

SEL Appendix C: Conceptual Framework for SEL

Michael H. Molenda
May 2020

Search for a Conceptual Framework

The early SEL literature, stimulated by the construct of “emotional intelligence,” tended to look for conceptual framing by looking at the linkages between EI and cognitive and social factors. There was not much attention to framing in the early years of SEL

Framework Ingredients: Domains of Learning

There is little discussion within the early SEL literature of “domains of learning” or taxonomies of learning. There is more in the recent literature, but it is not very penetrating.

There is also little acknowledgment of the distinction between *implicit* and *explicit* learning, although some authors do claim that SEL skills require explicit instruction. Elias (2006) makes the clearest claim for explicit teaching:

“Social-emotional and life skills **must be taught explicitly at the elementary and secondary levels. Like reading or math**, if social-emotional skills are not taught systematically, they will not be internalized and become part of a child’s lifelong repertoire of valued activities” (7).

National Research Council taxonomy

A document that is not part of the SEL literature, but is referenced in it, does make an effort to put SEL-type activities into a framework of domains of learning (National Research Council 2012).

The context is the search to identify “21st Century skills” for American school children. In seeking a helpful classification system, the NRC, rather naively, refers, first to Bloom’s taxonomy of 1956—ignoring the 2001 update of Bloom by Anderson and others (Anderson, et al. 2001). Then, they accept only Bloom’s **cognitive domain**—mentioning but then ignoring the affective and psychomotor domains.

Next, the NRC adds the “**intrapersonal**” domain, comparing it to the affective domain, but accepting the “intrapersonal” label without further justification (they don’t mention Emotional Intelligence). Finally, they add the “**interpersonal**” domain, again without extensive discussion. They then state that these three domains were the ones identified in any earlier (2011) NRC workshop.

Later in the same paper, the authors switch, referring to **cognitive and non-cognitive** competencies. Later they add a “personality” taxonomy, featuring “The Big Five” personality factors (derived from an analysis of various dictionaries in the 1930s, to find constructs that were widely used to derive people’s personalities [seriously??]).

The NRC then took a list of 35 “21st Century skills” gleaned from earlier OECD and NRC reports and categorized them into the 3 original categories: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. To each cluster that was identified they added the “**main personality factor.**” The final result is a “proposed taxonomy of 21st Century competencies.” It looks “taxonomy-ish,” but it doesn’t lead to a discussion of hierarchies or stages or learning requirements.

A recent Issue Brief from Penn State (Dusenbury and Weissberg April 2017) cites 5 “competency clusters” as defined by CASEL:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

Perhaps because of the ubiquity of CASEL in the SEL literature, this is a frequently encountered “typology” of SEL competencies. However, it is not deconstructed in terms of learning domains or learning processes.

Dusenbury and Weissberg conclude their brief overview of SEL with list of “best practices” distilled from the literature (April 2017, 6):

“Four distinct, but often inter-related, approaches are effective in promoting social and emotional development:

1. **Free-standing lessons that provide step-by-step instructions to teach students’ SEL competencies** (e.g., lessons that help students identify and effectively label their feelings, lessons on goal setting, communication, and decision making).
2. **General teaching practices that create conditions in the classroom and school designed to support SEL.** These include classroom routines and teaching practices such as cooperative learning that help students build positive relationships and forms of inquiry that create student-to student dialogue to help students reflect and develop greater self and social awareness.
3. **Integration of SEL skill instruction, general teaching practices, or both, as part of a broader academic curriculum.** For example, integrating SEL lessons with language arts, social studies, or science and math.
4. **Establishment of school-wide organizational structures and policies,** as well as leadership, to support SEL systemically.”

Note that this list does not correlate closely with the “competency clusters” specified in the same paper. However, this list of “best practices” can be parsed to detect where they might fit in an actual conceptual framework:

- #1 implies explicit instruction in, mainly, “emotional intelligence” skills.
- #2 implies implicit learning via immersion in methods that promote collaboration and reflective expressions...and modifications made in the Classroom Environment
- #3 implies explicit instruction, but embedded in academic subjects, not taught separately
- #4 implies interventions at the School Environment level.

Another stab at developing a taxonomy of “domains” is found below in Table 1, which evolved out of a study of possible “frameworks.”

Existing Conceptual Frameworks

The more recent literature from think tanks is much more serious about wanting to find a conceptual framework for SEL. Indeed, that is a major purpose of one of AIR’s occasional papers (Berg, Osher and Same, et al. December 2017). They find that “The multitude of frameworks in the literature highlights the great interest in identifying and organizing competencies, and it also presents a challenge to building a common language” (4). They find literally **dozens** of so-called frameworks, relating to EI, SEL, and the myriad spinoffs such as “workforce soft skills,” “21st-Century skills,” and the like.

Lippman’s conceptual schema. A typical example, one that is often cited by other think-tank papers is (Lippman, et al. June 2015). This paper is aimed at workforce development in a USAID context. The authors do a conscientious job of reviewing the literature and come up with a **list of domains** that encompasses the consensus on “soft skills:”

1. An intrapersonal/personal qualities skills domain
2. An interpersonal skills domain
3. A cognitive skills and attitudes domain, and sometimes
4. A technical skills/knowledge domain (32).

Notice that #1 seems to include a combination of skills and personality traits.

Notice that #3 combines cognitive skills and attitudes—usually viewed as different domains.

Lippman et al. then go on to propose a **conceptual schema** that is shaped like a star, with a different cluster of skills at each point:

- higher-order thinking skills
- communication
- positive self-concept
- self-control
- social skills (33)

This is fine, but not clearly related to the list of elements they identified in the lit review.

AIR analyzes frameworks. Returning to the AIR report by Berg, Osher, Same, Nolan, Benson, and Jacobs (December 2017); it goes on to categorize dozens of “frameworks,” according to the field of interest they originate in (actually 136 frameworks in 14 areas of study). Of most interest to us are: school-based competency development, psychology, and character education.

The AIR team go on to do a content analysis of all 136 frameworks, using the taxonomy developed by Stephanie M. Jones and The Taxonomy Project at Harvard (see more below). Their six “domains” are:

1. cognitive regulation
2. emotional processes
3. interpersonal processes
- plus three more, which do not appear to be parallel to the first three:
4. values
5. perspectives
6. identity/self-image.

See an expansion of this list below:

Table 1— Domains and Sub-Domains of SEL

Domain	Sub-Domains	Examples of competencies
Cognitive regulation	attention control	pays attention uses listening skills
	inhibitory control	controls emotional and behavioral responses in pursuit of short- and long-term goals
	cognitive flexibility	ability to think about multiple concepts simultaneously (creativity; responsible decision-making)
	critical thinking	analyzing, reasoning, evaluating, making judgments weigh evidence fairly, willing to change mind
Emotional processes	emotional knowledge & expression	understands one’s own emotions
	emotional & behavioral regulation	suppresses immediate reactions
	empathy/ perspective-taking	understanding others’ feelings being helpful and agreeable
Interpersonal processes	understanding social cues	being aware of others, reading cues acting in appropriate manner
	conflict resolution/ social prob.-solving	manage, mediate, and resolve conflicts
	prosocial/cooperative behavior	working effectively and respectfully in teams
Values	ethical values	“character education,” including fairness, honesty, equality beliefs about a higher purpose
	performance values	achievement motivation self-discipline maintain focus on goals
	civic values	civic consciousness; adherence to a shared system of beliefs
Perspectives	optimism	being hopeful about & having agency to affect future resilience through adversity
	gratitude	recognizing benefits received; being thankful; expressing thanks
	openness	receptivity to new situations intercultural understanding adaptability, ability to bounce back
	enthusiasm/zest	energetic participation in life
Identity/Self-Image	self-knowledge	assess personal strengths & weakness self-confidence

	purpose	positive orientation to future
	self-efficacy	belief in ability to succeed
	self-esteem	positive sense of self

Note that it is not clear what the items in Table 1 represent—outcomes of SEL? Inputs to SEL? Components of SEL? Or a mixture of all the above.

Note also that Table 1 is not a “framework,” nor does it necessarily include all the elements that would go into a framework.

It is just a list, derived by means of a content analysis of a list of items mentioned in various versions of SEL.

OECD Research Project has a Framework

The OECD is in the middle of a major international project, called SSES, evaluating the outcomes of SEL programs in 10 cities in 9 different countries. It is an ambitious project with a great deal of planning devoted to its conceptualization. It was actually supposed to be conducted in the Fall of 2019, with findings reported late in 2020.

“Big Five” as conceptual framework. The paper explaining the conceptual framework (Kankaraš and Suarez-Alvarez October 2019) spends a dozen pages on justifying **“The Big Five” personality dimensions** as the framework for this research project.

From a strictly logical standpoint, this makes little sense, and others have raised this criticism regarding other documents proposing to use the Big Five as a conceptual framework. There are many reasons to be dubious, beginning with how the Big Five were derived back in the 1930s—not from any empirical examination of human behavior, but from dictionary content analysis. Second, these personality factors were intended to describe adults, not children. Third, these personality factors are intended to be viewed as explanatory causes for observed behavior—inputs, not outputs. They were NOT viewed as learned capabilities.

Input factors as outcomes. How can the decision by Kankaraš and Suarez-Alvarez be justified?

Of course, personality traits are found to have some correlation with life success. It is easy to see personality traits as inputs or causes of educational or societal success. But OECD is using these traits as OUTCOMES of the study. They are saying that the best way to organize the anticipated outcomes of SEL is to measure factors derived from the Big Five model.

First, the authors have added “sub-domains” to the five main “domains.” These sub-domains are plucked from various lists of SEL factors, not necessarily from the Personality Theory literature. So, the items to be measured are actually an eclectic mix of apples and oranges, inputs and outputs.

Second, there is dispute in the SEL literature as to the direction of causality of many of the factors frequently discussed in the literature. It may be reasonable to view them as **mutually influenced** (e.g., does collaborative behavior lead to the formation of Trust? Or does Trust enable collaborative behavior?)

Relevance problem. If one were to accept the “Big Five” conceptual framework proposed by Kankaraš and Suarez-Alvarez, and if one were to accept those personality traits as dependent variables, you have a relevance problem. That is, the point of SEL is to improve academic achievement or the accomplishment of other valued “life skills,” such as employability. If you are measuring, for example, self-control, tolerance, and trust as your dependent variables, of what relevance is that to the purported purpose of SEL? That is, it is the goal of an SEL intervention program to improve some of the learner’s personality traits, such as persistence or tolerance or trust?? Or is it to improve the learner’s academic or real-world success?

Stephanie Jones and the EASEL website.

As mentioned on p. 3 of the “SEL Notes” document, Stephanie Jones’s EASEL website and Taxonomy Project are currently the best source of “conceptual frameworks,” such as they are. In my opinion, the closest thing to a comprehensive framework is that offered by Jones in (Jones and Bouffard 2012).

Works Cited

- Anderson, Lorin W., David R. Krathwohl, Peter W. Airasian, Kathleen A. Cruikshank, Richard E. Mayer, Paul R. Pintrich, James Rath, and Merlin C. Wittrock, . 2001. *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Complete edition.* New York: Longman.
- Berg, Juliette, David Osher, Deborah Moroney, and Nicholas Yoder. February 2017. *The Intersection of School Climate and Social and Emotional Development.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research (AIR).
- Berg, Juliette, David Osher, Michelle R. Same, Elizabeth Nolan, Deaweh Benson, and Naomi Jacobs. December 2017. *Identifying, Defining, and Measuring Social and Emotional Competencies. Final Report.* Washington DC: American Institutes for Research (AIR), 264.
- Dusenbury, Linda, and Roger P. Weissberg. April 2017. *Social Emotional Learning in Elementary School: Preparations for Success.* Issue Brief, Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 12. Accessed April 29, 2020. <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2017/04/social-emotional-learning-in-elementary-school.html>.
- Elias, Maurice J. 2006. "The Connection between Academic and Social-Emotional Learning." Chap. 1 in *The Educator’s Guide to Emotional Intelligence and Academic Achievement*, edited by Maurice J. Elias and Harriett Arnold, 4-14. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Elias, Maurice J., and Harriett Arnold, . 2006. *The Educator’s Guide to Emotional Intelligence and Academic Achievement.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Goleman, Daniel. 1995. *Emotional Intelligence.* New York: Bantam Books.

- Jones, Stephanie M., and Suzanne M. Bouffard. 2012. "Social and Emotional Learning in Schools from Programs to Strategies." *Social Policy Report* 26 (4): 1-22. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED540203.pdf>.
- Kankaraš, Miloš, and Javier Suarez-Alvarez. October 2019. *Assessment Framework for the OECD Study on Social and Emotional Skills*. Education Working Paper No. 207, Paris: OECD.
- Lippman, Laura H., Renee Ryberg, Rachel Carney, and Kristin A. Moore. June 2015. *Workforce Connections: Key Soft Skills that Foster Youth Workforce Success—Towards a Consensus Across Fields*. Child Trends Publication No. 2015-24, Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, Inc., 56. Accessed April 29, 2020. <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/workforce-connections-soft-skills-small.pdf>.
- Mayer, John D., David R. Caruso, and Peter Salovey. 2016. "The Ability Model of Emotional Intelligence: Principles and Updates." *Emotion Review* 8: 1-11. Accessed April 24, 2020. doi:10.1177/1754073916639667.
- National Research Council. 2012. "A Preliminary Classification of Skills and Abilities." Chap. 2 in *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*, 21-36. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Accessed April 24, 2020. doi:10.17226/133398.
- Osher, David, Yael Kidron, Marc Brackett, Allison Dymnicki, Stephanie Jones, and Roger P. Weissberg. 2016. "(Chapter 17) Advancing the Science and Practice of Social and Emotional Learning: Looking Back and Moving Forward." *Review of Research in Education* 40: 644-681. Accessed May 1, 2020. doi:10.3102/0091732X16673595.
- Salovey, Peter, Marja Kokkonen, Paulo N. Lopes, and John D. Mayer. 2004. "Emotional Intelligence: What Do We Know?" Chap. 19 in *Feelings and Emotions: The Amsterdam Symposium*, edited by Antony S.R. Manstead, Nico Frijda and Agneta Fischer, 321-340. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.