



SEL in Action:
What the Field Needs Now

Learning Conditions and Student Wellbeing







Supported by SEL in Action

Understanding learning conditions and how they support SEL rooted in equity

Learning conditions are “factors or circumstances that exist in students’ classrooms, or in schools or districts, [that support or hinder students’ ability to learn.](#)” They shape the way students learn academic and SEL content:

- Learning conditions can make or break a student’s academic, social and emotional development.¹
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- Well-designed learning conditions [can alleviate racial and other inequities.](#)
- [Frameworks that describe the learning conditions necessary](#) to support academic, social and emotional development have been created for several contexts.
- The most widely used learning conditions frameworks emphasize a core set of beliefs and practices for which classroom teachers hold the primary responsibility.

Learning conditions can, for example, [include](#):

Affirming Identities	Classroom Community	Feedback for Growth	Meaningful Work	Student Voice	Teacher Caring
					

Research shows that how students experience their classrooms’ learning conditions significantly influences student motivation, engagement and achievement. Countless studies show that learning conditions influence students’ motivation and their ability to engage and learn. When supportive learning conditions are present, students learn more and learn more equitably. For example, in [a 2019 study](#), students who experienced positive learning conditions in a class were 35 percent more likely to earn an A or B in that class and those benefits were pronounced for students of color. And Black males who experienced positive learning conditions were almost two times more likely to earn an A or B than those who did not. Better learning conditions also led to better social and emotional learning outcomes. When learning conditions improved, students were 86 percent more likely to experience a higher sense of belonging, 24 percent more likely to develop a growth mindset, and two times more likely to report they “tried their very best” in class.

What are examples of learning conditions frameworks?

There are several learning conditions frameworks (though below is a small sample), and a key contrast among them is if—and how—they focus on race equity:

¹ [Darling-Hammond et al.](#) (2020)
² [The Aspen Institute](#) (2019)
³ [Jones & Bouffard](#) (2012)
⁴ [The Aspen Institute](#) (2017)

Framework	Organization	Position on Race and Equity
Perts Elevate	PERTS	PERTS suggests supportive learning conditions allow students to “learn more and learn more equitably” and notes particularly positive impacts on students of color.
BELE Framework	Building Equitable Learning Environments Network	“We all inherited a public education system that limits possibilities for many young people and reproduces inequities based on race and class... While we didn’t create this inequitable system, it is our responsibility to redesign it now!”
Anti-Bias Education Framework	Roots Connected	Identity (deep understanding of one’s intersecting identifiers + community embrace of an authentic sense of belonging) and inclusion make up the central mindset of the framework , and the explicit purpose of the org is to create “intentionally integrated, inclusive, anti-racist, and anti-bias school communities.”
Cues and Conditions of Student Belonging	Equal Opportunity Schools	EOS developed their framework in response to traditional measures of belonging, which “placed an undue burden on low-income and students of color to identify with and ‘belong’ in racialized school environments.”
Teaching for Equity	Leading Educators	“Teaching all students requires us to critically understand and center racial identity to disrupt the patterns of harm our country has inflicted on communities of color and that our education system continues to perpetuate.”
Optimal Learning Continuum	New Teacher Center	The framework includes an emphasis on meeting the needs of diverse learners, having high expectations of all, culturally responsive teaching , etc. New Teacher Center is focused particularly on educators who serve BIPOC students and students experiencing poverty.

How do learning conditions support SEL rooted in equity?

The idea that learning conditions directly impact students’ abilities to learn reflects the need to focus attention on the systems and structures that support students, not necessarily individual students themselves. Attending to learning conditions and the learning environment takes the onus off of individual students and places appropriate responsibility on schools, districts and systems, creating more equitable education; this same idea is happening with shifts in SEL. Centering equity in SEL requires:

- Acknowledging the system-level conditions in which adults and students alike are asked to operate. SEL that focuses on the individual student without considering system-level conditions perpetuates inequities, particularly racial inequities, ubiquitous in our education system and society. One of the benefits of SEL often cited in research is that it leads to fewer disciplinary incidents. Yet, without centering equity, a common result is that SEL is used as a form of control,

particularly against BIPOC students, to [further perpetuate white dominant culture that narrowly defines what is “acceptable” behavior](#).

- Fostering an understanding of one’s identity, role and agency as it relates to systemic root causes. SEL that focuses solely on interpersonal relationships without fostering an understanding of systemic root [causes and one’s identity, role and agency further perpetuates inequities](#). One of the benefits of SEL often cited in research is that it is critical to developing the interpersonal skills needed for employability. Yet, without centering equity, a common result is that SEL is used to [reinforce white dominant culture](#) by not acknowledging the systemic conditions that affect who is seen as “employable” and “professional.”

Questions for reflection

- How can supporting an integrated approach to learning conditions and SEL rooted in equity be advanced by the philanthropic field?
- How might funders and other key decisionmakers expand on their current investments or strategies to better integrate SEL and improve learning conditions in the classroom?

Suggested further reading

- New Schools’ recent and longitudinal data on student outcome trends and the relationship between SEL and academic outcomes (see Expanded Definition of Student Success insights briefs from [2018](#), [2019](#), [2020](#), [2022](#))
- [“Reshaping Ecosystems of Learning: Creating Inclusive Environments for ALL Learners” research decks](#) created by Education First and presented at the 2023 CASEL SEL Exchange
- A research paper published in School Psychology Review, [A Call for Equity-Focused Social-Emotional Learning](#)
- Committee for Children policy brief, [SEL and Racial Equity](#)