Like many well-meaning researchers, teachers, administrators, and philanthropists, I used to talk a lot about achievement gaps. I wanted to help close the persistent attainment disparities between white students and students of color and between rich and poor students. I wanted to improve the outcomes of those who have historically been left behind. As a researcher, I thought I could help do that by identifying the deficits in students' skills and competencies that need to be improved.

However, three years of participating in the Building Equitable Learning Environments Network has convinced me that we need to turn this thinking on its head. In the BELE Network, I worked hand-in-hand with a coalition of educators, researchers, philanthropists, and nonprofit leaders to create more equitable opportunity in America's schools—to adapt systems and enable all students to thrive.

This work reinforced my prior belief that quantifiable metrics can help us identify the deficits that need to be improved. More importantly, though, it also helped me realize that I had been looking for deficits in the wrong places. The attainment metrics I had been using registered the deficits in the students. But the deficits are not in the students. They're in the systems that are supposed to serve them.

For too long, American schools have had a default orientation toward measuring students' abilities and achievement, rather than focusing on the resources—such as engaging learning environments and high-quality, culturally responsive teaching practices—that empower students to learn new concepts and skills.

Focusing solely on achievement rather than opportunity can reinforce a deficit-oriented discourse that blames underserved students, families, and communities for disparities between their educational outcomes and those of their more privileged peers. It reveals the symptoms, but not the causes of inequitable attainment.

When data reveal students' shortcomings without revealing the shortcomings of the systems intended to serve them, it becomes easier to treat students as deficient and harder to recognize how those systems must be changed to create more equitable opportunities. I have seen this play out firsthand as concepts from social psychology, like growth mindset and belonging, have started to enter the education mainstream.

My fellow social psychologists and I spent years documenting the conditions that students need to thrive and develop, like the need to belong, to see work as relevant, and to understand that academic abilities can improve. But as those concepts have been popularized in education in recent years, I have watched in terror as those insights about the conditions students need to thrive have transformed into yet another set of "competencies" in which students can be labeled deficient.

Some of my colleagues have objected to treating social psychological constructs as student competencies on narrow, technical grounds, arguing that the currently available measures of those constructs are demonstrably unfit for such use. However, even if we were to overcome those technical hurdles, more fundamental problems would remain with treating social psychological concepts like student competencies.

First, this plays into the deficit discourse. When a teacher believes a student has a fixed mindset as opposed to a growth mindset, that teacher is more likely to label that student as deficient.

"I can't teach those students because they have a fixed mindset," one might say. Some teachers have even forced students to recite "I belong here" at the start of class each day, as if a sense of belonging were developed the
same way a multiplication table is memorized. That's deeply troubling.

We should be very cautious of measures and practices that can influence educators to perceive students, or groups of students, as deficient, unless we accompany those measures and practices with the training educators would need to implement them effectively and equitably.

Second, measuring social psychological constructs as if they were the competencies of individual students belies their social nature. This line of thinking conflates the deficits of learning environments with the deficits of students. Educators then have a harder time thinking innovatively about how to build equitable learning environments that support healthy social, emotional, and academic development for all students.

A teacher who wants students to feel they belong in class should focus on building strong relationships with and between students, on giving students a platform to contribute to the classroom in meaningful ways, and on honoring their cultures and communities. Those practices are both more concrete and more psychologically sound than building belonging by "intervening" with a specific student who was "diagnosed" as having low belonging.

Approaches that diagnose and intervene with individual students might work for supporting students who need extra academic help. But if students don't feel like they belong in a class, it's not the individual students who need extra support and attention so that they can "do better"—it's the educator creating the social environment in which those students are learning.

As social psychologists, our work implicitly recognizes that students’ mindsets, feelings, and attitudes about school arise from the social contexts in which they learn and grow. However, in reflecting on the training most teachers receive and on the messages we send as a research community, it's clear we haven't always equipped educators to understand new findings and act on them in a productive way.

This realization has profoundly affected the way my team and I talk about student motivation, and the kinds of measures we help educators utilize. Rather than concentrating on the mindsets of individual students, we've started to measure the learning conditions that foster equitable development and on giving educators formative feedback about the learning environments they're creating for students. For example, do students feel respected and valued by their teachers? Do they understand that the critical feedback they're receiving from their teachers is intended to help them grow as thinkers? The results of these measures leave less opportunity to blame students, and they help educators focus on creating environments that foster equitable learning and achievement.

They say what gets measured gets improved, so let's start to measure opportunity.

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