

Tools for Selecting & Aligning International Frameworks for Social, Emotional, and Related Skills¹

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INTRODUCTION

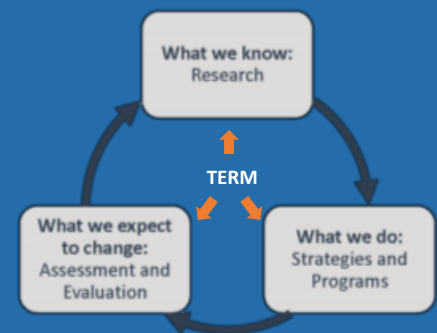
Supporting children and young people to develop social, emotional, and related skills is critical for developing responsible citizens, ending poverty and conflict, and achieving global sustainability. Research shows that these skills are important to many areas of development, including learning, health, and wellbeing (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Moffitt et al, 2011) and may be especially relevant for children and youth around the world who face chronic stress related to poverty, violence, and discrimination (e.g., Alexander, Boothby, & Wessells, 2010; INEE, 2016). Yet, many in the field have expressed concern about the lack of precision with which we discuss and measure them. This brief describes the way our team has responded to this challenge through the creation of the Taxonomy Project and in particular, what we have learned by expanding the project to include global and international frameworks for social, emotional, and related skills. It includes a demonstration of the Taxonomy Project's online tools, which are designed to help stakeholders connect and compare frameworks across the broad non-academic field, as well as key learnings from international stakeholders related to the contextualization of frameworks. Finally, the brief concludes by sharing next steps for the Taxonomy Project and the field.

The Challenge

Social, emotional, and related skills are referred to by many names (including social and emotional learning (SEL), 21st century skills, life skills, soft skills, citizenship education, etc.) and there is a lack of consensus about which skills are

Words Matter: Translating Research into Practice

As NGOs, schools, governments, and intergovernmental organizations around the world increasingly seek to embed social, emotional, and related skills into the fabric of learning environments, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers need to know what has been shown to be effective.



In a well-functioning relationship between research and practice (above), there is a clear link between what research says about how the outcome we hope to influence is related to a particular construct (the evidence), how we plan to develop that construct in children and youth (the strategy), and how we will measure it to determine if our efforts were successful (the evaluation).

Importantly, it is the *words* we use – the specific terms and the meaning, or definitions, we ascribe to them – that maintain those connections.

Without greater clarity and a mechanism for making connections between the many perspectives in the field, we risk creating and implementing ineffective interventions, and conducting research that is imprecise and inconclusive.

¹Portions of this brief have been adapted from "Introduction to the Taxonomy Project" (Jones, Bailey, Brush & Nelson, 2018).

important, what they should be called, and whether and how they relate to each other. This is in part because the domain is so broad and diverse; it is structured around a large number of frameworks (i.e. organizing models/systems that guide policy and practice such as CASEL, Developmental Assets, Big 5 personality traits, etc.) that sometimes define and describe skills using different – or even contradictory – language (Reeves & Venator, 2014). This challenge leads to imprecision and variability in how constructs are measured and promoted in both research and intervention contexts (Jones, Zaslow, Darling-Churchill, & Halle, 2016), and threatens to undermine high-quality work in the field: without clarity about which skills matter most and what evidence tells us about how to promote them, we risk designing interventions, measurement tools, or policies in ways that do not accurately reflect what we know and waste precious time and resources (see “Words Matter” box on p.1).

Relevance to the International Landscape

Several recent research efforts have highlighted the lack of clarity and precision used to name, define, and describe social, emotional, and related skills around the world. For example, while an increasing number of countries mention social, emotional, and related skills in their policy documents, there is wide variation in the detail with which they are defined (Care et al., 2016). Additionally, many programs with an explicit focus on social, emotional, and related skills fail to clearly state the specific skills they are designed to improve, and moreover, few impact evaluations measure them (Sánchez Puerta et al., 2016). A recent joint scoping study conducted in East Africa and India found a lack of clear definitions and assessment guidelines for life skills in the two regions and saw that the words used to describe skills (e.g., 21st century skills, transferable skills, employability skills, etc.) were often used interchangeably (Wamahiu & Bapna, 2019).

In an effort to gain clarity, many organizations and initiatives working globally or in specific regions have sought to identify and categorize important skills, including by developing their own, new frameworks based on existing literature and commonly used frameworks (Bapna et al., 2017; Gates et al., 2016; Lippman et al., 2015). Unfortunately, there is limited literature describing how social, emotional, and related skills are conceptualized across diverse global contexts (Castro-Olivo & Merrell, 2012; Garner et al., 2014). Despite recent interest in embedding competencies such as SEL, life skills, and psychosocial support within international education standards and practices (INEE, 2018; IRC, 2018; Varela, Kelcey, Reyes, Gould, & Sklar, 2013), the vast majority of research comes from U.S. or other Western contexts and more work is required to determine whether this research (a) accurately reflects the competencies needed for success in other cultures and contexts, and (b) will translate effectively across diverse settings (Castro-Olivo & Merrell, 2012; Garner et al., 2014). Some key cultural and contextual considerations include attention to: crisis and conflict-affected settings, gender norms and expectations, developmental perspectives, the role of informal economies, and the sociopolitical environment. Many in the international education sector have called for increased research and inquiry into how social, emotional, and related skills are conceptualized, developed, and measured in both formal and informal learning settings internationally (INEE, 2016; IRC, 2016). In other words, when considering the global landscape, there are a number of questions about the meaning as well as the cultural and contextual fit of existing skills, as they are currently defined. Increased understanding of the nuanced and varied ways that skills are defined across

disciplines and contexts, and where and when they overlap or differ, may therefore have particular salience and benefit for work in international settings.

THE TAXONOMY PROJECT: A ROSETTA STONE FOR THE FIELD

In response, our team at the Harvard Graduate School of Education has been working on the Taxonomy Project, which was mounted to develop and design a set of online tools that serve as a "Rosetta Stone" for the field (Jones, Bailey, Brush & Nelson, 2018). Much like the Rosetta Stone enabled historians to discover connections between ancient alphabets, the Taxonomy Project is designed to support stakeholders to make sense of and navigate between different frameworks in the field, regardless of differences in terminology. Our team developed a rigorous coding system that, when applied to frameworks, can be used to identify related skills across them, thus linking terms by how they are defined rather than what they are called. The coding system captures whether/when the various competencies described within each framework align with 550+ common social, emotional, and related skills (e.g., "identifies emotions in others") across 23 sub-domains (e.g., empathy/perspective-taking, conflict resolution/social problem-solving, etc.) and 6 broad domains (e.g., cognitive, emotion, social, etc.). We then calculate the similarity between every possible term-pair based on how many overlapping codes they received.

The resulting database of frameworks and terms – or taxonomy – feeds into the Explore SEL website, a set of interactive, online tools that allow those doing the work of the field to easily see where the terms and definitions used to describe important skills across different frameworks are the same or different, regardless of how they are labeled or named. These tools are intended to support stakeholders to select an approach that aligns with their vision and goals, and to understand where that approach is situated within the field and how it ties into the efforts of others doing similar work.

Suite of Online Tools

Framework Profiles

"Look inside Frameworks"

Learn more about widely-used social, emotional, and related frameworks and compare skills and features across them.

Three Visual Tools

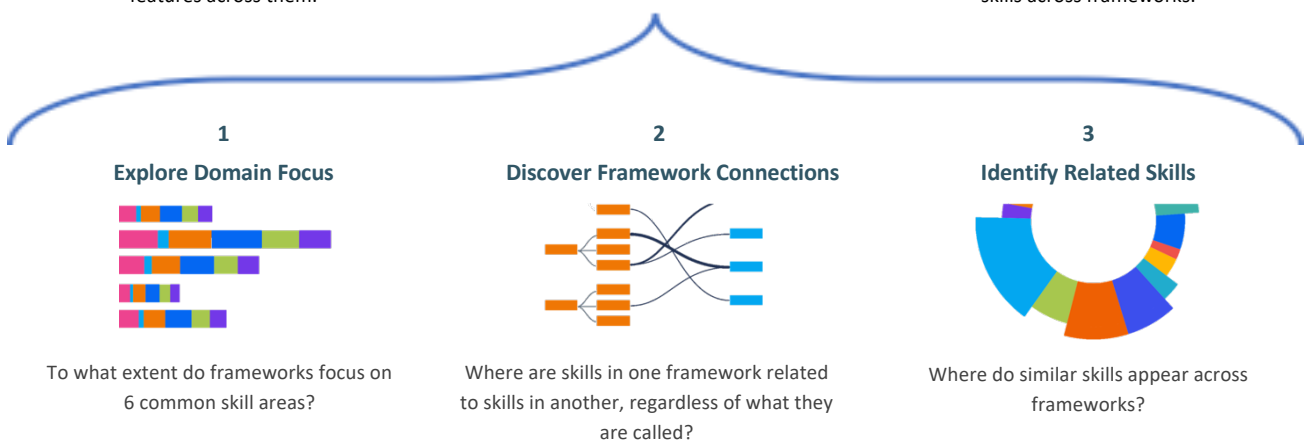
"Compare Frameworks"

Use a set of interactive visual tools to identify similarities and differences across widely-used frameworks.

Thesaurus

"Search for Skills"

Search a thesaurus of 200+ terms used to describe social, emotional, and related skills and identify related skills across frameworks.



Importantly, the taxonomy is agnostic to brand and viewpoint; it is designed to maintain the integrity of each framework while providing a system for comparing constructs and communicating across them. Our hope is that this project will lead to greater clarity and precision when translating research into practice, as well as increased coordination and collaboration throughout the non-academic field.

The central goal of Taxonomy Project is to produce a set of field-facing tools that **align and advance the “non-academic” field** by improving:

***Effectiveness**

Encourages and enables those working in the field to be clear and precise about the skills they are researching, developing, and measuring, leading to more effective and impactful research and practice throughout the field as a whole.

***Accessibility**

Brings together the work of many disciplines so that everyone can access, understand, and use available information about the field and infuse it into their own work.

***Coordination**

Enables researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to carefully coordinate and align work across frameworks, ages, and settings – ultimately maximizing field-wide impact.

***Communication**

Facilitates communication and alignment across different research areas and/or stakeholder groups in ways that enable stakeholders to effectively learn from and collaborate with those doing similar work.

THE INTERNATIONAL EXPANSION: ADDING GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS TO THE TAXONOMY

We began the Taxonomy Project by coding a small set of frameworks primarily designed for use in the United States, and now, with support from Echidna Giving, have expanded the project to include a set of international frameworks used globally or in specific regions, countries, and contexts around the world. Out of our database of 40 frameworks, 25 are developed for or used commonly in international contexts. Currently, much of the research on social, emotional, and related skills comes from U.S. or Western contexts. In expanding the scope of the Taxonomy Project beyond the United States, we hope to support the international education ecosystem by generating a more accurate, transparent, and comprehensive reflection of SEL from a global perspective, enabling global actors to more effectively define, discuss, promote, and assess social, emotional, and related life skills that are most important to their contexts.

Research Process and Methods

Our research process and methods included (a) identifying key international frameworks through a combination of desk research and key informant interviews with 35 stakeholders in the field of international and comparative education (see criteria for inclusion in our analysis below), (b) coding frameworks and the specific skills/competencies within them, (c) creating detailed profiles for each framework, and (d) updating our set of online tools accordingly. During the coding process, updates to our original data collection and coding system were also made to accommodate new ways of discussing/defining skills in various contexts and cultures.

A Focus on Context and Culture

A core component of the international expansion of the Taxonomy Project was to enhance the field's understanding of how culture and context influence the way social, emotional, and related skills are conceptualized, defined, discussed, and implemented across diverse international settings. Therefore, in addition to using the key informant interviews to identify frameworks, we also analyzed interview transcripts to gain insight into how skills are understood and approached from a global perspective, with a particular focus on cultural relevance and contextualization. Our analysis of the key informant interviews revealed five common themes and lessons from the field described later in this brief.

Framework Criteria for Inclusion in International Expansion

Each of the 25 frameworks selected for inclusion in the international expansion met the following criteria:

- Representative of a wide range of cultures, contexts, age groups, and disciplines
- Widely adopted, adapted, or referenced by educators, researchers, and policymakers in the field (i.e., those frequently cited in our interviews and desk research), or, those less commonly cited but specific to an under-represented geographic region or population
- Code-able (i.e., includes accessible materials that explicitly define individual skills, traits, competencies, strengths, behaviors, etc.)
- Available in English

FRAMEWORKS: WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT, AND WHAT DO THEY INCLUDE?

One way to learn more about how skills are conceptualized and defined by different stakeholders in the international field is to look carefully at frameworks. A framework can be understood as an organizing system, a blueprint, or a roadmap that communicates to researchers, policymakers, practitioners, program developers, funders, and other stakeholders what is important. In other words, a framework tells us what we are aiming for: what outcomes we should or can expect from any program, strategy, or practice.

What is a Framework?

Our team thinks about a framework as an organizing system, a blueprint, or roadmap that tells the user what they should be looking for.

In the case of social, emotional, and related skills, this means the kind of knowledge, skills, and attitudes you should expect to see in children and youth and when you should expect to see them across development. Another way of saying this is that a framework tells us what we are aiming for. It tells us what outcomes we should or can expect from any program, strategy, or practice.

What Makes a Good a Framework?

In our view, a good framework is considered to be:

- (a) **concrete** – it describes what one should expect to see in children’s (and adult’s) behavior, and it provides a clear set of reasonable short- and long-term outcomes;
- (b) **clear** – it employs terminology that is both transparent and linked in clear ways to measurement/assessment on the one hand and to strategies and practices on the other;
- (c) **empirically grounded** – it makes clear the evidence that links the skills and competencies included within the framework to specific outcomes that promote or predict success in school, work, and life;
- (d) **developmental and contextual** – it highlights what is salient (i.e., growing or emerging) at different developmental periods and links its concepts and constructs to age-specific and context-relevant demands and opportunities; and
- (e) **culturally sensitive and equitable** – meaning it acknowledges that the skills needed for success (and how they are understood, prioritized, developed, and expressed) vary across contexts and cultures, and explicitly addresses or incorporates racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, and linguistic considerations into its design.

These criteria also align with recommendations made by leaders in the field (e.g., the Assessment Working Group (AWG) via Blyth & Borowski, 2018) who emphasize the need for frameworks to be conceptually clear in order for stakeholders to develop, select, or adapt them to guide their work.

Why are frameworks important?

Frameworks carry a great deal of weight and influence because they distill ways of thinking and prioritizing that guide policy and practice. As one of the most common ways of communicating about and organizing social, emotional and related skills, they are often used to guide an organization, program, or funder’s approach to the domain. Therefore, frameworks have a great deal of influence over which skills and outcomes are prioritized, addressed, and measured. However, there are a great number of frameworks to choose from, and though they are similar and overlapping in some ways, they are not all the same. Frameworks vary considerably in their purpose, scope, structure, level of detail, and the extent to which they address issues of development, context, and diversity. Furthermore, they differ in which skills they emphasize and in the terms they use to describe them.

This diversity is ultimately helpful; different frameworks have different purposes for different settings, and each framework adds to the conversation. However, no single framework can be used to solve every problem or meet every need. The question, then, is how can one better understand different frameworks, including how they are related and how they are different, in order to communicate and collaborate effectively across disciplines; to identify a framework that meets the specific focus and needs of any particular setting or stakeholder; and to carefully translate research into practice in ways that align learning, assessment, and intended outcomes? The Taxonomy Project is designed to address this question.

What do frameworks include?

For each framework included in the Taxonomy Project, our team created an online **framework profile** to show what is inside the framework. These profiles are found on each framework’s page on the Explore SEL website. The framework profiles summarize the purpose, design, and key features of each framework and include information about the types of information and resources they provide to address important considerations such as development, context and culture, associated outcomes, measurement, programming, and more. For each profile, we collected the following information, summarized in Table 1 below, which can help stakeholders determine whether a framework is well-aligned with specific needs, goals, or contexts.

Table 1. Framework profile contents

FRAMEWORK PROFILE	FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW							
	Developer		Key Parameters		Level of Detail			
	Name	Type of Organization	Age	Setting	Framework	Skills	Observable behaviors	Learning Progression
	TREE DIAGRAM: LIST OF SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES							
	KEY CONSIDERATIONS							
	Developmental Perspective			Context & Culture			Associated Outcomes	
	AVAILABLE RESOURCES							
	Support Materials			Programs & Strategies			Measurement Tools	

These descriptive profiles of individual frameworks make it possible to understand “at-a-glance” what is in each framework. Profiles also indicate the extent and depth of information provided about the framework and skills it describes, including whether it includes information about observable behaviors or learning progressions that can support policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to recognize and sequence the development of concrete behaviors or skills. Some frameworks are highly specific and explained in great detail, while others are meant to be generalizable across multiple settings and thus described at a higher level. The **Framework Overview** section includes basic information summarizing the framework’s purpose (e.g., intended audience and objectives), common uses (e.g., any groups/settings among which the framework is widely known or used), scope and structure (e.g., the range/breadth of skills covered by the framework, including the number and type of skills included and how they are organized into groups or hierarchies), and key publications (publicly available and easily accessible documents that describe the framework). A set of **Key Parameters** are also used to create website filters that allow users to search for frameworks by parameters of interest, such as target age, region, or language.

The **Key Considerations** section also includes any resources or information the framework provides about important factors that (a) impact how and why skills are developed, and (b) guide how the framework should be applied across ages and settings, including information about development; context and culture; and any

evidence linking positive academic, employment, wellbeing, health, and related life outcomes to skills within the framework. Finally, the **Available Resources** section includes any resources or information the framework developer provides to help audiences understand, develop, and assess skills in the framework, including support materials, programs and strategies, and measurement tools.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE ONLINE TOOLS: EXPLORING INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS USING THE VISUAL TOOLS AND THESAURUS²

While the framework profiles allow one to explore and compare the major frameworks' features, our additional tools include a set of interactive visual tools linked to a robust thesaurus. The following section explores these tools in more depth and illustrates how they can be used to connect and compare frameworks and terminology in the field.

Interactive Visual Tools

The Taxonomy Project includes three interactive visual tools that enable those working in the field to look across frameworks and identify similarities and differences between them, regardless of differences in language or terminology.

The tools are designed to help make work in the field more straightforward, efficient, and effective. For instance, the tools can be used to find frameworks that align best with specific needs and goals or to identify through-lines across different ages, disciplines, contexts, and geographic regions (e.g., from early childhood through high school; between SEL and character development; across the education, mental health, and business sectors; or throughout the Global South; etc.) in order to better coordinate efforts across settings and stakeholders.

More specifically, the tools allow users to a) see what general types of social, emotional, and related competencies different frameworks tend to emphasize (the bar graph tool); b) compare and link terminology across different frameworks (the tree comparison tool); and c) identify where related skills can be found in different frameworks (the sunburst tool). Using these tools, we are able to take a closer look at how social, emotional, and related frameworks, and the skills within them, overlap or differ across diverse international contexts – based on how those skills are actually defined, rather than how they are labeled or named.

Bar Graph Tool: Which Skills are Emphasized in International Frameworks?

Frameworks often focus on different skill areas depending on their unique goals, audiences, and discipline; some provide broad coverage across many skill domains while others take a more focused approach. The Bar Graph Tool on the Explore SEL website enables users to see how much emphasis each framework places on six domains common to the non-academic field (cognitive, emotion, social, values, perspectives, and identity), which can help users narrow in on frameworks that best align with their goals. This graph is useful for understanding a

² Text adapted from "Introduction to the Taxonomy Project" (Jones, Bailey, Brush & Nelson, 2018).

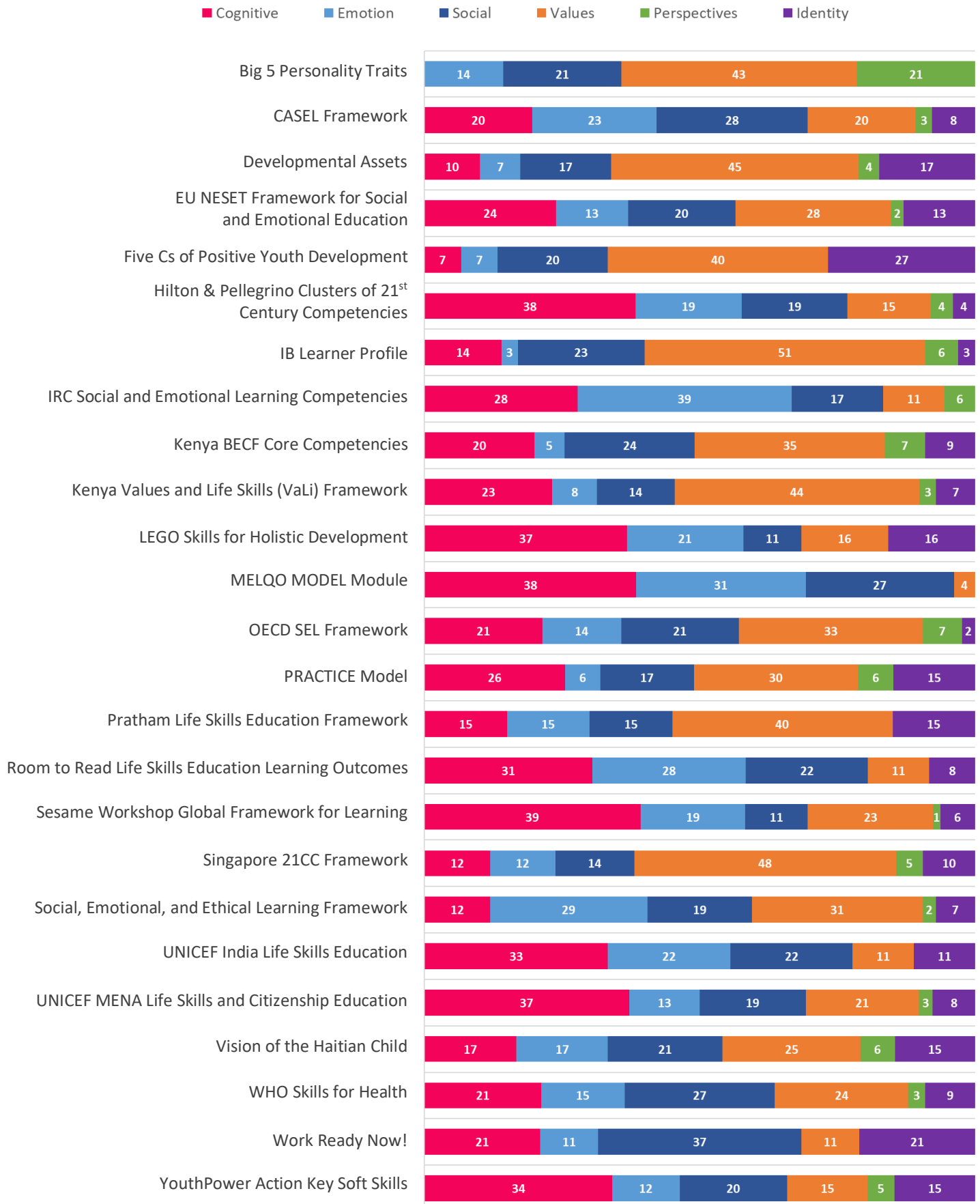
framework's general focus, or which domains receive the most attention. Each horizontal bar represents one framework, and the different colors show the percentage of codes that framework received within each domain.

As you can see in Figure 1 on the following page, there is considerable variability in the relative emphasis international frameworks place on the different skill domains. For example, some international frameworks include skills across all six domains, like the World Health Organization's Skills for Health, whereas others have a more targeted focus on a smaller set of domains, like the MELQO framework, which focuses primarily on the cognitive, emotion, and social domains, and includes little focus on the values domain and no focus on the perspectives nor identity domains. Figure 1 also highlights the frameworks that place the greatest emphasis on each domain compared to the emphasis it places on others. These are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Internationally-used frameworks with the highest, second highest, and third highest emphasis on each domain

Domain	Highest Emphasis	Second Highest Emphasis	Third Highest Emphasis
Cognitive	IB Learner Profile (42%)	Sesame Workshop Global Framework (39%)	MELQO MODEL Module (38%)
Emotion	IRC SEL Competencies (39%)	MELQO MODEL Module (31%)	Emory SEE Learning Framework (29%)
Social	Work Ready Now! (37%)	MELQO MODEL Module (27%)	WHO Skills for Health (37%)
Values	Singapore 21CC (48%)	Developmental Assets (45%)	Kenya TVET VaLi Framework (44%)
Perspectives	Big 5 (21%)	Kenya BECF Basic Competencies (7%)	OECD Social and Emotional Skills (7%)
Identity	5Cs of PYD (27%)	Work Ready Now! (21%)	Developmental Assets (17%)

Figure 1. Breakdown of relative emphasis placed on each domain among internationally-used frameworks

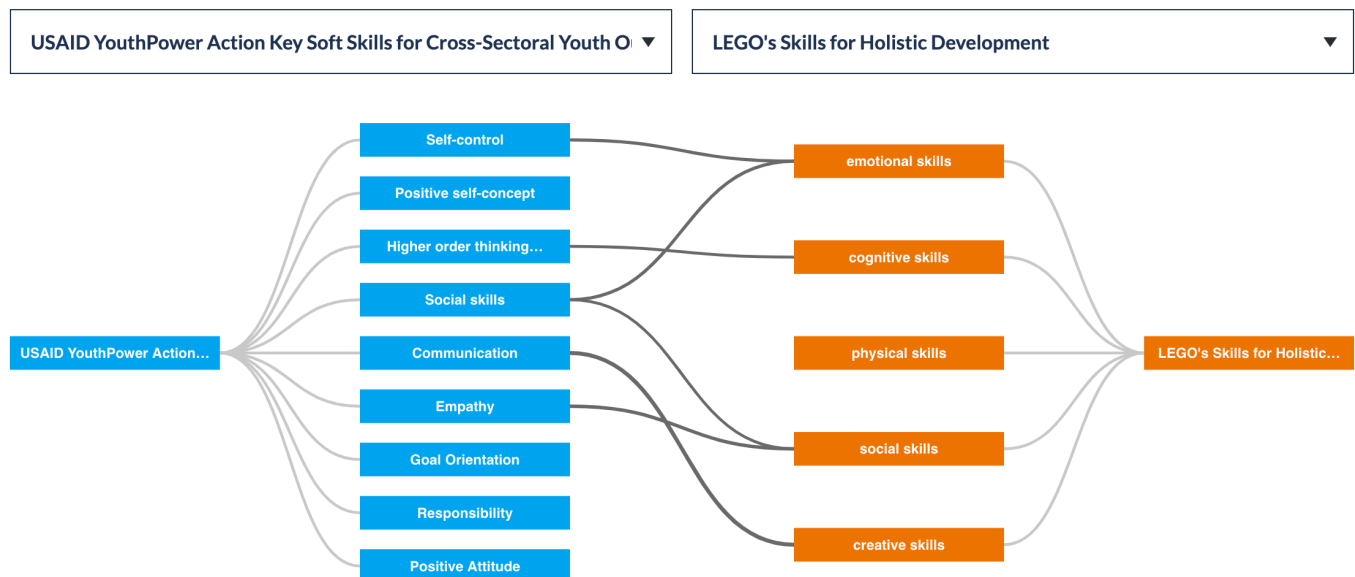


We also used the Bar Graph Tool to examine whether differences in skill focus existed between frameworks by region, including comparing those used globally/in regions and countries outside the U.S. to those used primarily in the U.S., and those used primarily in the Global South to those used in the Global North; however, we found few meaningful differences.

Tree Comparison Tool: Where do skills in one international framework overlap with skills in another?

In other instances, frameworks might refer to the same or similar skills using different names, or call two very different skills by the same name, which can make it difficult to tell whether and when frameworks are referring to similar skills. The Tree Comparison Tool, however, displays the links between related terms across two frameworks, based on their coded definitions rather than on their labels or names. In other words, the tree diagram allows us to look beyond term names when comparing two frameworks.

Figure 2. Links between related terms across USAID YouthPower Action and LEGO Foundation Frameworks



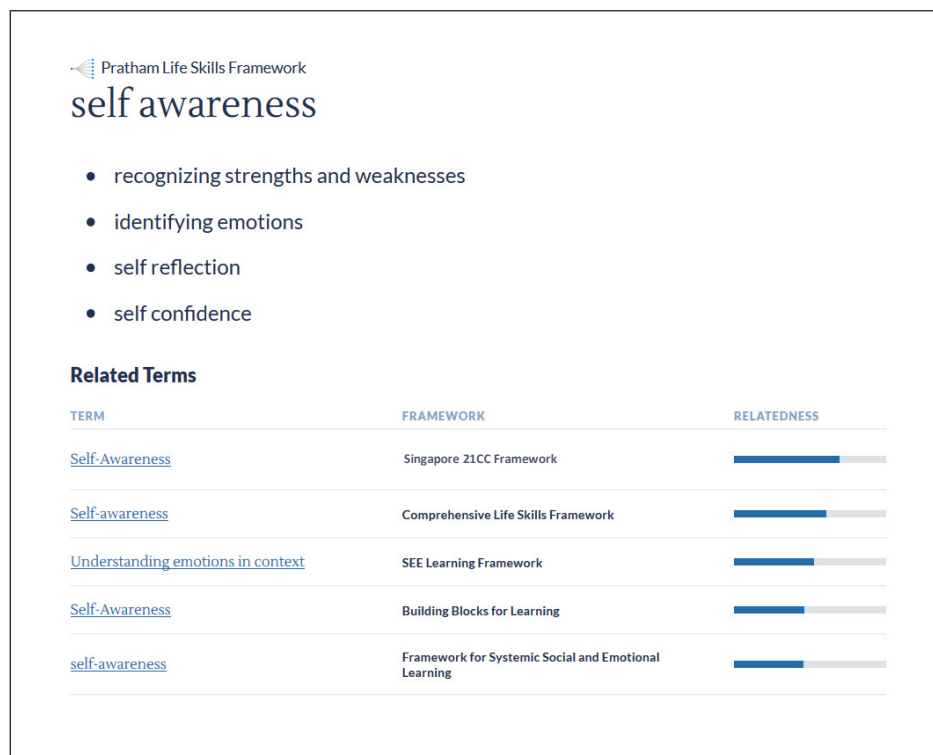
For example, in Figure 2 above, we compare the USAID YouthPower Action Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Outcomes framework, which outlines a set of core skills that predict positive outcomes for adolescents and young adults across workforce success, violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health, to the LEGO Foundation's Skills for Holistic Development framework, which outlines skills for holistic development in young children. Although the two frameworks use different terminology and focus on different ages, our data enable users to see where the terms within them are related. For example, you can see here that the definition of "social skills" put forth by the LEGO Foundation framework is related to the definition "social skills" used in the YouthPower Action framework – an unsurprising connection. However, you can see that "empathy" in Youthpower Action is also related "social skills" in the LEGO Foundation framework but not at all to "emotional skills," which might be slightly more unexpected. In addition, "communication" in the YouthPower Action framework is also related to "creative skills" in the LEGO Foundation framework but not at all to "social

skills,” which is another potentially surprising finding. Without a mechanism like the Compare Frameworks tool, it would be difficult to understand the precise points of alignment and divergence between these two frameworks.

Thesaurus: How are skills in one international framework related to skills across the entire database?

The complexity of relationships between terms, and the misunderstandings and misalignment that can arise when we are left to compare terms based on their names alone, is also addressed in Explore SEL thesaurus. Figure 3 below shows the thesaurus entry for “self awareness” in the Pratham Life Skills framework, which lists related terms across all coded frameworks. And while four of the top five entries are “self awareness” from other frameworks, which might be expected, the thesaurus also shows that “self awareness” as defined by Pratham is linked to “understanding emotions in context” in the Social, Emotional and Ethical (SEE) Learning Framework, which might be a less obvious connection. In fact, the definition of “self awareness” in the Pratham framework is actually more closely related to “understanding emotions in context” in the SEE Learning framework than it is to terms of the same name in both Building Blocks for Learning and CASEL’s framework for Systemic SEL.

Figure 3. Other database terms related to “self awareness” in the Pratham Life Skills framework

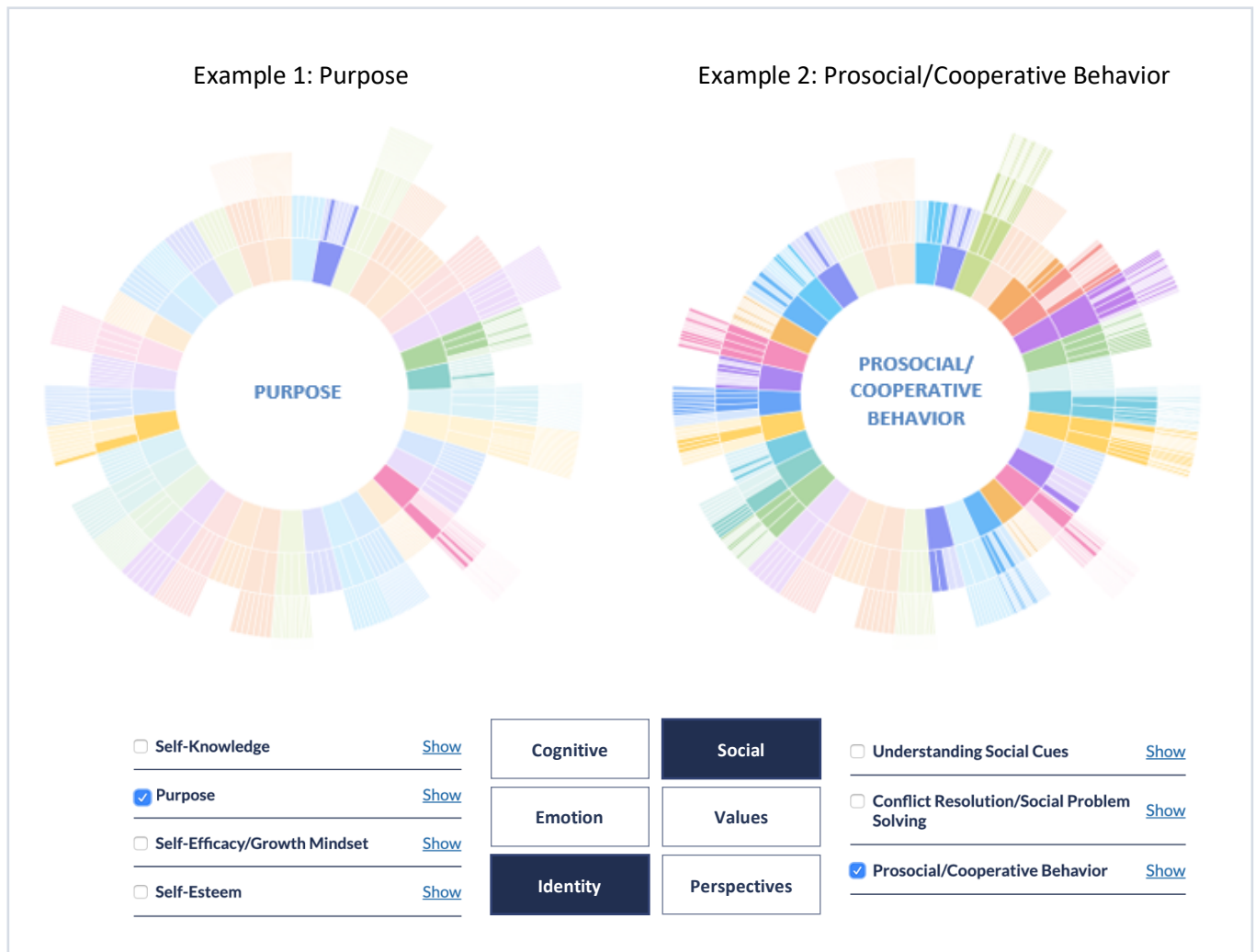


Sunburst Tool: Where does a particular skill appear across all frameworks?

With such a large variety of frameworks and skills in the field, it can be difficult to figure out whether and where frameworks include a particular competency or skill of interest, especially if it is labeled or grouped under an unfamiliar name. The Sunburst tool can help you identify where 23 common social, emotional, and related skills, values, and perspectives (e.g., empathy, conflict resolution, optimism, self-knowledge, civic

values, etc.) appear within any given framework, based on how many definitions received a code associated with that skill. Some of these skills appear across many frameworks, while others appear in only a few; in this way, the Sunburst Tool can also showcase at a higher level which skills appear most frequently across all frameworks, suggesting some consensus around their importance to the field. Figure 4 below provides an illustration of this. In the first example in Figure 4, “purpose” (i.e. having a purpose or drive motivated by something larger than oneself that shapes one’s values, goals, behavior, and plans for the future) was coded in only five frameworks across the entire Explore SEL database, one of which is included in our sub-set of international frameworks (Vision of the Haitian Child). By contrast, in the second example, “prosocial/cooperative behavior” (i.e. the ability to organize and navigate social relationships, including interacting effectively with others and developing positive relationships by listening, communicating, cooperating, helping, and community-building) appears in 25 out of 40 frameworks in the Explore SEL database, 20 of which are commonly used in international settings.

Figure 4. Comparison of how many terms across all frameworks were defined as “purpose” vs. how many focus on “prosocial/cooperative behavior” (e.g., how many codes they received in each sub-domain)



DEVELOPING, ADOPTING, OR ADAPTING FRAMEWORKS: CONTEXTUALIZATION IS CRITICAL

A core component of the international expansion of the Taxonomy Project was to expand our understanding of how culture and context influence the way social, emotional, and related skills are conceptualized, defined, discussed, and implemented across diverse international settings. We were interested in learning about cultural variation in SEL skills, culturally specific concepts in frameworks, and the process through which internationally developed frameworks, programs, or measures might be adapted to be more appropriate to the context where they are used. We used key informant interviews as a way to collect qualitative data on these questions. A grounded analysis of the interviews revealed five common themes and lessons from the field, which are summarized below.

Five Themes and Lessons about Contextualization Learned from the Field

1. Contextualization Processes. Our interviews suggested that while there is universal agreement that frameworks must fit the context and culture in which they are used, there are a number of ways in which organizations select, adapt, revise, and/or create frameworks to fit their needs. These include: choosing a program or framework and implementing/using it “as is;” selecting an existing program or framework and then going through a step-by-step contextualization process; convening an interdisciplinary task force to debate and develop a new framework; creating a framework “from the ground up” based on interviews with and participation from families and communities; as well as processes that fall somewhere in between. Yet among these different approaches, there remains agreement that contextualization should include many local voices.

→ **Key takeaway:** There are many approaches to framework development and contextualization that range from top-down to bottom-up; however, regardless of approach, it is essential to engage a variety of local stakeholders and researchers/experts, in addition to program staff (if applicable), in the creation or contextualization process, recognizing the diversity of perspectives that are present, as well as those that may be missing.

2. Investment in Human Capacity. Our interviews emphasized that program delivery staff (e.g., educators, facilitators, trainers) are critical resources for deep and nuanced contextualization of frameworks and programs. Effective delivery requires staff to first develop and practice social and emotional skills (e.g., active listening, emotional knowledge and expression, teamwork, critical thinking, empathy, etc.) themselves, before they can effectively model them for and teach them to students. We also learned that many cultural and contextual adaptations of frameworks take place at the program level and are at the discretion of the educator or trainer. This is also true of measurement and assessment tools, particularly those that are created to be adaptive and allow for modifications or interpretations by those who know the local context (e.g., Save the Children’s IDELA and ISELA assessments, etc.). What further emerged from our interviews is the idea that the quality and success of this kind of on-the-ground adaptation and contextualization requires an intentional investment in human capacity.

→ **Key takeaway:** It is important for funders and researchers to acknowledge that investment in human capacity may take time and require financial resources but is often critical to successful contextualization, and ultimately, impact. Coaching and peer-to-peer sharing were cited as effective ways to provide ongoing support to program delivery staff.

“So we really believe in and invest in and empower trainers. It's hard for me talk about our [curriculum] and our work with young people without talking about the trainers as the frontline.”

3. Unintended Consequences. We also heard from stakeholders that while many of the core social, emotional, and related skills and concepts may be universal, there are extremely important cultural and contextual factors that should be taken into account when seeking to develop and teach them. It is also important to note that even for skills that may be defined and described similarly across frameworks, the expression of those skills may be culturally specific. The most frequent example that came up during our interviews is the role of gender norms and the importance of walking a fine line between empowering young women with the skills they need to be successful, to thrive, and to disrupt inequities *without* putting them in harm's way by asking them to assert themselves in ways that could incite punishment or violence in their context.

→ **Key takeaway:** Even social, emotional, and related skills that are well-known and widely-accepted as important to success in various regions and contexts around the world may be (or need to be) understood, learned, and expressed differently across cultures and contexts, and ignoring this diversity may have unintended negative consequences. When developing or adapting a framework for a particular context, stakeholders should be aware of the topics, skills, and even language that may elicit fear, anxiety, or safety concerns.

4. Language and Meaning. Many interviews indicated that language plays a key role in the conceptualization of social, emotional, and related skills across the globe. Certain words or terms carry different connotations in different languages or contexts, and therefore influence the ways ideas about skills are understood and expressed. In many cases the definitions, descriptions, and terminology used in one language do not make sense or have the same meaning with direct translation alone. Moreover, in some contexts, the process of developing or introducing a new framework – particularly one developed in English – can have important sociolinguistic implications, as they may inadvertently introduce new language and vocabulary in the process of discussing and promoting skills that were previously not part of the vernacular. Particularly when the words and concepts used to describe and discuss social, emotional, and related skills are coming from another country, such as the United States, it is important to go through a careful process to make sure that translation and adaptation of those concepts have the most appropriate linguistic connotation for the context.

→ **Key takeaway:** High-quality contextualization requires more than direct translation. Direct translation from another language, particularly English, without deeper contextualization work can be limiting and linguistically hegemonic. Those developing frameworks for a particular country or region, or to be adapted for use across multiple countries and regions, should therefore strive to use terms that have meaning and make sense across cultures and to identify and include culturally-specific concepts and terms whenever possible.

"I think one of the things that I worry about a lot is...if everything's done as a base from English and we're working in this international realm, to what degree are we contributing to a kind of compression of emotional or socio emotional learning..."

5. Time and Resources. Finally, the interviews indicated that time and resources are critical, and often limited, in the work of contextualizing social, emotional, and related frameworks for diverse international settings. While interview participants agreed that careful contextualization of skills, frameworks, and programs is important, many noted that they are constrained by time and resources, and thus are not able to utilize as thorough a process as they would like. One of the greatest challenges that organizations face is the ability to measure and assess social and emotional skills with adequate reliability and validity. This is due to a host of factors, including whether the tool is developmentally, contextually, and culturally appropriate, and whether those doing the measurement and assessment have the time, resources, and training necessary to create and contextualize the assessments or to administer them with fidelity.

→ **Key takeaway:** Effective contextualization requires intentional investment but securing the time and resources to do so remains a challenge for the field. Expanded opportunities to fund the development and testing of high-quality contextualization processes and protocols would benefit the field and likely result in more precise and impactful work.

"That's the problem, quite frankly, to be very cut and dry about it, is that everybody wants to do [contextualization and adaptation work]. But we never, ever have the time, the resources, and the money allocated to actually do that well..."

Best Practices for Contextualization

In short, our interviews revealed the importance of and the challenges inherent in ensuring that frameworks for social, emotional, and related skills are culturally and contextually relevant, particularly given that a majority of the current research and dominant frameworks for SEL are conducted and designed in the United States or other Western contexts. When done well, ground-up and collaborative processes for the development of frameworks can reveal important, culturally specific social and emotional concepts and contribute to sustaining cultural values and practices that promote social and emotional development. When rushed or not done well, there are real risks of unintended consequences for the on-the-ground staff, children, and youth who participate in programming, particularly young women and girls.

Based on our analysis of interviews with key stakeholders in the field, we recommend the following best practices:

Recommendations for Program Developers:	Recommendations for Funders:
<input type="checkbox"/> Involve a diverse group of local stakeholders and experts in the design and development of frameworks for social, emotional, and related skills.	<input type="checkbox"/> Encourage and support grantees to build in time and resources for contextualization or ground-up resource development.
<input type="checkbox"/> If adopting an outside framework, go through an iterative vetting process with local stakeholders that brings to light local values, perspectives, and priorities, paying particular attention to the language to fit the local culture and context.	<input type="checkbox"/> Invest in the capacity of local program delivery staff to make social, emotional, and related skills relevant to the population they serve. This includes training and on-going coaching or professional support.
<input type="checkbox"/> Be carefully attuned to the cultural and socio-political dynamics of the setting to avoid unintended consequences that can undermine the goals of frameworks and programs or actively harm participants.	<input type="checkbox"/> Seek out and highlight innovative and collaborative processes for the development of frameworks.
<input type="checkbox"/> When planning and budgeting for a project, build in time and resources for contextualization or ground-up resource development.	<input type="checkbox"/> Encourage alignment between grantees' frameworks, measurement tools, and program activities to promote program effectiveness.
<input type="checkbox"/> Invest in the capacity of local program delivery staff to make social, emotional, and related skills relevant to the population they serve. This includes training and on-going coaching or professional support.	

WHAT'S NEXT? LINKING FRAMEWORKS, PROGRAMS, STRATEGIES, AND MEASURES

Given the diversity of purposes, perspectives, and contexts in which frameworks are used, we feel it is important to honor each individual framework while having a way to communicate across regions, sectors, and disciplines to enhance collaboration and avoid duplication of effort. The future of the Taxonomy Project will not only include additional frameworks from diverse organizations across the globe, but also expand our scope to include programs, strategies, and measures to create alignment across all facets of the work of SEL and related non-academic domains, such that the Taxonomy can be used to make clear and precise connections across the entire research to practice cycle.

We will expand the scope of the Taxonomy Project by:

*Adding frameworks

Create a more robust and comprehensive database of frameworks from which to draw information for the Explore SEL website

* Linking to programs

Identify and explore evidence-based SEL programs that align with specific frameworks and skills

* Linking to strategies

Identify and explore stand-alone SEL strategies that align with specific frameworks and skills

* Linking to measures

Identify measurement tools that align with specific frameworks, skills, and strategies/programs

...thereby enabling those doing the work of the field to translate research into practice in ways that ensure alignment between skills, strategies, and measures.

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THE TAXONOMY PROJECT:

The Taxonomy Project is Stephanie Jones and the EASEL Lab’s effort to address an ongoing question in the field of SEL: What are the skills, terms, and definitions employed in various “non-academic” frameworks (i.e., organizational systems used to guide research, policy, and practice in this area), and how are they related to those of other frameworks?

Our response to this question is to create a scientifically-grounded system – or *taxonomy of social, emotional and related non-academic skills* – that organizes, describes, and connects frameworks and skills across the domain. In doing so, the project seeks to create greater precision and transparency in the field of SEL and facilitate more effective translation between research and practice.

The Taxonomy Project includes a set of interactive online tools designed to help researchers, educators, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders better navigate the broad field of SEL. The tools include: (1) an online Thesaurus that includes information about various skills (e.g., self-control, empathy, cognitive flexibility) and how they are related to other skills and terms used by researchers and educators, (2) a set of visual tools that enable stakeholders to see and understand key similarities or differences across frameworks, and (3) framework profiles that allow users to quickly see high-level differences in focus, purpose, and features across frameworks.



About the EASEL Lab

The Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory, led by Dr. Stephanie Jones of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, explores the effects of high-quality social-emotional interventions on the development and achievement of children, youth, teachers, parents, and communities. Our projects aim to advance the field of social and emotional learning through research, practice, and policy. The EASEL Lab also effects change through its translational projects, which work to strengthen the links between the growing body of evidence supporting high-quality SEL and the creation and application of education policy and practice more generally.

About Echidna Giving

The international expansion of the Taxonomy Project and this brief were made possible with funding from Echidna Giving, a private foundation with the mission of advancing girls’ education. With a focus on lower-income countries, Echidna Giving makes grants, generates knowledge, and collaborates with critical thinkers, innovators, and practitioners to deliver on the promise of girls’ education.

Our Funders

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