

Parent and Caregiver Conceptualizations of Social and Emotional Skill Programs

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Social and emotional (SE) skills are interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-related behaviors that are important for adaption to and successful performance in educational and workplace settings (Casillas et al., 2015). These skills are related to important outcomes such as academic achievement and job satisfaction (e.g., Judge et al., 2002; Mammadov, 2022; Poropat, 2009). Additionally, students can improve these skills through social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions or programming designed to teach SE skill development to students in school settings (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2018). While teaching SEL shows promising results and continues to gain traction in the K–12 education space, little consensus exists on what label should be used to describe this skill set (e.g., Berg et al., 2017).

A recent study with parents¹ suggests that, although support for SEL-related skills is relatively strong, the label “social-emotional learning”² itself is unfavorable (Tyner, 2021). This conclusion was based on a rank order item which presented parents with a list of 12 undefined, SEL-related program titles and asked them to select three school programs they would most and least want their child enrolled in. The study concluded that “life skills” was the most favorable program label based on an index that captured how often the program was selected “most” minus “least.” Though “social-emotional and academic learning” was the second highest-ranked label, “social-emotional learning” was the second lowest-ranked label.

There are two main limitations of this previous study. First, due to the forced choice format, the overall level of support for each of the programs was unclear. The overall favorability ratings for each term are examined in a recent data byte (Daley et al., in press). Second, the program labels were not defined in the survey. Without definitions, we could expect that respondents assumed all program labels encompassed the same skill set as they made their rankings. Thus, it is unclear if respondents believed that all programs listed taught SE skills or if they believed they taught some other set of skills. An analysis comparing the relative level of support for different programs would be inappropriate if respondents thought some of the programs taught skills unrelated to SEL.

To test the assumption that respondents perceived all program labels as teaching SEL, we conducted a survey with parents and caregivers of ACT[®] test takers. The survey was sent to 25,000 parents/caregivers of ACT test takers following the April 2nd, 2022, National ACT test administration. Parents/caregivers were informed that the survey was voluntary and unincentivized. While 1,383 parents/caregivers began the survey, 1,084 respondents completed at least one block of the survey, and 485 completed the entire survey. To capture parent/caregiver conceptualizations of each of the program names used in the Tyner study, we used an open-ended format to ask respondents to list three skills they thought would be taught in each program. We included the following program labels from the Tyner (2021) study in our open-ended questions: “behavioral skills,” “life skills,” “social-emotional learning,” “social-emotional and academic learning,” and “soft skills.”

To analyze the open-ended responses, we used a binary coding scheme to differentiate skill responses that could/could not be categorized as an SE skill. To determine whether a skill fell into the SE skill category, we used the behavioral skills framework within the ACT® Holistic Framework® (Casillas et al., 2015). We then calculated the overall percentages of SE skills included across all responses for each of the programs examined. Table 1 shows the percentage of responses within each program category that represented an SE skill.

Table 1. Percentage of SE Skill Responses within Each Program Category

Program title	N responses	Percent of SE skill responses
Behavioral skills	794	67.0%
Life skills	1,664	17.5%
Social-emotional learning	725	64.8%
Social-emotional and academic learning	865	62.6%
Soft skills	1,077	53.1%

“Life skills” had, by far, the lowest frequency of SE skill responses, suggesting that it is inappropriate to compare the favorability of a life skills program to a social-emotional learning program. To get a better sense of what respondents believed was taught in a “life skills” program, we examined individual responses to the open-ended question about life skills. Figure 1 displays the most frequently listed skills in order.

Results from this follow-up study demonstrate that the program label “life skills” represents a far broader range of skills than those we would typically conceptualize as SE skills. While skills such as financial management, completing taxes, and taking care of homes and automobiles are undoubtedly important, they are fundamentally different from SE skills such as persistence, empathy, and resilience. Results call into question the validity of the Tyner (2021) finding that “life skills” is the most favorable program label for SEL-related programs given the lack of common understanding between the two terms. Instead, these results suggest the label “life skills” should not be used interchangeably with the other labels examined, given respondents had different conceptualizations of skills taught in a “life skills” program compared to other SEL-related programs.

Figure 1. Top 30 Most Frequent Responses in “Life Skills” Program Category



■ Social and Emotional Skill
■ Other Skill

References

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Notes

1. When describing the results of Tyner (2021), we use the term “parents” instead of parents/caregivers in keeping with the terminology used in that report.
2. In the current study, we use the term social-emotional learning instead of social and emotional learning in keeping with the terminology used in the Tyner (2021) report.



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