



From an Article by Junlei Li and Megan M. Julian

*Developmental Relationships as the Active Ingredient: A Unifying Working Hypothesis of "What Works" Across Intervention Settings**

Diffusion of Innovations and Science-Based Practices to Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools:

A Series of Information Resources on Enabling System Change

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, new directions are imperative. And, this involves more than tinkering with prevailing approaches. The need is for developing major innovations (e.g., comprehensive school-level prototypes) and taking them to scale throughout a school district.

The success of all this depends on stakeholders in public education becoming more knowledgeable about the complexities and strategies related to diffusion of innovations, enabling major systemic changes, and developing a *sophisticated* understanding of the role of empirically-based practices.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, to provide informational aids for use as tools in policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school improvement planning.

Abstract: Developmental relationships are characterized by reciprocal human interactions that embody an enduring emotional attachment, progressively more complex patterns of joint activity, and a balance of power that gradually shifts from the developed person in favor of the developing person. We propose the working hypothesis that developmental relationships constitute *the* active ingredient of effective interventions serving at-risk children and youth across settings. In the absence of developmental relationships, other intervention elements yield diminished or minimal returns. Scaled-up programs and policies serving children and youth often fall short of their potential impact when their designs or implementation drift towards manipulating other inactive ingredients (e.g., incentive, accountability, curricula) instead of directly promoting developmental relationships. Using empirical studies as case examples, we demonstrate that the presence or absence of developmental relationships distinguishes effective and ineffective interventions for diverse populations across developmental settings. We conclude that developmental relationships are the foundational metric with which to judge the quality and forecast the impact of interventions for at-risk children and youth. It is both critical and possible to give foremost considerations to whether our program, practice, and policy decisions promote or hinder developmental relationships amongst those who are served and those who serve.

*Li, J. & Julian, M. (2012). Developmental relationship as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of what works across intervention settings. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. [http://www.oed.pitt.edu/Files/Publications/Developmental %20Relationships%20Li%20%26%20Julian%202012%20 Orthopsychiatry.pdf](http://www.oed.pitt.edu/Files/Publications/Developmental%20Relationships%20Li%20%26%20Julian%202012%20Orthopsychiatry.pdf)

Excerpts from ***Developmental Relationships as the Active Ingredient: A Unifying Working Hypothesis of “What Works” Across Intervention Settings.***

By Junlei Li and Megan M. Julian (2012).

Much of what we do collectively to create positive and lasting change in children’s development may be categorized into two general approaches. One approach is evidence-based programming. We choose self-contained intervention packages with either proven efficacy or demonstrated promise through research and evaluation. Such interventions range from multi-year programs that specify a target, curriculum, and staff qualification. ...

Treating a well-specified and self-contained program or experimental protocol as the indivisible atomic unit of evidence-based intervention, the implementation primarily focuses on how to replicate and scale up such units with fidelity. An extension of evidence-based programming is the system building approach – linking together an amalgamation of promising interventions to comprehensively address a wide array of systemic factors that constrain or derail children’s development, such as poverty, crime, education, and parenting. For example, in early childhood work, we integrate parent education, social services, early intervention, and quality child-care programs... The famous Harlem’s Children’s Zone is known for taking an entire neighborhood and transforming every aspect of the community, including safety and sanitation, social services, education, and parent engagement. ...

Despite the ebb and flow of these two complementary approaches, we as a field have not consistently implemented reliable, sustainable, and scalable solutions that effectively serve large numbers of at-risk children across settings. On the positive side, we have always had a plethora of theoretically motivated interventions that demonstrate promising success during pilot, experimental, or developmental stages. To our collective dismay, when such efforts finally earned the privilege of being scaled up in large field trials or actual use, formal evaluations often found no effect or highly uneven effects. ...

It appears that the problem of “not working very well for very long” is the norm, rather than the exception, in existing efforts to promote developmental change in school and community settings. The decade-long federal program, What Works Clearing House, was designed to screen evaluation research to identify programs that both work and can scale. The program identified so few programs that passed its evidence criteria that it earned the unfortunate nickname Nothing Works Clearinghouse. ...

We believe an alternative to the evidence-based programming and system-building approaches is to focus on developmental relationship as the active ingredient upon which the effectiveness of other program elements depend. Viewed through the active ingredient lens, the present system-building approach may be unnecessarily broad, whereas the evidence-based programming approach may be too narrowly focused on experimental programs or interventions. In program design, the focal question ought to be “How does a (practice, program, system, or policy) help to strengthen relationships in the developmental setting?”

For example, if the policy or program decision is to adopt a new curriculum (teachers to students, or social worker to family), the most important question is whether or not such a curriculum would move the relational interactions closer to being developmental relationships, rather than merely the content, coverage, rigor, and alignment of such a curriculum.

When research and evaluation focus too narrowly on programmatic inputs and outcomes, as typical evaluations do today, they identify shortfalls in results without offering an insightful understanding of why programs fail ... The lack of consistent, positive, and lasting outcomes only fuels more research and evaluation for impactful programs (to no avail) and increases pressure on schools and community organizations to deliver or prove such outcomes on short order. Such pressure often inadvertently leads schools and community organizations further astray from promoting development relationships through their activities and services. ...

Few programs or policies serving children have hopes of producing lasting outcomes if they do not enhance, or if they undermine, the quality of developmental relationships. The thousands of studies reviewed by the What Works Clearing House, most of which focused on outcomes and failed to find them, ought to have signaled the futility of chasing after distal outcomes without first examining credible intermediate indicators in the present.

Conclusion

Developmental relationships are hypothesized to be the active ingredient in developmental interventions. Such relationships are defined relatively parsimoniously as human interactions characterized by four interwoven features – attachment, reciprocity, progressive complexity, and balance of power. We made the testable claim that developmental interventions produce desirable outcomes if and only if such interventions enhanced developmental relationships and offered case examples of empirical studies that shed light on developmental relationships across multiple settings for multiple target populations. Developmental relationships should become the focal point for efforts intended to produce meaningful developmental change: “How does a (practice, program, system, or policy) help to strengthen relationships in the developmental setting?” With this focus, decision making starts and ends with how an action impacts relationships.

One common response we receive when discussing this article with professionals who serve children (funders, program managers, researchers) is: “We do agree with the importance of relationship building. But funders pay for and want hard, measurable outcomes, not soft, hard-to-measure relationships.” We believe it is time to make developmental relationship the very outcome that is measurable and worth paying for.