

Exploring the Utility of “Durable Skills” as a Label for SEL-Related Programming

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Social and emotional (SE) skills are interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-related behaviors that are important for adaptation 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) programming designed to teach SE skill development to students in school settings (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2018). While the teaching of 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 report suggests the term “durable skills” can be used to describe the skills we typically define as SE skills in the K–12 space (Cole et al., 2021). The durable skills framework includes skills such as leadership, collaboration, and communication, which are indeed consistent with SE skill frameworks (see Berg et al., 2017). However, the framework also includes skills such as critical thinking and metacognition that are not typically included in SE skill frameworks. As such, the label “durable skills” may be less specific and potentially confusing regarding which skills are included. Furthermore, little is known about how parents and caregivers perceive durable skills and which skills they believe fall in this category.

To gauge the familiarity, favorability, and understanding of the label “durable skills” to describe SEL-related programs, we surveyed parents and caregivers of students taking the ACT® test. Parents/caregivers were informed that the survey was voluntary, and no incentives were given. The survey was sent to 25,000 parents/caregivers of ACT test-takers following the April 2, 2022, National ACT test administration: 1,349 parents/caregivers began the survey, 1,074 respondents completed at least one block of the survey, and 477 completed the entire survey. The survey included eight SEL-related program names: interpersonal skills, creativity, critical thinking, learning skills, collaborative problem solving, science of human development, information and communication technology, and durable skills. Regarding their familiarity with these terms, respondents were asked how familiar they are with each program and to rate each program title on a 1 (not familiar) to 4 (very familiar) scale. Regarding the favorability of the terms, respondents were asked how supportive they are of each program being taught in school and to rate each program title on a 1 (very unsupportive) to 6 (very supportive) scale. Table 1 shows familiarity and favorability for durable skills compared to the average of all other programs combined.

Table 1. Familiarity and Favorability Ratings

Program	Familiarity Rating (%)	Favorability Rating (%)
Durable skills	42	92
Average of other SEL-related programs	66	92

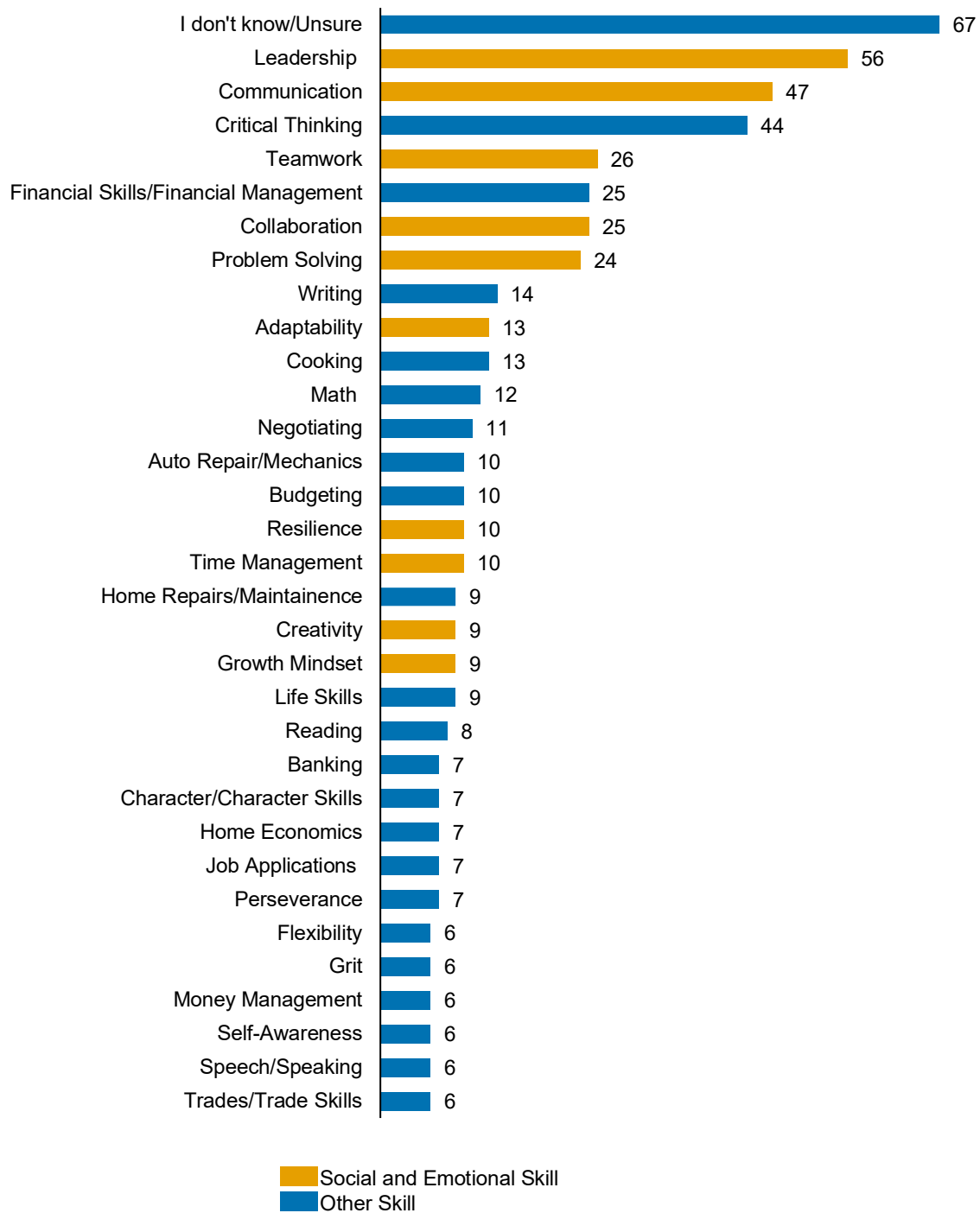
Note. Other SEL-related program titles include interpersonal skills, creativity, critical thinking, learning skills, collaborative problem solving, science of human development, and information and communication technology. Familiarity rating ($N = 1,074$) represents the percentage of respondents with a rating of “somewhat familiar” or higher. Favorability rating ($N = 929$) represents the percentage of respondents with a rating of “somewhat supportive” or higher.

To capture parent/caregiver conceptualizations of each of the program names, we asked respondents in an open-ended format to list three skills they thought would be taught in each program. To analyze the open-ended responses, we used a binary coding scheme to differentiate skill responses that could or could not be categorized as an SE skill. To determine whether a skill fell in the SE skill category, we used the behavioral skills framework within ACT’s Holistic Framework (Casillas et al., 2015). We then calculated the overall percentages of SE skills included across all responses for durable skills. Results showed that only 37.4% of responses represented SE skills. Figure 1 shows the 30 most frequent responses for durable skills.

Taken together, results from this study do not provide strong support for the label “durable skills” to describe SE skills. Familiarity with the term was low (42%)—the lowest of any program assessed (other programs averaged 66% familiarity ratings). Furthermore, the most frequent response to the open-ended questions was “I don’t know/Unsure” (see Figure 1), further indicating that the label could be confusing. Overall, durable skills is most likely not the best label to describe SE skills given (a) respondents’ low familiarity with the term, (b) a relatively low association of it with SE skills, and (c) confusion surrounding its meaning.

One interesting finding from this survey was the high favorability rating of durable skills despite low familiarity, with only 42% of respondents reporting being familiar with the term. The positive nature of the word “durable” might have led parents/caregivers to assume that these skills are important even though they had a limited understanding of what skills could be included. Examining the cause of these high favorability ratings despite the low familiarity and limited understanding of the term is an avenue for future research.

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



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