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Understanding Unique Social Communication Characteristics and Social Learning Systems

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To better understand and support social learners, it's important to understand their social learning system based on their social learning characteristics (e.g., strengths, needs, and/or struggles). The Social Thinking® Social

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complexity because it is also a social emotional process. Most of us tend to respond emotionally (internally and perhaps externally) to those who are around us and how they treat us and others. This means we need to consider factors related to social language as well as social emotional processing. Key factors include reading the context, responses related to non-verbal cues (i.e., situational cues), what one knows or doesn't know about the communication partner, how we think and feel about their actions and words (tone of voice, facial expression, word choice, gestures, etc.). And, to complicate matters, the social communication process is synergistic and dynamic and constantly evolves with age.

Social Thinking (thinking socially) vs. Social Skills

The term Social Thinking® was created by Michelle Garcia Winner in the late 1990s to move teaching beyond and beneath the level of simply memorizing social skills. The early work focused on how social cognition (thinking socially), metacognition, and emotional processing could be used to build supports through language and cognitive-based tools. The motivation was to move away from a “one size fits all” approach to teaching more deeply about the social world. She began documenting what most educators, therapists, and caregivers already know: some tools and approaches are better suited for certain kids while others are not. And that in order to figure out the most effective, efficient, and practical teaching tools, we need to understand the learner’s strengths, their needs, and their goals.

This deeper look at learner characteristics lead to a series of articles and hypotheses over the years. This article will suggest ways to understand the social learner without relying solely on standardized testing and to use what we learn to build better teaching and support programs.

How the Social World Works

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our observations through,

Social interpretation - We use our social minds to consider the information we've gathered to assign meaning. We also consider our own/others' thoughts and feelings while using knowledge about how the world works (world-based knowledge) to,

Socially problem solve - We consider potential dilemmas, others' point of view, and our own social goals to decide whether or not to,

Socially respond - We act (or not) with our bodies and words. We may comment or rather hold that thought. We might move towards a group or move away. Our social responses are based on accomplishing our own social goal(s) or social desires.

The ST-SCM is evidence aligned and grounded in the seminal work related to social information processing, social learning theory, and social cognition. In our model, social skill production does not stand alone. Instead, it is based on how we move through the four steps above. In other words, social skills are the output of a complicated observational, interpretive, and problem-solving process. This means the production of social skills is not simply an act resulting from memorized behaviors produced on cue but are in fact a result of the social mind's intricate social reasoning.

So, thinking socially (social thinking) occurs when we consider the context (e.g., where we are, who are the people and what's happening) and what we know about our own and others' thoughts, emotions, beliefs, desires, motives, prior knowledge, and experiences in that situation. We use this information to interpret and possibly respond to others. We use our social thinking even when we are not intending to interact with another person. For example, whenever we read fiction, our social brain needs to figure out what we know about the character's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. We interpret intentions of characters in movies and online. Thinking socially (social thinking) is a building block for social competencies (Crooke, Winner, & Olswang, 2016).

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~~AUTISTIC LEARNERS HAVE THE SAME SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS JUST AS IS TRUE FOR NON-AUTISTIC STUDENTS.~~

Winner began looking more closely at the different social learning characteristics and found there were some social learners who were a good fit for the Social Thinking Methodology and others who were a better fit with more structured social skill approaches. For example, a skill-based intervention seemed to be helpful for those students whose social communication learning system was more literal. These students needed more supports for understanding the social world, and the cognitive and language demands of the Social Thinking Methodology (STM) would bog down their learning. On the other hand, some students with strengths in cognition, language, academics tended to be a good match for the metacognitive tools and language-based activities found in the ST methodology. From this early work, she developed the Perspective Taking Scale which included three learning subtypes. The perspective taking scale was published in articles, books, and websites. **Note:** *These early works do not represent our current thinking and should be discarded, disregarded, or recycled.*

However, this early work did inform our current understanding of several different learning systems or subtypes as defined in the Social Thinking-Social Communication Characteristics Summary (ST-SCS). This learning system characteristic summary is dynamic and continues to change according to the latest research, extensive clinical experience, and family input (ASHA definition of evidence-based). The ST-SCS components are evidence-informed and based on a foundation of evidence-based concepts and definitions. Therefore, the ST-SCS should be thought of as a descriptive tool to help interventionists better understand the learning nuances and social learning systems of the students and clients with whom they teach. *The ST-SCS should never be used to diagnose or measure progress.*

Social Learning Systems

A key factor in developing social thinking and social competencies is having social awareness of oneself and others to observe social contexts and how people share space

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- Pre-Emerging Social Communicator (PESC)
- Self-Protective Social Communicator (SP-SC)

Multidimensional Characteristics of Learning Systems

The ST-SCS is simply a way to consider many different characteristics across social cognition and social metacognition. The characteristics include:

1. Understanding own and others' minds
2. Emotional coping
3. Social problem solving
4. Peer interaction, including play.
5. Self-awareness
6. Academics
7. Bullying, tricks, mental manipulation
8. Time management

The Influence of Neurology

We postulate that the variance in people's social learning systems is, in part, due to unique neurology present at birth. These hard-wired social characteristics, in turn, impact and influence future social and sensory learning. Human brains are neurodiverse and represent a huge range of cognitive, sensory, and language skills. It is quite logical that not everyone learns concepts in the same manner, depth, or speed. In other words, learners are unique so tools and outcomes should be unique too.

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goals. Working towards one's social goals is a lifelong process, not a K-12 sprint.

Important: This ST-SCS was not designed to reflect developmental patterns, nor does it reflect or encourage a “recovery-based” model. In a nutshell, this tool is a way to describe the individual learning systems in individuals ages eight and older. We set the age at eight because 3rd to 4th grade tends to be a time when social communication learning systems are more apparent. In other words, individuals don’t typically change their learning system over time. They continue to learn new concepts and skills, but they are still the same person. It is also important to recognize that social development continues to evolve throughout childhood and even in adulthood. What was too difficult to understand when young can be, in part, aided by maturity. When we look at a person’s progress, we need to focus on how the individual has improved compared to themselves rather than how that person compares to others of the same age or grade.

Using this descriptive tool is in no way meant to limit the growth of an individual or their potential, but rather should help with selecting teaching materials and guide discussions about realistic expectations for learning and independence. Again, this should never be used to measure progress in therapy or as a pre/post teaching tool because that would imply that the learning systems or characteristics are linear, which we believe is not the case.

This tool is also not designed for use with preschool children (we use modified play scales for this age range) or with older adults (descriptions do not fully describe their needs or concerns). Finally, note the lack of precision of the descriptors in the tool. We often see that many individuals will have characteristics in more than one category. The idea is to determine which learning system best describes the individual globally.

Social Learning Systems and Characteristics

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- Prone to make social faux paus across their lives (sticking their foot in their mouth, not always being sensitive to what someone is thinking or feeling, etc.), these hiccups tend to be part of a social learning process where they learn from their mishaps to avoid doing the same in the future. May use these mistakes as a way to become more adept socially to meet their social goals (e.g., joining groups, conversations, dating, advocating, expressing opinions, etc.)
- May or may not seek counseling from friends or mental health professionals for social issues over the course of their lifetimes.
- Can be overwhelmed by social demands and face anxiety and depression.

Strengths: Intuitive and/or strong social emotional connection to others. Can adapt their social behavior to meet their own social desires or the social expectations of the group (social chameleons). May prefer big groups of people or a smaller social circle. May prefer to stick with a trusted friend. Can establish and maintain peer networks to feel connected within whatever community they choose. Either know, or can learn, how to determine when others are dishonest, trick, lie, or manipulate them or take advice from trusted others if they are not aware of the deceit.

Struggles: May have social anxiety, second guess their choices, have failed relationships, loose their temper, make social mistakes, experience heartbreak, feel remorse deeply, etc. Social communicators with this social learning system experience many or all of the struggles associated with being human.

Teaching and supports: Seek the help of counselors to navigate the complicated waters of social emotional relationships, work, and life pressures. May seek the counsel of friends and family. May need additional academic or executive functioning support. This group (Social Communicators) are a good fit for most components of the Social Thinking Methodology.

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of their families, even though there is a desire to be a part of a larger social structure. May recognize that we all notice and have thoughts, and sometimes feelings, about what others do and say (usually in benign ways), this social learning system by kick into warp speed, leaving the individual to overly focus on their own and others' possible thoughts.

Observable social, emotional, sensory, and academic learning characteristics of the NSC-A often include (also explained in further detail throughout this section): Tend to seem predisposed to experience more anxiety and to intuitively doubt their social abilities.

- May appear to have significant social challenges around unfamiliar others or groups. Anxiety shuts down access to social competencies. However, when comfortable or around family and close friends, they are at ease and anxiety does not get in the way of accessing their social competencies.
- Appear highly uncomfortable and report feeling the same way. May over focus on anxiety and retreat or push away others, leading some to think they are aloof or not interested.
- Tends to respond to teaching and strategies that specifically address their anxiety and not solely social competencies.

Strengths: Strengths in the areas of language, academics, and cognition. However, may be anxious about their workload and may succumb to anxiety, unable to complete their assignments. Some may have difficulty with executive functioning, which could actually be the core of their anxiety. EF can impact social relatedness (social executive functioning) and organizational skills (organizational executive functioning). May be slightly more literal and naïve than others their age; however, often is a result from a lack of practice. Individuals with this social learning system often excel in careers that allow them some level of predictability and fewer demands to interact with co-workers or clients.

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work well with NSC-EF or SC.

Prognosis: Social learning systems that are characterized by higher levels of social anxiety usually need to develop strategies to manage their anxieties throughout their lifetimes, their prognoses, with supports, is good.

NSC-EF (Executive Functions/Attention Mediated System)

General description: Highly aware of their own thoughts about what other people do and say. Understand that others notice their words and actions too. Understand that each person has their own unique perspective of the world. Attention to the subtleties of others' facial expressions, body stances, and gestures, and words can be difficult. May turn their attention inward, to their own thinking or interests and miss other clues or cues. Often socially motivated to be a part of groups and connect with others. Tend to be described by teachers and staff as capable but not always compliant. May complete the work, but never turn it in.

Observable social, emotional, sensory, and academic learning characteristics of the NCSC-EF often include (also explained in further detail throughout this section):

- Average to superior verbal language skills and cognition with no delays in language development when younger.
- Executive functioning for written expression is a relative struggle given their academic intelligence.
- Attentional issues compounded by some anxiety is also common.
- Tend to prefer the attention of adults and may seek them out as often as possible to talk to, even during recess and lunch breaks at school.
- If extroverted, may be described by others as egocentric. If more introverted, may be described as shy, even though they often crave group membership.

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- may make this group more likely to be overlooked and miss out on needed supports.
- Often achievement-oriented and intellectually bright, those with this learning system may struggle to do their work independently because of organizational issues. It is not uncommon to see lack of preparation or being overwhelmed by having to assume responsibility not only for work but also sleep schedule, hygiene, meal planning, budgeting, completing homework on time, developing peer relations, dating, etc.

Strengths: Solid to strong language users. Often show solid to gifted academic intelligence, scoring high on tests. May also have many other talents, such as in music, arts, or even athletics. Voracious learners, specifically in the realm of science (also in literature, history, or any number of varied topics).

Struggles: Some may have academic issues, mostly related to feeling overwhelmed by the executive functioning load and inadequate social emotional coping mechanisms. Others may be bogged by attentional issues and anxiety related to overwhelm. Some may have dysgraphia (difficulty coordinating the physical act of writing) while also having simultaneous difficulty organizing ideas, sorting related details, or considering the reader's interpretation while also focusing on grammar and punctuation. Yet when tested on each individual area of written language, they perform well. Some NSC-EF may have other learning disabilities that may or may not be related to their social learning differences and/or challenges, such as difficulties learning abstract math concepts or dyslexia.

Peers can be very unkind because they perceive the person as academically equal or superior. They may be perceived as a “know-it-all” or may state their thoughts about another person without fully realizing how that person is feeling upon hearing this perceived criticism. At high risk for persistent bullying, teasing, and trickery, not only as children but

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important to support them in getting to a place where they can manage their own assignments and advocate for themselves. Also, consider a transition to college program that teaches self-management of academic homework. Or, if there is a strong history of rejecting the idea of completing classwork/homework, vocational training programs shouldn't be ruled out to help maximize their learning strengths in a more hands-on work environment.

Prognosis for NSC (A and EF): Prognosis for these two social learning systems can be quite good, but also fragile. Solid chances to succeed in intellectual goals, getting/maintaining a job, finding a life partner, etc. However, may also have significant risks if there is no safety net.

Some adults with this social communication learning system ultimately seek counseling (or are told they need counseling) for their struggles with nuance-based social emotional connection with others (usually referred from spouse, friends, children, or at times even their workmates). Others have made choices in careers and partners that allow them a very stable, happy life but seek counseling to understand why they struggled in the past.

Emerging Social Communicator (ESC)

General description: May appear awkwardly engaged. Parents, teachers, and peers notice social differences, difficulties, and/or challenges. This social learning system most likely represents many individuals who receive(d) special education or other supportive services in schools and the community. Social characteristics vary greatly within this social learning system, but two core characteristics are common: 1) social interpretation and 2) critical thinking for social situations. While clear differences are apparent when young, maturity is on their side, and they continue to learn and use social strategies as they work towards their own social goals.

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- Neurological differences in tone or voice, loudness, pitch, posture.
- Interests or preservative interests in an area that might be described as unusual for their age. May develop specific skills related to this interest.
- Social perspective taking requires extra time to process and respond to social information. Many are described as having auditory processing or central auditory processing struggles.
- Development of joint attention and pronouns tend to develop much later.
- Literal interpretation of spoken and written language, which impacts comprehension of literature.
- Executive functioning struggles that affect homework, written expression, time, and time management, etc.
- Literal in interpreting situational cues, determining the motive of the communicative partners, interpreting the words spoken, assessing the tone of voice.
- Narrative language may be difficult to follow as they organize and convey their thoughts. To narrate one's story requires the speaker to consider what the listener or audience knows and doesn't know (perspective taking) and how to share (narrate) the information in a manner that makes sense.
- Writing may be seen as disorganized with an over-focus on details and lack of bigger concept. Many also have an artful ability to convey their own thoughts and interests if free from others' guidelines and expectations. For example, they may write a good science fiction fantasy story but can't produce an essay assigned by the classroom teacher. This can be very frustrating to the teacher, parent, and student alike as there is often a discrepancy between self-generated written expression versus completing homework requiring the student to take perspective of the teacher's expectations, etc.
- Anxiety is more in the form of world-based rather than social anxiety. In other words, anxiety arises from the unpredictability of transitions, people, things, animals,

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- May be unaware that some tricks are for fun and other tricks can put people in danger (email scams, false advertising, and people who target their trusting nature).
- Bullying is less pervasive because the peer group is far more forgiving of the ESC's clear social differences.
- Often unaware of playground and other social hierarchies. May believe they are part of a friend group simply because they are near other students. Peer mentors can be helpful in coaching. Inclusive environments are very beneficial.
- Gaining employment may be needed for interviewing. However, once in a job that fits their learning system, they can be highly productive and successful workers. Tend to do best when engaging in tasks where there is inclusion and acceptance, and without demands to dynamically interact with others as part of their job description. May excel as scientists, computer programmers, horticulturists, animal scientists, etc.

Strengths: There is a tendency to have the strength of visual learning over auditory (but not universal, of course). May be excellent text decoders and read (decode) early in development. Academic gains are very apparent in the early years of school when their attention to detail makes them strong rote learners. May excel as they age in the areas related to their interests. Some are thought of by teachers and staff as model students as they are devoted to following routines (class rules, group rules), and that includes studying. If born to a temperament or a tendency towards hard work and tenacity, may be quite successful at meeting academic course requirements throughout their lives.

Struggles: While this learning system excels as comprehending fact-based information, there are usually ongoing struggles to interpret information based on predicting what people are thinking and feeling. Hence, there may be difficulties tackling grade level curriculum in middle and high school even when test scores in a given subject (such as reading comprehension) indicate grade level scores. Time management and/or awareness of time

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people manipulate those thoughts. Please see this article for a series of lessons and a longer description of how to develop a teaching and support plan for these learners (Crooke & Winner, 2022).

Transition to adulthood: It is critical to explore abstract and critical thinking as well as how they manage their own unmodified homework assignments independently to determine readiness ,for attending an academically based college/university program. If the individual has a history of requiring intensive or full adult support for most academic coursework, then college may not be the best next step.

Prognosis: ESCs live happy, successful, and fulfilled lives, usually with some level of support across their adult years. Parents or caregivers are often concerned about their child's naïve approach to the world and tend to want them to live at home for a longer period. This usually does not eliminate their own march toward independence. Many ultimately live independently but have a trusted team of adults (parents, other relatives, co-workers, or paid caregivers) to help when dealing with social critical thinking and significant changes in their routine. For example, an autistic 32-year-old client of ours lived in his own apartment, prepared his own meals, maintained hygiene, took the bus around the community (although he had a driver's license), paid his bills, maintained a job, and kept his apartment relatively clean. However, when life changes occurred (moving to a new apartment, applying for a new job, dealing with a bus schedule change), he usually needed his parents to help problem solve.

Pre-Emerging Social Communicator (PESC)

General Description: Rote learners who tend to need significant academic, adaptive, and social support. Attention is highly distracted in unstructured situations but tend to thrive in highly structured situations.

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- Learns best with direct instruction. This includes how to understand others perspectives while playing games. For example, the point of playing a card game is to keep the other person from knowing your cards/plan. Perspective taking and self-awareness can get in the way of the learner understanding the need to whisper or hide their cards.
- Can be good text decoders and math calculators. Comprehending inferential information in math word problems can be very hard.
- May not sense time or feel a sense of urgency to finish tasks. Their parents often state that they are not accidental learners in that they don't absorb new learning from simply being exposed to new experiences. Instead, parents have reported (and we have noted ourselves from years of clinical experience) that these individuals learn best when explicitly taught concepts.
- With an extreme focus on details without a bigger picture of how they connect, finding the right employment can be challenging. If asked to do the same task in a new environment, they may need to relearn all the steps of the task since they haven't conceptualized the task. However, once employed in a predictable/routine job, there is a tendency to keep it.
- Excel with a visual or predictable schedule. Tend to be punctual when understanding the timeline but also need supports to understand the passing of time.

Strengths: Most individuals with this learning system are described as having “splinter skills” in specific academic areas such as decoding and remembering factual information. May also have visual learning strengths over auditory processing but not universally. Individuals tend to be literal thinkers and crave/need structure for their best performance. Because this group finds comfort in routine and predictability, they may do very well in jobs based in redundancy and routines.

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selected by exploring the unique strengths and struggles to tap into eclectic teaching regimes. Additionally, relationship-based interventions such as the SCERTS model is ideal. Vocational training when in high school and transitional post-secondary programs are also excellent for helping to prepare these social learners for adulthood.

Prognosis: May require significant support throughout the adult years and may live at home or in a supported living environment. When given routines that match their interests and needs, living as independently as possible is an option. Employment and relationships require support and highly structured and routine-based jobs are good choices for these individuals.

Self-Protective (resistant) Social Communicator (SP-SC)

Note: While we hypothesize this is a distinct social communication system, we are unclear as to the origin or if there is some combination of systems in place. It is highly likely that temperament is a contributing factor. Certainly, the environment plays a role, but there are many variables that fall under the umbrella of “environment.” Many parents of SP-SCs report having a great deal of difficulty setting effective behavioral boundaries and proactive supports with their children from the very earliest of years. Our clinical experience has shown that these social learners have a blend of social learning system characteristics seen in the ESC and the NSC – A/EF.

This is a unique learning system where the individual tends to default to a self-protective mode or what others might define as “resistant.” This can look very similar to the developmental pathway of a teenager, and we expect/assume that most teens pass through a resistant phase as part of their development. This is not the same type of resistance/self-protectiveness found in these social learners. Social communication characteristics of the SP-SC are persistent and found across home, school, and the community. We continue to be

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peer rejection and have difficult relationships with their parents.

- Tend to avoid working on establishing, maintaining, or repairing relationships by stating, “I don’t care.”
- May lash out indiscriminately when emotionally overwhelmed.
- When in groups or classrooms, there is a tendency to attempt to get the group focus on them and their actions. These individuals later report being delighted when receiving the full attention of the group (negative or positive).
- May argue and resist, sometimes making statements that are offensive to their peers (and adults) and say they don’t care about others.
- Show lagging social thinking and related social skills which makes us hypothesize that attempts to take over the group may be due to a lack of understanding of group dynamics, rather than a willful act.
 - Tend to expect and acknowledge there should be group norms or boundaries for groups once in a safe 1:1 working relationship is established.
 - Tend to not follow their expressed boundaries for others.
- May think in black-and-white terms related to social (“that person likes me” or “that person doesn’t like me”).
- May have undiagnosed sensory needs; an OT should be consulted.
- Solid to good sense of humor but may not understand the impact of using certain humor with certain groups at certain times.
- May get stuck in insisting that people follow their rules but push back when others expect the same from them. For example, some may insist in absolute honesty from others but can be quite adept at lying.
- Many, but not all, have other learning differences or diagnosed disabilities.
- During the teen years, teachers and parents may describe them as “manipulative.” The irony is that they struggle to understand when others lie to them.
- May be naïve without realizing it and are easily taken advantage of by their peers. They may get tricked into doing things their peers ask them to do to fit into a group

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unintentionally do or say something that is perceived to be very offensive to a peer one day, but then struggle to connect how that will impact how that same peer might respond to them today or tomorrow.

There is often a mismatch between how the individual perceives themselves vs. how others perceive them.

From a mental health perspective, many struggle with depression, which can manifest itself in lashing out at others, blaming, or reacting in a condescending manner. They can face serious mental due to rejection. Social anxiety does not seem to be difficult because of a lack of awareness of how their words and actions might impact others.

Teaching and supports: Intensive individual therapy with a trusted person who understands the social communication learning system is critical. Given a need for direct discussions, these learners do best with those who can give them clear information about what they are doing well and why it matters, without constant corrections.

While *inside-out* teaching is important for all social communication learning systems, it is critical for the SP-SC. This means we start by teaching through the lens and perspective of that person first. This allows them to anchor concepts through their own social value system. By studying who they like, don't like, and why, they realize they are forming their own social impressions and reacting to what they think and feel based on what others do and say. It will take some time (at times years) to help them to appreciate that if they require people to act and respond emotionally in certain ways to them, it eventually makes some sense that others might have those same social expectations.

Unfortunately, these social learners get a lot of attention for how they participate or when they struggle to participate in groups. Professionals often and erroneously insist on them

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from their families. Some self-medicate with drugs or alcohol as a way to cope. However, when supports, understanding, acceptance of their different learning system, and individualized supports are available, then prognosis is similar to all of the other social communication learning systems.

Final Thoughts

Social communication is incredibly complex. It is multifaceted and at the core of so much of what we, as humans, do on a daily basis and throughout our lives. It involves, among other things, emotional processing and responding to others as well as integrate and interpret academic information. One complicating variable is how mental health setbacks can impact both learning and outcomes. Anxieties of all types are very real and social anxiety can be a roadblock for many. Ultimately, we need to look closely to understand the individual's social learning system to build supports that allow them to make progress towards their own social goals. We need to be mindful of co-occurring social learning, academic, executive functioning, and mental health challenges. In short, people are complex and supporting their needs is equally complicated. We hope that having a better understanding of the learner will help to drive better teaching and supports.

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