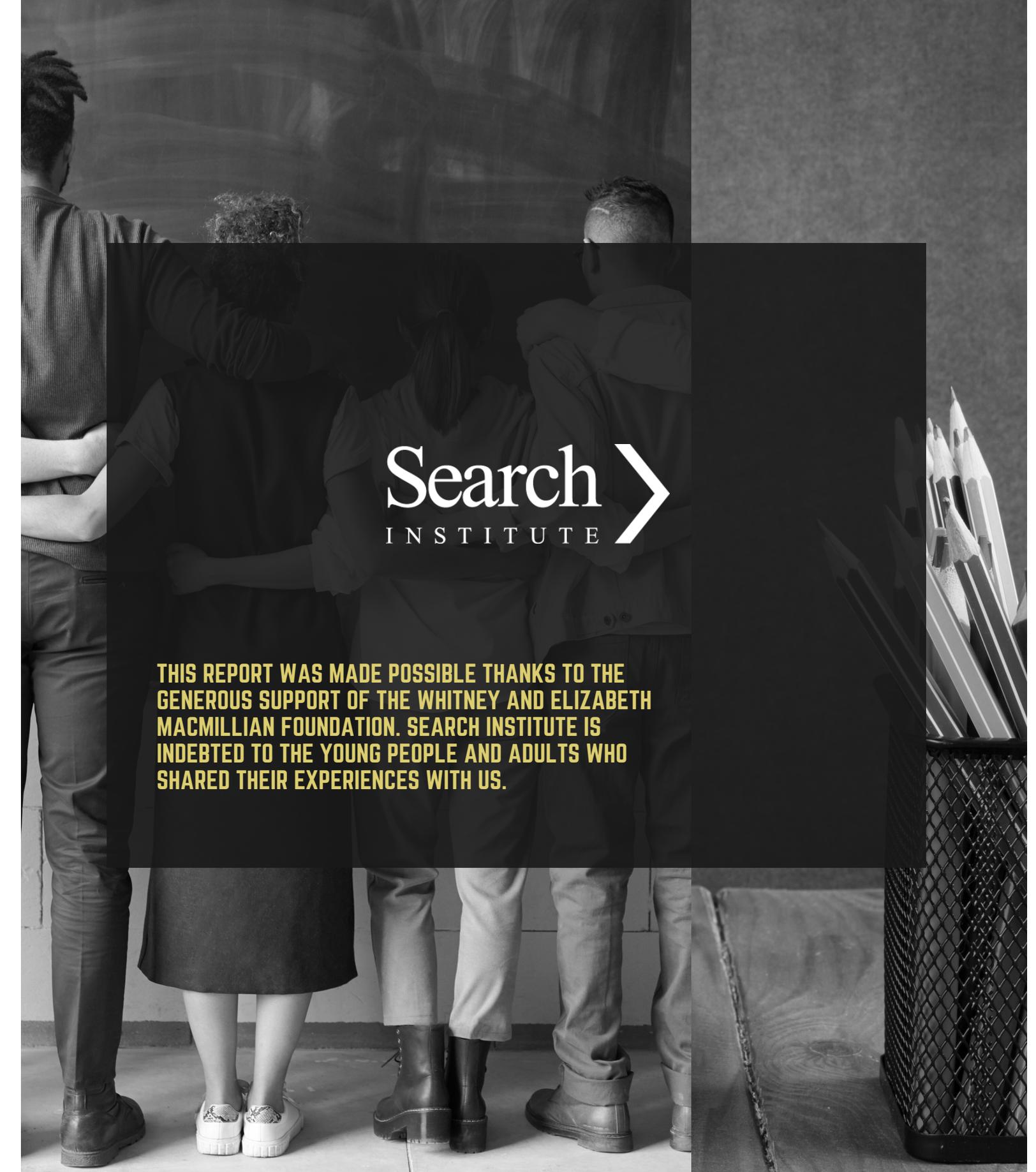
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# Search >

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