

SEL Frameworks – Practical Challenges and Opportunities

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.

CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD

Given that SEL is a relatively young applied field using research and theories from many disciplines, it is not surprising that it encompasses many voices, frameworks, and languages. Sorting through them and finding one that works for your context and population can be challenging whether you are at the broad field level, work in a system, or are trying to change your own or others' local practices. Furthermore, the challenges at one level often create or complicate challenges for the next level—and perhaps open some opportunities. In this brief, we examine challenges at all three levels and offer some recommendations and activities to consider in your quest to impact the social and emotional learning of young people.

AUTHOR

Dale A. Blyth
University of Minnesota

Coherence Challenges: Multiple Frameworks

The first challenge is the lack of consensus on an overall framework that unifies the field's work and allows research findings and practice approaches to add up efficiently and effectively. While the issue of social and emotional development has been studied for many years and from many perspectives, efforts to get systematic about how SEL occurs, which competencies are most important, and what improvement approaches work have emerged primarily over the last 20 years. With both the long history and rapid growth of social-emotional learning, the field has many contributing disciplines and schools of thought that have each contributed numerous frameworks. This is both a challenge and an asset for a growing field, but becomes particularly challenging in practice.

This is perhaps most easily seen in the [2018 report](#) by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) where 136 frameworks from 14 different schools of thought were identified and categorized. The sheer number of different frameworks in the field is a daunting challenge when trying to identify which ones are already in use, let alone select one that could be used to guide practical SEL improvement efforts. According to the report, competency frameworks come in particular from education (33), youth development (19), workforce development (18), psychology (11), and character development (10), but there are also relevant frameworks in public health, economics, juvenile justice, mental health, foster care, disability services, and different cultural perspectives among others. The AIR report and related resources for better understanding different frameworks is the subject of a brief in our **Comparing Frameworks Series**.

Most of these frameworks share many common elements related to both interpersonal (social) and intrapersonal (emotional) as well as cognitive competencies. However, effectively using research evidence from all these areas of study and related practice wisdom without clear articulation of definitions and assumptions that allow for alignment and cross-walking of theories, constructs, and measures is quite daunting. As a result, it is hard for the field of SEL to synthesize and utilize information from all these areas in the systematic ways needed to optimally advance the field and inform practice.

Communications Challenges: Multiple Meanings, Inconsistent Language

Given so many frameworks from so many different schools of thought, it is not surprising that often the same words are used in very different ways, and essentially the same competencies may be called by very different names in different frameworks. As Stephanie Jones has pointed out, words matter, and the inconsistent language in SEL is a major challenge. Jones and her team at the [Harvard Taxonomy Project](#) are working to meet this challenge directly by creating a thesaurus that links language on competencies from different frameworks, as well as a coding system that enables visualizing linkages and improving alignment both across frameworks and between frameworks, interventions, and measures. The goal is not to have the whole world speak one language (an overarching unifying framework), but rather to develop the capacity to be multilingual and able to translate language across different frameworks, knowing both the words and what they mean. This work is the focus of a brief in our **Comparing Frameworks Series**.

For the field of SEL overall, these challenges make it hard to consolidate and accumulate knowledge systematically. Studies using different frameworks can be hard to synthesize. Different measures may sound the same but actually get at very different dimensions of social-emotional learning.

Opportunities in a Dynamic Field

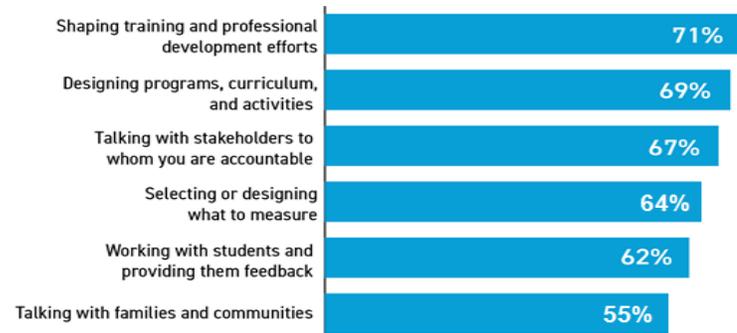
With the challenges that multiple frameworks and inconsistent language bring, there are also opportunities. SEL as a field is at a dynamic, innovative stage. Rather than seeking to create a new unifying framework or mandate language that everyone “should” use, people and places are free to explore and use different frameworks and work on different skills that connect best with their values and current efforts. Practitioners should have freedom to use different approaches for driving improvements to advance SEL. For the field, the goal is less about getting everyone on the same page in a specific curriculum-like framework, but rather to assure that the many different approaches the field is using to advance SEL are connectable and the work is increasingly coherent, with approaches that best fit different contexts, cultures, and settings. In working toward this goal, there are many opportunities (and a critical need) for the field to create the kinds of tools, resources, syntheses and approaches that can help enable connections and avoid major disconnections.

2018 Survey of Practitioner Perspectives

We surveyed a nonrandom national sample of more than 240 SEL-related practitioners to better understand practice perspectives related to multiple frameworks and confusing language¹. Respondents were asked about the extent to which “multiple frameworks and language issues” have been challenging or beneficial. Findings included:

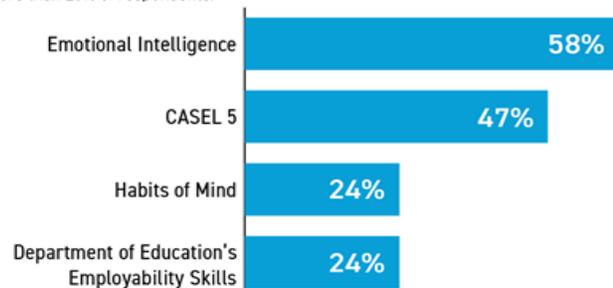
- 60% indicated multiple frameworks and language issues were challenging when trying to communicate with stakeholders, and 27% said it was somewhat or very beneficial.
- Roughly 55% said frameworks and language were challenging when working to integrate existing efforts, deciding on what to measure, and selecting which framework language to use.
- Two statements were rated as more of a balance of challenges and benefits: Selecting specific social-emotional competencies on which to focus (49% challenge; 36% beneficial) and shaping professional development (43% challenge; 38% beneficial).

HOW ARE YOU USING FRAMEWORKS?



FEW FRAMEWORKS ARE WELL-KNOWN

Of 32 frameworks offered, only six were even known by a majority of responders. Only four were reported as used by more than 20% of respondents.



¹ The survey went to about 1,200 members of our Collaborator Network. While it is not a representative random sample, it is a helpful snapshot of practitioners perspectives. A blog on the results is [available](#).

CHALLENGES AT THE SYSTEMS/ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

What happens at the field level often creates challenges at the system and organizational levels. For example, when the author was working locally with leaders from different sectors around what SEL is and on which competencies to focus, the challenges for the field quickly became challenges for the systems and organizations, as well as the practitioners working directly with children and youth. This section examines two of these fundamental challenges.

Choosing an SEL Framework to Drive Efforts

The importance of having a clear framework for getting multiple people from different departments and professions in a system on the same page is clear. Choosing a framework, however, can be difficult. In most systems and organizations, multiple initiatives and strategies may already be in use; e.g., PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports), MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports), value statements, state standards or competencies, strategic priorities, and/or specific curriculum or building goals. Although not all of these may be SEL-focused, many are likely to be SEL-related, including those around equity.

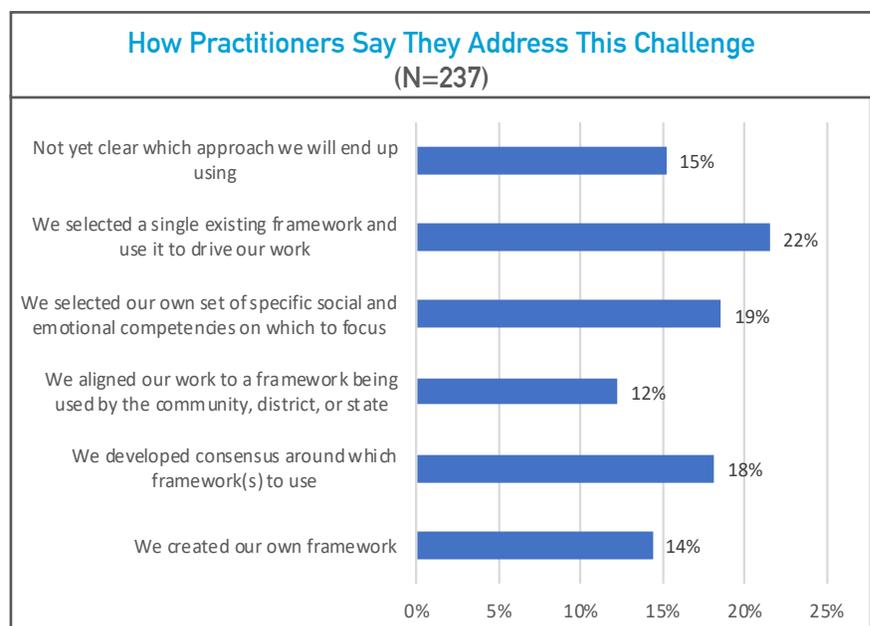
In order to better understand how practitioners addressed this challenge, we asked people which of the following best described how they have actually dealt with multiple frameworks and language issues in their work. The results

show no dominant approach but rather illustrate the wide range of approaches in use, including some that are still not yet clear (15%). Although many respondents select an existing framework (22%) or choose to align with frameworks already in use (12%), others work to develop consensus (18%). Still others either select their own specific set of competencies (19%) or create their own framework (14%).

How does one decide whether to **select** an existing framework, **adapt** a framework to adjust it for local use,

or **create** an entirely new framework? It may be helpful to begin by considering two questions: how do you want to use the framework to guide or drive SEL work, and what resources are available?

Selecting a framework: If one needs a framework primarily to communicate out to key stakeholders to make the case for the value of SEL and developing these competencies/skills, then selecting an



existing, empirically grounded framework may be critical. Such a framework will be more likely to have data to show the importance of SEL skills and their connections to valued outcomes such as reduced problem behavior, stronger school climates, and academic learning. Don't underestimate the educational and communication value of a broad, comprehensive framework to ground SEL efforts. The [CASEL 5 framework](#) and [Emotional Intelligence](#) were two such frameworks noted by practitioners. Such an approach can also be useful when there are fewer resources to put into implementation, as some existing frameworks already have implementation supports of various kinds available.

Adapting a framework: Adapting existing frameworks may be necessary, particularly if the framework one uses to make the case was designed with a different set of cultural or other assumptions and has not been applied and tested with a population or context similar to yours. This approach can allow some customization to the local context, language preferences, and current work to aid implementation. This approach may be able to better mobilize existing resources.

Creating a new framework: Creating a new framework may be attractive to launch a new SEL effort, but the investment needed to do everything "from scratch" may require developing customized tools, communications, and training, i.e., an additional investment.

For example, Carla Burley, Director of SEL for the Boston Public Schools (BPS), notes that Boston started with the CASEL framework but adjusted the framework to include culturally and linguistically sustaining practices and make it something Boston needed to live not just follow. They created their own framework with four competencies using language that supported equity and access for all students to identify their assets. The process and act of doing so helped the BPS community make real-life connections to SEL and gave credibility to the transformative process of SEL. BPS promoted the four competencies through several communication channels with images of their students, teachers, and schools that included a user-friendly flip book with sentence stems, developmentally appropriate posters for schools, a logo that included the competencies and a balanced integrated approach to SEL. Materials and standards were also developed through a depth of knowledge lens that described each of the competencies clearly with examples. Without such investments, even the best new framework will lack legs on which to move forward. In the end, Boston felt the costs to message the new framework were minimal compared to recognizing and supporting the voice of their educational communities vision of equity and valuing cultural and linguistic assets of students.

Aligning Across Frameworks

Whether selecting from existing frameworks, adapting them, or creating a new one, significant challenges remain in using a framework to actually drive the work. In a July 2018 meeting of the [National Practitioner Advisory Group](#), it became clear that a great deal of flexibility is required. No matter what framework is used, one still needs to be able to create connections between what people know and currently do and exactly how the framework will be implemented for SEL. Several people suggested using a broad and empirically based framework such as the [CASEL 5](#) to help people understand what SEL is and then using their own selected framework to drive their work.

Even when a framework is selected, adapted, or created to drive efforts, there is still a need to help practitioners at multiple levels within the system connect their ways of working with the framework. Different departments or professionals with different orientations may be driven by specific disciplinary frameworks. Therefore, leaders are challenged to crosswalk or align the ways different frameworks are used and translate competencies and approaches into a unified effort. Departments that have been using the lack of competencies as a basic rationale for disciplining students may have different language and frameworks than others using a different approach. Often this work is viewed as secondary to the work of foundational academic departments. As social-emotional competencies are increasingly accepted as important for all youth, and are increasingly built into academics, the challenges have grown even greater.

Creating an integrated, systemic approach to SEL includes not only figuring out which framework to use but also how it aligns or replaces the multitude of frameworks already in use. Districts and organization may also have other priorities that must be connected to SEL efforts. For example, SEL is often associated with initiatives to address equity issues, discrimination, and opportunity gaps. Fortunately, focusing on SEL can bring insights to such combined approaches. Rob Jagers and colleagues tackle this issue in one of the briefs for this project's **Special Topics Framework Series**.

Opportunities to Shape Systems

Although there are no easy answers to system-level challenges, they can provide opportunities for exploring which frameworks are already in use, which ones may be most helpful, and how to reach a decision on the framework or frameworks that can help drive the system's SEL efforts going forward. In our **Special Topic Framework Series**, we feature a deeper look at how the Minneapolis Public Schools' efforts evolved as SEL moved from a fragmented to central approach as part of the district's strategic plan.

Here are some activities to consider that may open opportunities to go further in your system or organization's SEL efforts.

1. **Map what exists.** Map the variety of SEL-related frameworks and related sets of competencies currently used in your system or organization. Look for overarching state and district frameworks as well as frameworks that guide efforts in specific departments, units, or types of professionals. How is the language similar or different across these frameworks? Is there a common set of high-priority social-emotional competencies?
2. **Review what is taught.** Review the language used in training different professionals, from teachers to support services staff, and see whether and where SEL and specific social-emotional competencies are mentioned. How could this become more systematic and clearer if driven by a more unified framework approach?
3. **Convene people.** Convene a cross-department meeting to discuss SEL and ask people to identify the language and frameworks they are using for training, communicating with families

and other stakeholders, implementing SEL in the classroom, or deciding on what to measure. Compare the different frameworks and explore how they connect. How would having a common framework to drive more of these efforts help and what are the barriers to doing so?

CHALLENGES FOR PRACTITIONERS

Challenges at the system and organizational level can also create challenges for those working directly with children and youth to improve their social-emotional competencies. When there is misalignment in the field and at the organizational level, practitioners need to move forward anyway and either use the parts they understand, try to do too much, or abandon the whole effort. We note two particular challenges here and encourage practitioners to keep asking questions and collaborating with those at the practice level who have experience dealing with these issues.

Aligning with the Frameworks Around You

At the direct practice level, the challenges around frameworks are less about selecting a framework and more likely about understanding the frameworks that have been chosen by the system or organization and trying to align your work in ways that are productive for your children and youth. This is particularly the case for teachers and youth workers who are dealing with the multiple realities of day-to-day practice. When the challenges at the system level are being effectively addressed, it makes it easier for front-line practitioners to do their work. When these challenges are not met well, the direct practitioners are too often on their own to find ways that can guide what they do in their setting with their children and youth and how they measure its success.

Aligning Your Own Efforts

Beyond aligning your work with the framework(s) that are supposed to drive efforts in your organization, practitioners are often challenged to align the ways they understand how to foster certain social-emotional competencies with the strategies, methods, materials, and measurement approaches they use. It is the alignment of these elements, informed by research and best practice, that can make practice powerful but also difficult. This is especially the case when strategies and tools are not well-aligned at the system or organizational level. Often while the language seems the same, the competencies you are seeking to build are defined differently than in the measurement tool used in your organization, the ways you go about teaching, or the curriculum you are using. This is all too common and can be a direct result of the unmet challenges at the field and system levels.

Opportunities to Shape Practice

Those who work directly with youth or who help train and support them are unlikely to solve the challenges of the field but are likely to experience the resulting difficulties. This is especially true if your system or organization has not selected and aligned different frameworks. Depending on their level of independence and the support of those above and around them, practitioners working to improve SEL can seek to better understand the evidence, select strategies and best practices for their setting and population, and work to use appropriate data to assess progress and guide improvement efforts.

Here are some opportunities for “curious engagement” with potential frameworks and your practice. What does each have uniquely to teach/offer? What are its assumptions that can inform the work? What do you know from practice that either reinforces or challenges a framework’s approach? Where in your practice might you push back on some aspects or assumptions of a given framework? The goal is to think critically about the frameworks as a way to sharpen understanding and shape practice.

1. **Investigate frameworks.** Investigate how your district, school, or organization is defining SEL and the competencies they believe children and young people need to succeed. These may come from SEL state standards or competencies if they are in place in your state, or they may come from the organization’s mission and strategic plan. Wherever they come from, seek to understand what they are, why they are important, and what they look like in practice.
2. **Review your own practices.** Review everything from your instructional goals to the resources you use and identify how what you are doing could be used to more deliberately teach and model social-emotional competencies. Perhaps take a particular framework you are supposed to use and highlight in your class planning and activities where the key social and emotional competences are or could be taught.
3. **Self-Reflection.** Reflect on your own social-emotional competencies and how you learned them. Are they the same or different from what you are expected to help students learn? How are your social-emotional competencies influenced by your race, culture, gender, and age? How might these be similar to or different from those of the young people you are trying to engage?
4. **Using Data.** Reflect on how you currently are measuring or could measure the social-emotional competencies of your students. Do you make systematic observations or notes on student competence in these areas? Could you do ratings using a common tool to improve the way you support and rate students? What is the data – either your ratings or student self-reports or actual performance measures – telling you about your students and how to support them?

About the Author



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.

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://measuringssel.casel.org>

Introductory 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.

Comparative Series

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.

Special Issues Series

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.

Descriptive Series

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.