

Measuring Social and Emotional Learning Development with Behavioral Performance Level Descriptors

STEVEN MANNING, PHD CANDIDATE, JASON WAY, PHD, ALEX CASILLAS, PHD

Summary

- Along with core academic knowledge and skills, social and emotional learning (SEL) skills are critical for individuals to find success throughout education and the workplace.
- As part of the ACT® Holistic Framework™, the ACT Behavioral Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) were empirically developed to measure and provide diagnostic information about SEL skills across the education through career continuum.
- Teachers can successfully use the PLDs to differentiate the levels of effective SEL skills from elementary through postsecondary education.
- Information from the PLDs also can be used by educators to measure and track the effectiveness of SEL developmental programs, leading to improvements in SEL practices and positive outcomes for students throughout their educational career trajectories.

Overview

Core academic knowledge and skills such as math, science, and English Language Arts (ELA) have been extensively researched and

carefully categorized within educational systems. Because these skills have been thoroughly examined, educators have a better understanding of the developmental progressions that support advancement across the education through career continuum (i.e., from elementary through work). Other skills often referred to as social and emotional learning (SEL; a.k.a. non-cognitive, character, soft skills) also have been recognized as important indicators of success within educational and work contexts. Despite this recognition, SEL has not received the same level of attention as core academic skills. Additionally, assessments of SEL have not been widely employed within the educational system. To quantify SEL skills, understand how core academic and social and emotional learning are intertwined, and create developmental programs to improve SEL, educators, administrators, and policymakers require descriptions of the behavioral expressions of these skills across the developmental levels. This primer describes ACT's Behavioral Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) that were developed to clarify the task-related, interpersonal, and self-regulatory behaviors required for success from elementary school to work.

Steven Manning was a summer intern at ACT and is completing his PhD at Colorado State University. His research interests include measurement of SEL skills, employee engagement and disengagement, and employee well-being.

Jason Way is a research psychologist in the Center for Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning. He researches behavioral and psychosocial skills, including their relevance to important academic and work outcomes.

Alex Casillas is a principal research psychologist in Design-based Research specializing in assessment design and behavioral predictors of performance and persistence in education and work settings.

A Holistic View for Education, Career, and Success

The ACT Holistic Framework provides a more comprehensive examination of the range of knowledge and skills required for success in education and the workplace.¹ The framework includes four broad domains: Behavioral Skills, Core Academic Skills, Cross-Cutting Capabilities, and Education & Career Navigation. While core academic skills have traditionally dominated education and training programs, the interrelated domains featured in the Holistic Framework encompass the variety of skills needed for success in modern society. This paper focuses on the Behavioral Skills domain of the framework, particularly the PLDs, which specify the effectiveness levels of task-related, interpersonal, and self-regulatory behaviors needed to be successful in education and career contexts across developmental levels. The PLDs were developed as a foundation for creating assessments and curriculum/training programs to measure and help develop the SEL skills required for success.

The Behavioral Skills Framework² provides a guiding structure for researchers and practitioners to organize and understand behavioral skills across the education through career continuum. The framework is organized into six broad dimensions rooted in personality and behavior models, which are broken down into more specific component, subcomponent, and finally PLD levels. The more specific levels of the framework allow for a detailed view of SEL skills in closer proximity to the actual behaviors that make up the knowledge and skills needed to be successful. For example, within the Collaboration subcomponent, a student who *almost always completes his/her share of group work* would be

Dimension: Getting Along with Others	
Component: Cooperation	
Subcomponent: Collaboration—Completes group tasks and achieves group goals by effectively interacting with others	
Performance Level Descriptors for Collaboration	
Highly Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listens to all group members' ideas, frequently accepts ideas that are not his/her own Almost always completes his/her share of group work Demonstrates active participation in group work even without any teacher support
Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates participation in group work with only limited teacher support Usually completes his/her share of group work Listens to all group members' ideas, sometimes accepts ideas that are not his/her own
Somewhat Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates limited participation in group work without full teacher support Sometimes completes his/her share of group work Listens to only some group members' ideas, usually those similar to his/her own
Not Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ignores or criticizes group members' ideas when they do not align with his/her own Rarely completes his/her share of group work Does not actively participate in group work, even with full teacher support

Figure 1. Example of PLDs from the Collaboration subcomponent in elementary school

demonstrating a highly effective level of collaboration (see Figure 1).

Developing Behavioral Performance Level Descriptors

ACT researchers collaborated with education and workforce experts to generate PLDs across each of five developmental levels.³ Elementary, middle, and high school teachers; postsecondary instructors and academic advisors; and workforce supervisors were consulted as subject matter experts. One set of education and workforce experts was presented with the Behavioral Skills Framework and were asked to develop descriptions of behavioral expressions of the subcomponents within the framework. The behavioral statements they generated varied in levels of effectiveness and were aligned with experts' experience (i.e., high school teachers developed high school descriptors). Another set of education and workforce experts were asked to verify that the first set of statements were classified correctly and were asked to rank the effectiveness of these statements.

The PLDs were developed and validated following rigorous research methods while also maintaining clear relevance to the education and workforce environments in which they are meant to be used. The PLDs identify the behaviors critical for education and workplace success. In fact, for the final version of the PLDs, there was high agreement among the education and workforce experts about which behaviors were most important and which behaviors indicated highly effective, effective, somewhat effective, and ineffective levels of SEL skills.⁴ Further, teachers and supervisors were able to successfully distinguish between the different levels of effectiveness with relative ease.⁵ This demonstrates that the rigorously developed PLDs can be used by teachers and other raters to identify and diagnose SEL skills for their students and help them to develop their skills.

Support for Educators

The specific behavioral skills portrayed by the PLDs can be used to develop formative assessments that identify students' level of SEL skills. Although

many educators understand the value of social and emotional learning, attention within education has been exclusively focused on assessing, diagnosing, and improving core academic skills because teachers are often pressured to work on measurable skills. The PLDs provide the tools to quantify SEL skills, allowing educators to measure growth and improvement throughout students' educational trajectories. With such tools, teachers will be better able to demonstrate the positive impact of focusing on SEL skills in the classroom.

Programs to Develop Social and Emotional Learning

In addition to identifying SEL skills, PLDs also provide diagnostic information about where gaps exist within these skills. Using this information, developmental programs can be effectively designed to leverage students' SEL strengths and focus on the portions of the Behavioral Skills Framework that present growth opportunities for students. The PLDs may be used in conjunction with assessments of core academic knowledge to take a

more holistic view of education that integrates core academic knowledge with SEL and other important skills, providing students with the more comprehensive set of knowledge and skills required in modern educational and workplace environments.

As an example, students who do not have effective independence (within the Self-Confidence component) may see improvements in their understanding of the academic material when they are shown how to explore material and complete tasks on their own, without rushing to seek assistance or approval from others. As SEL skills are integrated into the educational curriculum and included in formative assessments, developmental programs, and teaching programs, we will gain a better understanding of how SEL skills and academic knowledge are intertwined and interdependent. An increased understanding of these skills and their reciprocal relationships will, in turn, lead to improvements in educational, work, and life outcomes for individuals. ■

Notes

1. Camara, W., O'Connor, R., Mattern, K., & Hanson, M. A., (Eds.), *Beyond Academics: A Holistic Framework for Enhancing Education and Workplace Success*. (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2015).
2. Casillas, A., Way, J. & Burrus, J. "Behavioral Skills." In *Beyond Academics: A Holistic Framework for Enhancing Education and Workplace Success*, edited by W. Camara, R. O'Connor, K. Mattern, & M. A. Hanson, 25–38. Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2015.
3. Latino, C. A., Way, J., Colbow, A., Bouwers, S., Casillas, A., & McKinniss, T., *The Development of Behavioral Performance Level Descriptors*. (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2017).
4. "Table 3: Agreement of Classification Across SMEs." In *The Development of Behavioral Performance Level Descriptors*, by C. A. Latino, J. Way, A. Colbow, S. Bouwers, A. Casillas, & T. McKinniss, 6. Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2017.
5. "Table 4: Comparisons Across Effectiveness Levels Rated by SMEs." In *The Development of Behavioral Performance Level Descriptors*, by C. A. Latino, J. Way, A. Colbow, S. Bouwers, A. Casillas, & T. McKinniss, 7. Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2017.