

TEACHER RATINGS OF STUDENT'S ASSETS AND RESILIENCE: DEVELOPMENT OF THE SEARS-T

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Abstract: This paper describes the development of the teacher form of the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales, the SEARS-T. This tool is a 54-item behavior rating scale that has teachers evaluate student social-emotional strengths and resilience. The SEARS is intended for use in assessment, screening, intervention planning/monitoring, program evaluation, and research. Initial standardization sampling findings, including internal reliability and descriptive statistics are presented. Results indicate gender and grade group differences, as well as an association between teacher's evaluations of student academic performance and SEARS-T scores. This study suggests future directions for the development and research of strength-based social-emotional assessment.

Researchers and practitioners are concerned with addressing the social and emotional needs of children and adolescents in educational settings. Much previous research in this area has focused on studying the early risk factors that contribute to negative outcomes later in adult life. Clearly, factors such as poverty, parental maltreatment, and substance abuse have all been identified as significant contributors to later adverse outcomes.

In addition to the connection between risk factors and poor outcomes, there are emerging efforts to shift this perspective in some measure toward identifying *protective and insulatory variables* that help young people thrive and succeed in school and in life, despite the frequent poor odds against them. This emerging area of resilience research within the field of prevention science offers a unique perspective toward identifying and promoting strength-based variables that will support positive growth for children and adolescents.

Although previous research has identified what contributing factors promote resilience in children and adolescents, to date there are few practical assessment tools designed to measure these variables. Thus, practitioners and researchers who are interested in building into their assessment work an additional focus on positive social-emotional characteristics and strengths of students have little from which to

choose to accomplish this goal. Indeed, there has been a call for the development of positive, strength-based measures in the field (Beaver, 2008). To address this need, the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS) have recently been developed, and are currently being validated and refined.

The Social-Emotional Assets and Resiliency Scales (SEARS; Merrell, 2008) is a newly developed cross-informant social-emotional assessment system, currently being researched and refined. As its name implies, the SEARS is a strength-based assessment system, aimed at assessing positive social-emotional attributes of children and adolescents, including social and emotional knowledge and competence, peer acceptance and relationships, resilience in the face of difficulties, coping skills, problem-solving abilities, empathy, global self-concept, and other positive traits. The intended age range for the SEARS assessments is grades K-12, or about ages 5-18. Four rating forms comprise the system: a student self-report for children in grades 3-6 (SEARS-C), a student self-report for students in grades 7-12 (SEARS-A), a teacher report for teachers of students in grades K-12 (SEARS-T), and a parent report for caregivers of children ages 5-18 (SEARS-P). The SEARS is intended to be used for a variety of purposes, including assessment, screening, intervention planning/monitoring, program

evaluation, and research. The various forms contain similar items, reworded slightly to reflect appropriate age levels or setting contexts. The focus of the research presented in this paper is the development of the SEARS, and the initial analysis of the teacher version of the SEARS, the SEARS-T, a 54-item questionnaire for teachers designed to measure a student's social-emotional strength and resilience.

Method

The SEARS items were generated based on a theory-driven process of identifying a large number of potential items and reducing these to a manageable number, using a step-wise development process in conjunction with an expert content validation panel. Initial item selection was conducted by generating a list of 97 items, 68 adapted from 6 common social-emotional assessment tools, and 29 novel items created based on the descriptive literature in social-emotional competence. These 97 items were then clustered into 12 asset-groups based on shared characteristics: friendship skills, empathy, interpersonal skills, social support, problem solving, emotional competence, social maturity, global self-concept, self-management, social independence, cognitive strategies, and social-emotional resilience. Items were then removed due to redundancy of content and to balance the coverage between the different groups, which resulted in a list of 51 items. A content validation panel of 6 peer psychologists then reviewed the list for appropriateness of content and for wording of items. The list was then reworded and re-organized into final research versions of the scales for the four different versions of the SEARS: the SEARS-C for students grades 3-6, the SEARS-A for students grades 7-12, the SEARS-P for parents of students, and the SEARS-T for teachers.

Copies of the SEARS may be viewed at the SEARS development website: <http://strongkids.uoregon.edu/SEARS.htm>. This website also contains additional information on the SEARS normative and standardization project. These current research versions of the SEARS assessments range from 52 to 54 items, and require an average of about 15 minutes to complete. Items are rated using a four-point

categorical rating scale, where the rater is asked to determine whether a particular item is "never," "sometimes," "often," or "always" true for them (in the case of child and adolescent self-reports) or for the student who is being rated (in the case of the teacher and parent rating forms).

Schools were recruited to participate in the SEARS normative data project through active recruitment by the SEARS author and by members of the Oregon Resiliency Project research team at the University of Oregon. Informed consent was gathered through an IRB-approved process for the SEARS measures. The most current national normative data for all versions of the SEARS includes forms collected from students, parents, and teachers in Massachusetts, Iowa, Georgia, Colorado, Ohio, Oregon, and Hawaii.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 16.0.

To date, there are 507 completed SEARS-T forms (teacher ratings) in the standardization sample on which the following preliminary analyses were conducted. Female teachers represented 84.6% of the sample and were representative of a diverse array of years of teaching experience ($M = 15.6$, $SD = 9.7$). SEARS-T data were collected from a range of student grade placements, with grades K-4 representing 26.7%, grades 5-9 representing 56.6%, and grades 9-12 representing 16.7% of the sample. Female students comprised 48.4% of the SEARS-T ratings. Student ethnicity for the current preliminary sample was 76.7% Caucasian, 3.6% African-American, 3.0% Hispanic/Latin-American, 9.9% Asian-American, 5.5% multiracial, .4% Native American and 1.0% of other ethnicity. Data on student special education eligibility were also collected, with 81.1% of the student not receiving services, 10.8% of student receiving services for a specific learning disability, and 8.2% receiving special education services under a different category.

Data Analysis

Factor analytic studies for the SEARS-T have not yet been conducted, given that data collection is continuing, and the current sample size is not considered to have an optimal number for exploratory and confirmatory factor analytic procedures. Thus, the analyses for this study were confined to the summative scores.

In analysis of the SEARS-T, a “total item score” was calculated by adding together individual item scores on the questionnaire. Responses marked “never” were coded as “0”,

“sometimes” as “1”, “often” as “2”, and “always” as “3”. Therefore, scores could range anywhere from 0 (all items marked as “never”) to 162 (all items marked “always”). As all items on the SEARS-T are related to social-emotional assets, a total score on the SEARS-T is representative of the general superordinate factor social-emotional strength of the student. At time of analysis, there were 507 coded SEARS-T forms ($M = 94.48$, $SD = 33.05$). Items on the SEARS-T had a very strong internal reliability coefficient, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha, of .98.

Table 1
Independent Sample t-Test Statistics for Gender and Grade Placement Groups

	Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i> -score
Gender	Female	244	99.33(31.18)	500.59	3.14*
	Male	259	90.20(34.06)		
Grade placement	K-6	321	97.18(33.02)	387.55	-2.37*
	7-12	185	90.01(32.64)		

* $p < .05$

Independent samples t-tests were run to see if there was a difference between female and male students on their total scores on SEARS-T (see Table 1). Four cases had to be excluded due to missing data. The SEARS-T scores for female ($M = 99.33$, $SD = 31.18$) and male ($M = 90.20$, $SD = 34.06$) students were significantly different, $t(500.59) = 3.14$, $p < .05$. We are 95% that the difference in means is between and 3.42 and 14.85.

Independent samples t-tests were run to see if there was a difference between students in grades K through 6 and students in grades 7 through 12 on their total scores on SEARS-T (see Table 1). One case had to be excluded due to missing datum. The SEARS-T scores for students in grades K-6 ($M = 97.18$, $SD = 33.02$) and grades 7-12 ($M = 90.01$, $SD = 32.64$) were significantly different, $t(387.55) = -2.37$, $p < .05$. We are 95% that the difference in means is between and 1.21 and 13.14.

On the SEARS-T form, teachers were asked to estimate how well the student was doing in school. Teachers were asked to select from one of three options: above average, average, below average. This question obtained an estimate of the students overall academic performance. To determine if the effect of a teacher’s estimate of student performance was predictive of a student total SEARS-T score, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted (see Table 2). Eighteen cases had to be excluded due to missing data. The effect of a teacher’s estimate of student performance on their overall SEARS-T score was significant, $F(2,486) = 107.08$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc pairwise group comparisons were made using Tukey’s HSD (see Table 3). All groups were found to be significantly different from one another, $p < .001$.

Table 2
One-way Analysis of Variance for the Effects of Teacher Estimate of Student Performance on Total SEARS-T Score

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Student performance	163560.94	2	81780.47	107.08	<.001
Error	371171.30	486	763.73		
Total	534732.25	488			

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Total Scores on the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scale – Teacher Version by Teacher’s Prediction of Student Achievement Group

Achievement group	n	M	SD
Below average	73	61.25 ^a	25.96
Average	188	91.47 ^b	25.77
Above average	143	112.34 ^c	27.70

Note. Group means sharing a common superscript are not significantly different, $p < .05$. The distribution of SEARS-T scores is generally symmetrical, with no severe outliers.

Discussion

Although development of the SEARS-T is not yet complete, initial analysis has provided some interesting and promising results. Group differences appear to exist on the SEARS-T regarding the gender of students, with females being rated by their teachers as having significantly higher levels of social-emotional competency than males. These results are consistent with preliminary analysis conducted on the student and parent versions of the SEARS (SEARS-A/C and SEARS-P respectively). Also, differences between grade levels appears to exist, with students in lower grades (K-6) scoring significantly higher than upper grade students (7-12). This finding is surprising when considering the fact that social and emotional development is thought to increase with age.

Although it would be highly speculative to draw any definitive conclusions from these results as the development of the SEARS-T is still in its early stages, these results are still interesting and warrant further investigation.

These analyses provide some initial evidence that student’s academic performance is related to social-emotional assets. Teacher estimation of student performance produced significantly different results of a very large magnitude on the overall SEARS-T score. Future research will strive to elucidate this finding as it has implications for targeting social-emotional intervention. Furthermore, research will focus on determining whether there is any causal relation between these two factors, or whether they are simply correlational in nature.

There are several limitations to the current research. The sample size on which analysis of the SEARS-T was conducted is relatively small, which could be affecting obtained results. Factor analyses have not yet been conducted on the SEARS-T. There could be items that need to be removed from the assessment, or necessary factor-constructs that need to be taken into consideration when conducting analyses. Teacher estimate of “how well student is doing in school” may not be providing the best metric of student achievement. If teachers are not providing an accurate estimate of achievement, the results obtained in the aforementioned analysis could be inaccurate. SEARS-T data collection and form refinement is still underway, which will in time produce more detailed analysis to hopefully address the aforementioned limitations, and answer future research questions.

The field of social emotional assessment has traditionally focused on negative student qualities and psychopathology. The positive psychology and problem-solving movements have advocated for a shift in this perspective, moving towards a strength-based emphasis in assessment. The SEARS measures provide a complimentary balance to the traditional tools by assessing positive student traits and skills, offering a highly-promising alternative to assessment of student social-emotional well-being.

References

Merrell, K. W. (2008). Social-emotional assets and resiliency scales (SEARS). Eugene: School Psychology Program, University of Oregon. Available at <http://strongkids.uoregon.edu/SEARS.html>

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