SEL Frameworks –
What Are They and Why Are They Important?

Recognizing the value and importance of frameworks in guiding social-emotional learning (SEL) efforts and their measurement, a team of organizations convened a group of leaders, informally called the Assessment Work Group (AWG), to create the *Establishing Practical Social-Emotional Competence Assessments of Preschool to High School Students Project.* The project recognized the importance of solid SEL frameworks to guide not only how you measure SEL but also how you think about it, communicate it, and act upon it. The AWG's series of framework briefs is designed to help practitioners better understand and grapple with the challenges and opportunities multiple SEL frameworks can present.

This introductory series of three briefs is designed to:
1. Introduce the nature, types, importance, and uses of frameworks.
2. Describe current challenges that the multitude of frameworks present for practice and facilitate discussion of opportunities for addressing them.
3. Define criteria for rating the extent to which a framework is conceptually clear, is based on evidence, and has different types of implementation supports.

All the briefs are intended to support systems, schools, and community organizations as well as individual practitioners' working to advance their SEL efforts and improve youth's intra- and inter-personal social and emotional competencies.

Ever try to put a 1000-piece puzzle together without looking at the picture? Or with all the pieces upside down? It's hard. Now image trying to put together a puzzle from a pile of pieces that are from five different puzzles, two of which have the same shaped pieces but different pictures on them. Sounds frustrating, doesn't it? Working in SEL can sometimes feel like that—multiple ways of looking at things, lots of pieces that don't seem to fit together, and different people working on different parts of the puzzles or bringing different-shaped pieces. This is why a useful social-emotional learning framework is so critical to putting together an effective SEL effort. But unlike puzzles, there is no one answer—no one way to make everything fit together. Perhaps a better analogy would be taking a journey into new territory. Frameworks are like maps, guidebooks, and other travel tools that help you think about where you want to go and set goals, communicate with others who have been there or are going on the journey with you, and figure out the best ways of getting from here to there (action).

AUTHORS

Dale A. Blyth
University of Minnesota

Stephanie Jones
Harvard University

Teresa Borowski
University of Illinois at Chicago

Frameworks are one key way people organize their thinking, communications, and actions. SEL has a growing abundance of frameworks from which to choose that can cause problems in practice. While some may hope for the day when all these frameworks have been synthesized and collapsed into one comprehensive and agreed-upon framework, that day is far away at best. Perhaps, in fact, locking everyone into one framework, however strong, is also undesirable for a vibrant and growing field with multiple settings and systems as well as diverse populations. There is richness, flexibility, and opportunities that come from multiple ways of framing SEL efforts—differences that can better capture local buy-in and integrate more effectively with efforts already underway. Nonetheless, the multitude of frameworks and the inconsistent use of words create real challenges for navigating the journey to improve SEL—challenges in designing systems, implementing programs, providing training, assessing outcomes, and guiding practitioners who are seeking to implement effective SEL efforts.

What Are Frameworks?

In essence, *a framework is simply a tool that helps organize ideas in order to provide a foundation for thinking, communicating, and acting.* For this series, frameworks are key ways of organizing and naming social and emotional competencies and the social-emotional learning process in order to better support efforts to study, understand, communicate, and work together to build these competencies.

In SEL, there is a multitude of different frameworks, and they vary in their focus on different competencies, their degree of empirical support, their conceptual clarity, their intended purpose, and the resources they provide for supporting implementation and use in different settings. By better understanding different types of frameworks, why they are important, and how they can be useful, we hope to support practitioners at multiple levels to select, align, and use frameworks that are best suited for their particular setting.

Frameworks Come in Different Forms

Not all frameworks are alike. They come in many forms from many different places and schools of thought. Here are some typical forms frameworks take and how they differ in ways that may matter for how you intend to use them.

THEORIES. Theories are efforts to organize a body of knowledge and systematically connect ideas about how things work in order to predict or hypothesize about relationships. If A happens, then you can expect B. Because they propose what happens if one does something, they are often useful to efforts seeking a desired outcome. Theories suggest what to do to get the outcome. Theories often come from a broader school of thought or body of knowledge from which multiple frameworks may emerge. For example, the CASEL framework (figure 1) is one of many noted as coming out of education. In some theories, social-emotional competencies may be the predicted outcome, while in other theories, these outcomes may be in the middle and used to predict other outcomes like school success, high school graduation, or college.

Figure 1

MODELS. Models are similar to theories and are generally designed to illustrate how specific pieces fit together. Models are often used to organize and describe how something works but usually less formally than a full theory. Both the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's framework about the foundations of young adult success (figure 2) and its framework on the role of noncognitive factors in student performance are examples of models[1].

Figure 2

TAXONOMIES AND RUBRICS. Taxonomies and rubrics are, in essence, frameworks designed primarily for classifying things in a systematic way so that multiple people can use a similar language for identifying and talking about those things (e.g., the taxonomy of plants and animals used in the biological sciences or a student grading rubric that organizes what is expected and how to allocate points). Taxonomies are typically complex, comprehensive, and overarching systems that evolve so that everything fits somewhere. The emerging work of the Harvard Taxonomy project led by Stephanie Jones is creating a common thesaurus and coding system to link terms across frameworks. The work is an example of an emerging taxonomy of social-emotional competencies and related tools that are proving useful[2].

FRAMEWORKS OFTEN HAVE DIFFERENT PURPOSES

As the American Institutes for Research (AIR) report[4] notes, frameworks are often created for different purposes. Here are four primary purposes of frameworks in SEL:

1. Summarize and Advance Theory and Research
2. Support Applied Practice
3. Define Key Competencies and Inform Development of Standards
4. Inform Assessment and Measurement

Many frameworks end up being used for multiple purposes. Knowing the original purpose of a framework as well as its type can be helpful in selecting and using one that will be most appropriate for your setting and initiative.

LISTS. Lists are simple frameworks created by selecting competencies or concepts with limited efforts to connect the concepts or systematically organize or comprehensively cover a topic. Lists pull out concepts that are deemed important and present them in ways that are memorable or focused to enable action. A variety of different considerations can be used in creating a list from practical to theoretical. The Susan Crown Exchange's list of six social-emotional constructs related to thriving[3] is one example.

Any given framework may meet the criteria for one or more of these different ways of organizing information. Theories and models are stronger at specifying the relationships between concepts and

[1] Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T. S., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners: The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C. A., Ehrlich, S. B., Heath, R. D., Johnson, D. W., Dickson, S., Turner, A. C., Mayo, A., & Hayes, K. (2015). *Foundations for young adult success: A developmental framework.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

[2] EASEL Lab (2017). *Taxonomy project.* Retrieved from https://easel.gse.harvard.edu/taxonomy-project

[3] Smith, C., McGovern, G., Larson, R., Hillaker, B., & Peck, S. C. (2016). *Preparing youth to thrive: Promising practices for social emotional learning.* David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. Washington, D.C.: Forum for Youth Investment. Retrieved from https://www.selpractices.org/resource/preparing-youth-to-thrive-methodology-and-findings-from-the-sel-challenge

[4] Berg, J., Osher, D., Same, M. R., Nolan, E., Benson, D., & Jacobs, N. (2017, December). *Identifying, defining, and measuring social and emotional competencies: Final Report.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Pages 33-36.

how they influence each other, while taxonomies are more exhaustive ways of grouping ideas, and lists tend to pull out the ideas or concepts deemed worthy of focused attention.

Why Frameworks Are Important

Why is it that frameworks of these different types and purposes are important in SEL work specifically? Here are four answers to consider. Perhaps you can think of others.

Because frameworks exist and are often commonly used shortcuts. Each of us uses frameworks every day to help us organize our world and our actions. We use frameworks that organize what is written and what we like to read (e.g., fiction versus nonfiction, mysteries, science fiction, biographies) as well as the food we eat (e.g., basic food groups and the Food Pyramid). We also use frameworks to organize our knowledge broadly (e.g., the social sciences, the physical sciences, and the biological sciences). Each framework helps us, individually and collectively, to organize how we think about, understand, and communicate about something important and to shape our actions (e.g., the Food Pyramid framework is used for balancing what goes on one's dinner plate to improve nutrition).

This also happens in SEL. For example, the National Research Council report organizes what they called "noncognitive" skills into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive in order to make sense of the wide variety of terms that were and are being used around 21st-century skills, many of which are social and emotional (intra- and interpersonal). For SEL, which has emerged from and often intersects with a number of different fields, it is often difficult to know what language to use, let alone identify specific competencies. As a study funded by the Wallace Foundation[5] notes , there are pros and cons to what overall language is used—from SEL to character development to 21st-century skills. As the work by the Harvard Taxonomy Project mentioned earlier shows, this is even more complex at the level of individual competencies, where the same words may mean different things and different words can mean essentially the same thing.

Because frameworks influence how we interpret information. Some frameworks are created for specific purposes and others are more informal ways we think about something. Both can shape our actions. For example, the Frameworks Institute has studied the variety of mental and cultural models people use to frame/make sense of what they hear and how it influences what they think should be done. In one example, the Frameworks Institute found that when people were presented with the problems young people encounter, such as drugs and delinquency, it triggered a deficit framework for thinking about young people. But when people were presented the ways young people contribute to their communities through service projects, it triggered an asset framework. The difference in which framework was triggered was then used to interpret information and significantly affected the degree to which adults support critical positive investments in young people[6]. Thus, these kinds of mental frames, when present or triggered, can significantly alter the receptivity to proposed actions. Learning

[5] Edge Research (2016) *Social and emotional learning: Feedback and communications Insights from the field.* Prepared for the Wallace Foundation available at https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/sel-feedback-and-communications-insights-from-the-field.aspx

[6] Joslyn, H. (2016, September). Words that change minds. *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 1-6.

to understand and work with people's informal mental frames and beginning to shape and select deliberate formal frameworks is important for effective implementation of any change, including efforts to improve SEL.

Because frameworks can shift how we think about our work. One SEL-related example of this that has made a difference in how we think about children and youth is the shift from primarily a deficit model to a prevention framing and then to a more strength-based framing that promotes building the strengths all children need—a more whole-child approach. Neither is right nor wrong, and both frameworks heavily use some of the same evidence. One, however, frames how to work with youth to prevent problems and build protective factors, while the other frames this work in terms of the skills and strengths we want to nurture in and surround young people with as they develop[7]. Such differences in frameworks can change how a community approaches supporting their young people—in the extreme from fearing the dangers that need to be prevented by specialists (such as drug use) to activating the whole community so everyone can support youth by becoming a caring adult or nurturing engagement in constructive activities. There can be major difference in how one approaches SEL if one thinks about it as universal competencies that all youth need versus as a way of identifying deficits that cause behavior problems and need intervention. Both involve SEL but frame the work very differently and can significantly influence who and what is used to drive, educate, and implement SEL efforts. Different SEL frameworks come out of each of these and many other traditions, such as specific cultural and equity frameworks[8].

> DIFFERENCES IN FRAMEWORKS CAN CHANGE HOW A COMMUNITY APPROACHES SUPPORTING THEIR YOUNG PEOPLE – IN THE EXTREME FROM FEARING THE DANGERS THAT NEED TO BE PREVENTED BY SPECIALISTS TO ACTIVATING THE WHOLE COMMUNITY SO EVERYONE CAN SUPPORT YOUTH.

Because frameworks can expand or contract who is involved. For example, while talking about children in poverty triggers a need for public support frame among advocates, it tends to trigger a different frame for typical voters, one that blames the parents for their poverty. This "blame the parents" frame works against creating public policies supporting children in poverty. However, when the language is changed, and issues are reframed around how difficult it is to parent and support children, and how much more difficult that is without resources, significantly more voters indicate they support public intervention.

Perhaps too often we frame SEL primarily as something that schools need to teach and ignore the role that families and community activities can play in children's development. This may be particularly problematic if people's informal mental frames suggest that developing SEL skills is

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[7] Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., Scales, P. C., & Blyth, D. A. (1998). Beyond the 'village' rhetoric: Creating healthy communities for children and adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science*, 2(3): 138-159. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads0203_3

[8] Berg, J., Osher, D., Same, M. R., Nolan, E., Benson, D., & Jacobs, N. (2017, December). *Identifying, defining, and measuring social and emotional competencies.* Washington, D.C.: American Institutes of Research. Retrieved from http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Identifying-Defining-and-Measuring-Social-and-Emotional-Competencies-December-2017-rev.pdf

naturally the role of families. By acknowledging and engaging families and the wider community around the importance of these skills and the ways they contribute to how they are learned and develop, there may be less opposition to schools playing appropriate, active, and complementary roles.

Because frameworks can help us align multiple efforts. Finally, when a group can consistently use a framework to think about, problem-solve, design strategies and approaches, select programs and curriculum, identify appropriate measures, inform training, and shape practice, it serves to align these efforts in intentional ways that are more likely to be effective. If the people responsible for each of these areas in a school district are using different frameworks, the work may be less likely to achieve the desired impact. In the case of SEL, if the state sets SEL standards using one framework but districts select programs and curriculum using a different framework, and the research department assesses SEL using yet a third framework, while teachers and staff are trained into yet another framework, the pieces are not aligned and efforts to improve young people's social and emotional competencies are likely to be less powerful.

In essence, frameworks are important because we use them to structure and organize how we think about our world, how we process information, how we communicate with others, and how we can proactively shape and align the ways we work individually and together to make a difference. If we want to help people understand social-emotional learning, use evidence-based practices, communicate with stakeholders as well as other staff, and use assessment data to improve their efforts to support young people's social-emotional competencies, frameworks are an essential tool.

Three Specific Ways Frameworks Are Useful

One key way a framework is useful is in establishing a foundation and making important distinctions that help us organize and sort information. This sorting and organizing helps us to better understand an area and the evidence supporting it and to recall and use the information effectively. One reason people use both informal mental frames and formal frameworks is to help them sort through and organize all the information they get so they can better make sense of it. Information that fits frames is generally more easily recalled and used in ways that influence practice while information that does not fit frames is less likely to be remembered and used—and can even be distorted. For example, in some cases, frames can be seen as "eating" inconsistent data rather than, as some might hope, having the new data help a person change their framework. Using frameworks to help people organize and sort the information you present helps people who need to work together to organize and sort information in roughly similar ways, which is critical to effective implementation. Frameworks are one critical tool for doing so, especially for policy and system leaders shaping what

they expect and want to see done.

A second key way frameworks are used is to communicate evidence and priorities effectively with others. If everyone has his or her own framework/filing system, it's difficult to work together consistently. Sharing a common framework makes it easier to communicate consistently with others. The framework provides a common language and way of mentally, visually, and linguistically organizing where information is placed. It can help everyone file and draw resources out of the shared system. This makes it easier to teach others about SEL competencies—for example, whether through professional development for practitioners, sharing with key stakeholders like parents and board members, or working directly with young people. To be clear, using frameworks this way does not mean there must be only one framework for the entire field. Rather it stresses the importance of a clear framework that can be used consistently in the state, district, school, classroom, or organization and program that most need to work together to make a difference. Thus, it is not about finding the single right framework for the field, but rather finding the right framework for your particular purpose, context, population, and level.

The third key way frameworks are useful is to help us focus, align, and mobilize our specific action efforts. In the case of SEL, frameworks may help us to balance both social and emotional competencies or note both intra- and interpersonal factors as we work with young people. They can provide language we can use consistently to develop expectations, norms, and routines that are key to developing and accessing competencies. Frameworks are often designed to make certain dimensions more memorable through language and analogies that help people use the ideas behind them more effectively in their work.

> WE NEED CLEAR AND CONSISTENT WAYS TO TALK ABOUT THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES NEEDED FOR SUCCESS.

Strong frameworks provide a foundation—a system and language for aligning efforts. Just as education systems often align teaching strategies, curriculum, and assessment to state or national standards (an example of a framework), SEL frameworks can help make sure that what we seek to accomplish in developing social and emotional competencies is aligned with the theoretical and research evidence and informs the strategies, programs, and activities we use, as well as how we assess and use data to improve efforts.

All these uses of frameworks help to illustrate why they are so important to effective teaching and learning. When there are too many different frameworks in a field or in use in a particular setting, it is hard to communicate or coordinate and align efforts, let alone mobilize effectively. Imagine receiving health care from people who do not have a common way of thinking about what your health issue is, let alone align that diagnosis with appropriate treatments—or ending up with a framework that does not fit your context, culture, and needs (e.g., medical professionals that use predominately a

ACTIVITIES TO CONSIDER

1. Think of a framework somewhere in your life and how you use it yourself and with others to get things done. It may be a framework such as a teaching or grading rubric or a framework you use when planning a family or business trip. How are these frameworks useful to you? How do they help you work with others in planning or doing things?

2. Think about your work in SEL and which of the three uses of frameworks is currently strongest and which is a constant challenge? How might this relate to the presence or absence of clear frameworks in your work or in the field as a whole?

surgical approach versus a more holistic lifestyle approach to health that the patient may prefer). Just as health care requires frameworks that define health, we need clear and consistent ways to talk about the social and emotional skills and competencies needed for success.

In the next brief in this series, SEL Frameworks - Practical Challenges and Opportunities, we examine current challenges facing SEL efforts as a result of the many frameworks and inconsistent uses of language in the SEL field, as well as opportunities for addressing these challenges.

About the Authors

DALE A. BLYTH
University of Minnesota

Dr. Dale Blyth is a senior research consultant and advisor who recently retired as Extension Professor in the College of Education & Human Development at the University of Minnesota, where he served as the Howland Endowed Chair in Youth Development Leadership and Senior Research Fellow with the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement. For 15 years, he served as Associate Dean directing the Center for Youth Development. Recently he led an initiative to advance social and emotional learning outcomes. He serves on several community, state, and national groups related to out-of-school time, data systems, and youth development.

STEPHANIE JONES
Harvard University

Stephanie Jones' research, anchored in prevention science, focuses on the effects of poverty and exposure to violence on children and youth's social, emotional, and behavioral development. Over the last 10 years her work has focused on both evaluation research addressing the impact of preschool and elementary focused social-emotional learning interventions on behavioral and academic outcomes and classroom practices; as well as new curriculum development, implementation, and testing.

TERERA BOROWSKI
University of Illinois at Chicago

Teresa Borowski is a graduate student at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) in the Community and Prevention Research Ph.D. program in the Psychology Department. She works as a research specialist with the UIC Social and Emotional Learning Research Group and with CASEL's research team. Prior to UIC, Teresa worked as a research assistant on a National Science Foundation project at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, as a research experimenter and observer in the Infant Cognition Lab, and for the Learning and Memory Lab at the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology.

The Measuring SEL Series of Frameworks Briefs

The *Establishing Practical Social-Emotional Competence Assessments of Preschool to High School Students* project as guided by the Assessment Work Group (AWG) is dedicated to helping advance the effective use of data to inspire practice in SEL. In deciding how the AWG could best contribute to advancing the field and complement rather than compete with other efforts underway to address the challenges of multiple frameworks and inconsistent use of language, the AWG Frameworks Subgroup, led by Stephanie Jones and Roger Weissberg, developed four series of briefs designed for practitioners. Each series and each brief in the series is designed to help advance how people think about the issues and make reasonable choices that work best for them and their context. We hope they provide a set of "building blocks" that systems and practitioners can use to advance and improve their SEL efforts. Learn more at https://measuringsel.casel.org

Introductory Series	Comparative Series	Special Issues Series	Descriptive Series
These briefs are about what frameworks are, how they are useful, the challenges and opportunities they present in practice, and defining criteria that are helpful when considering what frameworks to use.	These briefs explore efforts underway to categorize and align ways of thinking about comparing unique frameworks. The briefs also describe tools available to aid systems and practitioners in their selection and use of a framework.	These briefs identify critical issues that frameworks must address or that influence how they are used that are important to consider when selecting and using frameworks, such as equity and SEL, and developmental considerations.	These briefs each describe an individual framework currently in use. They are intended to illustrate how frameworks can be analyzed and help practitioners learn to evaluate frameworks on the types of criteria that matter most in their settings. *(The briefs are not an endorsement of these frameworks.)*

The Assessment Work Group is committed to advancing dialogue on key issues in the field and stating a perspective when appropriate. The views and opinions expressed in these briefs reflect the general position of the Assessment Work Group. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of CASEL or any of the individual organizations involved with the work group.