Considering the context: Generalizing noncognitive scores across student groups

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This brief report provides an overview of challenges when interpreting and generalizing noncognitive scores across diverse groups of students. The aim of this report is to help support and foster greater equity in testing and interpretation of noncognitive measures. Noncognitive scores should not be interpreted without understanding the context.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “CONTEXT”?

Context refers to various environmental considerations—e.g., cultural, social, community, and historical factors that shape how we know what we know and what influences our interpretations. For instance, as noted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), what is missing in SEL measurement is the school context and the interactions that shape the characteristics of students. This includes a student’s home environment, such as cultural and economic differences, ways of learning, and also child-adult interactions. The sections below summarize three articles and a website1 that discuss how we can consider the context.

THE CONTEXT OF NONCOGNITIVE MEASUREMENT

Noncognitive skills are also known as character skills, 21st-century skills, and social emotional learning (SEL). Measuring noncognitive skills is connected to the long history behind intellectual development. Sociological and psychological work discuss how noncognitive factors have deep roots in the social sciences and remind us to think about the connections between structural and individual factors.

For instance: We know there are gender and racial disparities related to school discipline, as black and male students are more likely to be suspended or expelled. Given disparities and the damage they cause, educational discipline reforms have focused on incorporating SEL practices. Although incorporating SEL holds promise, it is crucial to consider the context: (a) Interventions are not “colorblind” and neglect issues of privilege, power, and cultural difference, and (b) SEL is centered on students and needs to also consider the adults who interact with them. Building educators’ SEL skills is key to help foster positive student relationships and to prevent incidents of discipline. Programs such as RULER Program (https://casel.org/guideprogramsruler/) can help build such skills. When schools integrate equity reform, it is critical not to lose sight of ecological school-wide perspectives on SEL. It is necessary to consider how students from marginalized and racialized communities

are expected to achieve the same levels of SEL competencies as white students and the unequal constraints imposed by power and privilege that diverse students face.

Ideas for improving equity include educators drawing on their own self-awareness and social awareness. To advance equity, educators can examine conscious and unconscious beliefs as they relate to varying cultures. Increasing social awareness means adopting a sociocultural and historical orientation, so educators can better see how students experience inequalities. This includes learning more about systemic racism—in doing so, educators can move away from seeing racism as an individual act and instead recognize that the system favors certain characteristics and behavior.

The sense of powerlessness also needs to be considered in causal relationships and outcomes, and this matters more for vulnerable populations. Consider a more systematic approach and “how a sense of control over one’s future is connected to race, social class or gender.” Additionally, it is important to think of SEL factors as related concepts, not in isolation. Treating SEL skills in isolation from structural factors alienates them from their history and rich discourse. Therefore, a key aspect to consider is the sense of powerlessness that is present (see exercise below).

Exercise for educators

Are they likely to take initiative?
Do they seek help?
Do they recover from adversity?
Do they attend to advice?
Are they committed to their work?
Do they attend to other information in their environment?
How much do they value a given domain of activity?

ISSUES OF METHOD AND MEASUREMENT

The confusing terminology in the area of noncognitive skill measurement is a constant concern, and clear definitions are needed. Unclear terminology can make it difficult to know what needs to be addressed in practice and how to assess the impacts of interventions, and it also makes it difficult to bring together research findings.

Another challenge related to measuring and evaluating noncognitive skills is ensuring there are large enough groups of students to confirm the findings are generalizable. For instance, if we want to study the performance of Hispanic students, we need a large enough group in our
studies. These issues are critical concerns in improving equity. As it stands now, research suggests considerable caution when generalizing about diverse groups if there is not a large enough sample size, as characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, SES, disability status, and sexual orientation/gender identity) are reported inconsistently or not reported at all.

**IMPROVING RESEARCH AND EQUITY-ORIENTED PRACTICES**

**WHAT CAN WE DO?**

1) Consider the similarity between differently labelled concepts to appreciate core ideas.

   » For instance, the concepts of grit and hope both have an orientation toward the future, with the concept of hope dating back to the 1980s. Remembering these similarities helps appreciate the core ideas behind the concepts.

2) Be mindful of narrow conceptions of human development.

   » It is important not to think of SEL skills as all or nothing. Human development is complex and is influenced or facilitated by the environment and context.

3) Remember our own self-awareness and social awareness.

   » We need to bring awareness of our own emotions, values, and personal goals. Also, empathy and compassion help to consider others’ perspectives and positions (e.g., complex ways of valuing or devaluing certain cultures/race can contribute to disparities).

4) Take into account issues of power, privilege, and cultural dynamics.

   » Consider that certain expressions of behavior are more likely to be nurtured in cultures. In order for SEL to be student-centered, we need to consider the school environment and the multiple influences—policies, disciplinary practices, and how interpersonal interactions are guided by culturally informed educator and student SEL competencies.

5) Consider collective processes rather than individual.

   » Develop a mindset of critical consciousness that focuses on collective rather than individual empowerment (e.g., “we can change” rather than “I can change”).

**IMPROVING PRACTICES FOR GREATER EQUITY**

» An ecologically and equity-oriented SEL that acknowledges the cultural and power dynamics is needed.
ADDITIONAL READING


