Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jappdp

Development and initial validation of a social emotional learning assessment for universal screening

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Social emotional learning
Universal assessment
Screening
Identification of at-risk children

ABSTRACT

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a critical aspect of schooling. While a theoretical model put forward by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has defined five well-accepted components of SEL, few assessments claim to measure these SEL components. This study examined the initial validation of scores for a new universal screening measure called the Social Emotional Learning Screening Assessment (SELA). The SELA's content and internal structure were based on the CASEL five model and the existing SSIS Performance Screening Guide. As part of a larger project, experienced Australian teachers of 268 children from prep through year 3 provided initial user and psychometric evidence for the SELA. The results indicated the teacher-completed SELA is well aligned with the CASEL model and offers educators a time-efficient, sensitive, and reliable measure that effectively identifies students at-risk socially and academically. Although preliminary but promising, further research with the SELA is required to replicate and extend these findings to educators in US schools and to test its application with larger, more diverse samples of students.

A contention is growing world-wide that children need more than traditional academic skills to thrive in the 21st century. In fact, many people believe children and youth need social emotional skills to complement and enable their academic skills (e.g., ACARA, 2013; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2016). This assertion about the importance of social emotional skills is based on research in several countries – Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, and the United States – that demonstrates social emotional learning (SEL) skills are essential for students to meet the challenges of learning, to help them prevent risky personal behaviors, to prepare them for the demands of a changing workplace, and ultimately, to promote their wellbeing (e.g., DiPerna, Volpe, & Elliott, 2002; Durlak, Weissberg, Dyminicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Elliott, Frey, & Davies, 2015; Guhn et al., 2016; Miyamoto, Huerta, & Kubacka, 2015; Nielsen, Meilstrup, Nelausen, Koushede, & Holstein, 2015).

This article focuses on the conceptualization and initial validity evidence for a new universal screening assessment that measures SEL competencies consistent with those advanced by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012). Specifically, we briefly review universal screening assessments of children's social emotional skills and identify the paucity of measures conceptually aligned with the widely-adopted CASEL SEL competency model. Second, we examine the development and initial psychometric attributes of a universal SEL screening measure called the Social Emotional Learning Assessment[1] (SELA; Elliott, 2016). The SELA was (a) designed with experienced teachers at the conclusion of a multi-year, class-wide social skills intervention program, (b) inspired by the CASEL SEL competencies, and (c) modelled on the SSIS Performance Screening Guide (Elliott & Gresham, 2007), which screens both social and academic behaviors of children.

1. Social emotional learning and social skills: defined and aligned

Social emotional learning has been defined as the "process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs to identify and manage emotions; to care about others; to make good decisions; to behave

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[1] The *Social Emotional Learning Assessment or SELA* was integrated into the SSIS SEL Edition Assessments and renamed the *SSIS SEL Screening and Progress Monitoring Scales* in 2017. This assessment is published by Pearson Assessments and authored by S.N. Elliott & F.M. Gresham.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2017.06.002
Received 19 September 2016; Received in revised form 23 May 2017; Accepted 1 June 2017
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ethically and responsibly; to develop positive relationships and to avoid negative behaviors" (Elias & Moceri, 2012, p. 424). Based on this comprehensive definition of SEL, leaders in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) advanced a theoretical model of SEL, often referred to as the CASEL five (CASEL, 2012), which includes:

- *Self-Awareness,* defined as the ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.
- *Self-Management*, defined as the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals;
- *Social Awareness*, defined as the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports;
- *Relationship Skills*, defined as the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed; and
- *Responsible Decision-Making Skills,* defined as the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

To date, the CASEL five model (CASEL, 2012) has directly influenced the development of dozens of school based intervention programs in the United States and an entire national curriculum on Personal and Social Capability in Australia. It has not until recently, however, directly influenced the development of assessments of the social, emotional, and academic skills commonly targeted within these programs. The relative paucity of assessments is likely the result of assessment tools being developed and published prior to the recent burgeoning interest in SEL and the disconnect between professionals involved in social behavior assessments and others involved with classroom interventions (Elliott et al., 2015). Interestingly, however, many of the skills representative of the CASEL five have been traditionally part of SSIS social skills assessments and intervention programs that have been in use for decades (Elliott et al., 2015). Numerous definitions of social skills exist, and nearly all describe behaviors that facilitate the initiation and maintenance of positive social relationships, contribute to peer acceptance, allow for individuals to cope with and adapt to the demands of the social environment, and result in satisfactory school adjustment while enabling academics (Gresham, 2002; Gresham & Elliott, 1990, 2008). These behaviors are part of a number of well-regarded assessments and clearly are embedded within many, if not all, the SEL core competencies advanced by CASEL.

2. Assessment of social emotional skills

Several methods exist for assessing children's social emotional skills, including direct observations, interviews, role-plays, and rating scales. Over the past two decades, however, the most frequently used method for assessing social emotional skills has been rating scales (Crowe, Beauchamp, Catroppa, & Anderson, 2011; Humphrey et al., 2011). There are a number of reasons for this rating scale preference. First, rating scales are relatively efficient tools for representing summary characterizations of individuals' observations of other people or their own behavior. As noted by Elliott and Busse (2004), rating scales are imperfect "mirrors" for reflecting images of individuals' social, emotional, and personal functioning; yet, in many cases, the information reflected by a well-constructed rating scale can be very useful. Second, rating scales are relatively easy for teachers, parents, and in many cases students to complete. Third, rating scales have been demonstrated to be more time-efficient and as valid as direct observations for assessing social skills (e.g., Doll & Elliott, 1994; Elliott, Gresham, Freeman, & McCloskey, 1988).

Three comprehensive reviews of measures of social and emotional skills for children and youth have been published (i.e., Crowe et al., 2011; Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016; Humphrey et al., 2011) over the past five years. All three teams of researchers conducted a comprehensive search of the research literature for measures used in empirical investigations of children's and youth's social behavior. While the Humphrey et al. team identified 189 measures, the Crowe et al. team, using a more restrictive set of search criteria, identified 86 measures all of which also were identified by Humphrey and colleagues. Finally, more recently, Halle and Darling-Churchill (2016), focusing on early childhood (ages 0 to 5 years), identified 75 social emotional measures. None of these reviews, however, included assessments specifically designed for universal screening of children and youth; although short-forms or briefer versions of some the reviewed measures have been used for screening students (e.g., Behavioral and Emotional Screening System from the Behavioral Assessment of Children Scales-2).

A critical review of social-emotional and behavioral screeners was recently published by Jenkins et al. (2014). The Jenkins' team of reviewers identified five common measures, and along with our search of the research literature and publishers websites, two more measures were identified. The resulting seven published SEL screening measures currently available for use are: Behavioral and Emotional Screening System (BESS; Kamphaus & Reynolds, 2007), Behavior Intervention Monitoring Assessment System (BIMAS; McDougal, Bardos, & Meier, 2011), Deveraux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA; LeBuffe, Shapiro, & Naglieri, 2009/2014), Social Academic and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS; Kilgus & von der Embse, 2015), Social Skills Improvement System Performance Screening Guide (SSIS PSG; Gresham & Elliott, 2008), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997), and Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD; Walker & Severson, 1992). Each of these screening measures has positive qualities and could be used for efficiently screening large numbers of students (Jenkins et al., 2014). Only one of the assessments, the DESSA, reports to align reasonably well with the CASEL five model, but at the time of the current study there was no published research on the psychometric quality of this assessment. As a result, the rationale for the invention of the present study's research problem is the paucity of a psychometrically sound screening measure that is content-aligned with the CASEL SEL competency model. This need, coupled with ongoing SEL research in Australia where a CASEL inspired national curriculum is influencing school and classwide interventions, motivated the invention of the universal screening measure investigated.

3. The present study: research problem and questions

The rationale for the solution of this problem was to design and validate the Social Emotional Learning Assessment[1] (SELA). Given our ongoing social emotional skills intervention programs in Australian schools, we explored the transformation of the highly efficient and reliable SSIS Performance Screening Guide (PSG; Elliott & Gresham, 2007), which was already in use in the schools, into a CASEL aligned screening measure. The SSIS PSG is the class-wide and universal screening component of the SSIS and is an example of a broad-band screening measure that allows for prosocial behavior to be contextualized along with academic skills. It was designed to be used as the first measure in any programmatic intervention effort for children within classes or entire schools to provide a quick, general sense of the status of children's social and academic functioning based on observed

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