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By: Dr. Gil G. Noam, Director, The PEAR Institute: Partnerships in Education and Resilience

The widespread adoption of social emotional learning (SEL) has led to an increased focus on school climate, curricula to help students manage their emotions, and systems that create consistent behavioral expectations within and across classrooms. These so called universal approaches create the psychological foundation of a well-functioning school. As part of a whole-school SEL approach, assessments help schools answer questions like: How do the students and the teachers view their school climate? Do we find consistency across classrooms when we systematically observe behavior systems? What is the parental attitude toward school bonding? For this reason, many of the assessment in the SEL space are oriented toward understanding whole systems such as schools or school districts.

But SEL is also making inroads in personalized learning, another popular approach in education. Personalized learning moves away from the whole-population view, with its focus on averages and standard deviations from the norm, and instead prioritizes collecting as much data as possible on how a specific student processes information, develops relationships, and has learning interests that combine motivation, engagement, and content learning. Personalized learning aims to propel each child on a path of learning that is as tailored to their interests and needs as possible. Technology that enables the large-scale data collection needed to facilitate personalized learning is revolutionizing classrooms and schools, allowing true individualization for the first time. Despite these innovations, many SEL assessments and interventions remain focused on whole populations.

For this reason, it is time to use SEL assessments that can work for schools on multiple levels, from the personal level to small groups, classrooms, and whole systems. The PEAR Institute: Partnerships in Education and Resilience (<http://thepearinstitute.org/>) at McLean Hospital, a Harvard Medical School affiliate, has worked within this space for a very long time and rolled out its first SEL self-report (<https://measuringSEL.casel.org/defense-self-report-surveys/>) measure over a decade ago. Our challenge was to design a strength-based assessment that could rapidly turn around actionable data reporting to schools and out-of-school-time programs at three tiers of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) (<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/mtss-what-you-need-to-know>). In this post, we want to share some of the lessons we learned and challenges we faced while developing an SEL assessment at the individual level.

The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) (<https://www.thepearinstitute.org/holistic-student-assessment>) is a student self-report survey (https://medium.com/@gil_noam/the-importance-of-student-voice-in-social-emotional-assessment-c04b794d4412) that measures three domains: resiliencies (action orientation, emotion control, assertiveness, empathy, trust, reflection, optimism), learning and school engagement (academic motivation, perseverance, critical thinking, learning interest, school bonding), and relationships (with both peers and adults). HSA data can be presented at both the individual student level, "Portraits," at the small group level, and at the whole-school or program aggregate level. We consider the HSA a screen. While schools and programs cannot use this assessment to make diagnostic determinations, they can use it as a door to more intensive assessment and discovery. Because the HSA is strength-based, it can be used for educational purposes by helping educators better know the children in their classroom and programs and more clearly understand their strengths and what approaches should be encouraged and reinforced to support learning.

When an assessment moves from a general whole-school view to look at specific students there are a number of different issues that must be addressed. Just because a measure is good for populations does not make it good for individuals. There is a long process of research and development that must happen. Measures that go down to the individual level are often longer because they need more items per construct to be sensitive enough to measure at the individual level, which can make assessment-taking an onerous process.

Another important consideration is the systems that need to be in place to support the assessment and its findings. Just labeling an assessment "SEL" and letting everyone take it for purposes of individualization it is not enough. Schools need systems and SEL training to be able to understand and act on the data they're collecting. If an infrastructure doesn't exist, the school or program needs support and guidance in how to build one. Educators need clinical and counseling psychology back-up in order to do this safely. Finally, there's the issue of student privacy: who can see the data and how it is stored and viewed. Once you go to the individual level, the privacy issues are even more significant than when you look at aggregated data.

During our development of the HSA, we learned that creating an individual-level SEL assessment required significant investments of finances and time. Reflecting on the intensive process, we believe developing an individual-level assessment was worth the effort. By having individualized data available that can work for both multi-systemic approaches and personalized learning, educators can improve the lives of the children they serve both by improving the whole school climate and the experience of individual students by better understanding and supporting their social-emotional needs.

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