

Comparing the Labels “Life Skills” and “Social and Emotional Skills” for a Student Assessment

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a growing national movement (Schwartz et al., 2022). SEL is a term used to describe programming designed to develop students' social and emotional (SE) skills. SE skills are “individual capacities that can be (a) manifested in consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours, (b) developed through formal and informal learning experiences, and (c) important drivers of socioeconomic outcomes throughout the individual's life” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015, p. 35). An important aspect of SEL programming is assessing SE skills. Those who develop an assessment of students' skills need to consider the specific label that describes the skills measured. This label is important for parent, caregiver, and student buy-in and for messaging to the broader public, especially in light of a recent study that concluded that the term “life skills” is preferred by parents/caregivers over other SEL-related terminology (Tyner, 2021). Despite Tyner's conclusion, our recent research shows that most parents/caregivers are supportive of various SEL-related terms (Daley et al., 2022). Yet less is known about how the different terms commonly used to describe these skills may affect students' behavior. As such, the current study examined how the terms “life skills” and “social and emotional skills” affected students' willingness to engage in an assessment of their SE skills.

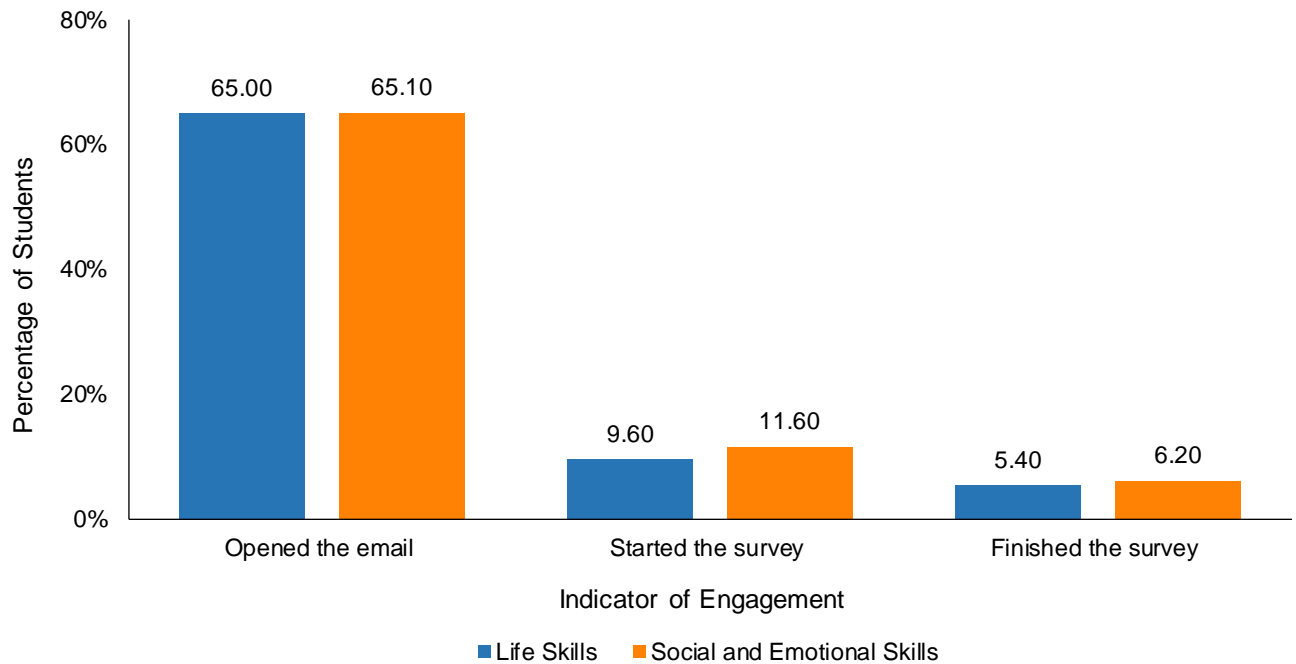
To examine student engagement, we sent a survey to 9,999 ACT® test takers following the April 2022 National ACT test administration. Half of the initial sample was randomly assigned to the “life skills” label version, and the remaining half was assigned to the “social and emotional skills” label version: 267 students completed the “life skills” version, and 304 completed the “social and emotional skills” version. The two versions differed in their use of “life skills” versus “social and emotional skills” in three areas: (a) the subject line in the emailed invitation to participate in the study, (b) the main body of that email (see the Appendix), and (c) the first line of the survey instructions. Apart from these differences, the surveys were identical and contained 37 Likert items that assessed student SE skills. Upon completing the survey, students were asked to rate their experience.

Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine group differences on several indicators of student engagement (see Figure 1).

- Groups did not differ in the frequency of opening the initial email: $X^2(1, N = 9,999) = .02$, $p = .88$, $\phi < .01$.
- More students in the “social and emotional skills” group clicked on the link to start the survey: $X^2(1, N = 9,999) = 9.75$, $p < .01$, $\phi = .03$.

- Groups did not differ in the frequency of completing the survey: $\chi^2(1, N = 9,999) = 2.52$, $p = .11$, $\phi = .02$.

Figure 1. Engagement with Skill Assessment as a Function of Group



Note. Opened the email = % of individuals who at least opened the initial survey invitation, including those who (a) just opened the email, (b) opened the email and clicked the link to start the survey, (c) started the survey but timed out or only partially finished, and (d) completed the survey. Started the survey = % of individuals who at least clicked on the link to start the survey, including those who (a) just clicked the link, (b) started but timed out or only partially finished, and (c) completely finished. Finished the survey = % of individuals who completed the survey.

These results provide no evidence that student engagement was greater for the “life skills” group than for the “social and emotional skills” group. In contrast, student engagement in terms of the “started the survey” indicator was greater for the “social and emotional skills” group, although the effect size was small. While it may not matter which label is used, the results of this study suggest that the term “social and emotional skills” may be slightly superior in engaging students. Retaining this label also has the benefit of remaining consistent with prior research on parent/caregiver support for SE skills (Daley et al., 2022; Murano et al., 2022) and the work of leading organizations such as CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning).

References

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Appendix

The text for the body of the email varied by group and included either the term “life skills” or “social and emotional skills” five times. The relevant portion of the “life skills” version follows:

Thank you for taking the ACT test. We are conducting research on an assessment of Life Skills. Some of the Life Skills we measure in this assessment include your ability to stay organized, manage stress, and socialize with others. ACT research shows that students who score higher in these Life Skills tend to have higher levels of college and career readiness. We are inviting you to pilot an assessment of these Life Skills. After completing the assessment, we ask that you complete a few short follow-up questions to receive your personalized report showing your current Life Skill levels.

The other version is identical except “Life Skills” was replaced with “Social and Emotional Skills.”



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