Assessing social and emotional learning at school is crucial but tricky

A novel app can provide a solution

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How do we know that a student is thriving at school? In the past, student grades and test scores have been the key measures of academic success. But these days, students also need to know how to set and pursue goals, understand and manage emotions, cope with setbacks, show empathy, collaborate, engage in positive social relationships, and make responsible decisions—a skill set called social and emotional learning (SEL).

Although extensive research over decades has demonstrated that social and emotional skills contribute to students' academic achievement and well-being, educators lack pragmatic, scalable, and actionable ways to measure SEL in school settings. The numerous commercial SEL surveys marketed to school districts are limited in significant ways. First, the response options are abstract and vague (e.g., never, often, sometimes) and rely on teachers' subjective perceptions. The format requires teachers to focus on a single student at a time, which produces similar scores across distinct SEL skills (a phenomenon known as the halo effect) and limits teachers' ability to identify strengths and opportunities for growth.

This approach is also very time-consuming, which contributes to teacher work overload and limits the scalability of assessments. Finally, the information gathered is difficult for educators and parents to interpret and act on. Even when developers provide normed percentile scores and colorful heat maps, it is not easy to translate the results into concrete steps to support students' SEL.

Despite these limitations, teachers' involvement in SEL assessments is critical because they have a window into how children apply SEL skills in real-world situations, which is difficult to assess through games and tasks. Also, teacher reports are relatively cost-efficient compared with direct assessments, and do not require children to miss instructional time.

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Nevertheless, our research shows that teacher reports can be biased for certain demographic groups; therefore, an equitable assessment tool that will help teachers understand SEL in developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive ways is urgently needed. Toward this goal, my lab at Stanford University is currently developing a novel SEL assessment platform for teachers, beginning with specific behavioral markers to describe SEL skill levels. These behavioral markers

reflect the stance that students' social and emotional skills are not personal attributes, but are dependent on teacher support. Diverse consultants are assisting this process to ensure that our SEL questions and markers do not privilege expectations and norms of dominant cultural groups.

Our assessment platform is an iOS app that teachers can seamlessly use during the school day, which can reduce the burden of assessments. Using the touch-screen, teachers can quickly and easily respond to questions as they slide students' names into behavioral categories. They also will be able to respond to one SEL question at a time for all students. In this way, teachers can focus on systematic observation of specific SEL behaviors and differentiate SEL domains. The app will leverage teachers' experience working with children who have a wide range of SEL skills and prompt them to consider the full range of student behaviors when responding to each question.

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Finally, the platform will allow teachers to access summary reports quickly (at the individual and classroom levels) that reflect specific student behaviors. Teachers can use this information to guide instruction, set personalized student SEL goals, and provide parents with meaningful feedback. School administrators will have a tool for tracking student SEL needs, which can inform practice and policy change over time.

Meanwhile, researchers will be able to test SEL skills in larger, and more diverse, representative samples, to investigate disparities and potential biases in assessments of students' SEL skills, and to evaluate interventions targeting these skills. We will perform pilot testing with our community partners serving elementary school students in spring of 2020 and plan to have the app ready for school-wide implementation during the 2020-21 school year.

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