The Taxonomy Project

Stephanie M. Jones
EASEL Lab, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Harvard University

WHAT IS THE TAXONOMY PROJECT?

The Taxonomy Project is designed to generate a coherent taxonomy of non-cognitive skills[1] that organizes, describes, and connects them across disciplines in a way that is agnostic to brand and sensitive to development and context.

The broad goal of the project is to clarify and connect the various ***frameworks*** (i.e., organizational systems used to guide research, practice, and policy efforts in this area such as CASEL, Character Lab, OECD) and ***terms*** (i.e., the specific skills or constructs and what they are called) in the field. In doing this, the project seeks to create greater precision and transparency and facilitate more effective translation between research, practice, and policy. We believe this will lead to more positive outcomes for our nation's children and youth.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A strong body of research shows that non-cognitive skills are important to children's success in school and in life. Currently, however, the national discussion of the domain is beset by dilemmas about how best to measure and promote skills in this area, in large part due to the fact that the domain is structured around a large number of organizational systems, or frameworks.

As of now, there exists no easy way to compare skills across different frameworks, connect them back to scientific evidence, and make informed decisions about standards and strategies for schools. When this happens, we risk translating research to practice in ways that waste time, money, and effort and imperil the status and value of the field as a whole (see box to the right).

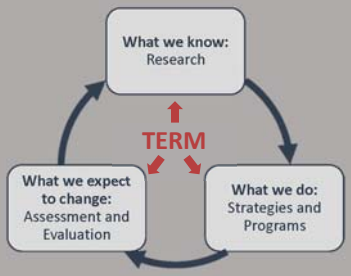
HOW DOES IT WORK?

The project uses a rigorous coding system to map frameworks and terms onto one another in order to illustrate both how non-cognitive constructs are related to one another across disciplines, as well as when and how science supports them. The system is designed to preserve the integrity of each framework without obscuring nuances in meaning or links to evidence. We are currently working with research- and practice-based experts to test and refine our coding system to ensure it reflects a comprehensive and accurate view of the field.

The resulting catalogue of terms – or taxonomy – will serve as the foundation for a set of practical, user-friendly tools that make it easy for individuals in the field of education and related disciplines to search across multiple frameworks, identify similarities and differences between them, and make decisions about what to focus on based on their specific needs and context.

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

As early learning and K-12 seek to embed SEL and non-cognitive skills into their learning environments, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers need to know what has been shown to be effective.



In a well-functioning relationship between research and practice (above), there is a rigorous link between three things:

- **The evidence** – what skills are linked to specific outcomes and what research says is effective for building skills,
- **The strategy** – how we plan to develop those skills in children and youth, and
- **The evaluation** – how we will measure it to determine if our efforts were successful.

Importantly, **it is the *words* we use** – the specific terms and the meanings we ascribe to them – that maintain those connections.

Without greater precision and clarity, and a mechanism for making connections between the many perspectives in the field, we risk creating standards that don't reflect the evidence base, implementing ineffective strategies, and conducting research that is imprecise and inconclusive.

[1] We use the term "non-cognitive" because it is frequently used by educators, policy makers, researchers, and journalists to refer to a broad set of skills that matter to student learning but that are not typically part of academic content areas such as math and literacy. We think the term is problematic because it suggests these skills are separate from cognition. In fact, many skills in this domain (including those described as social or emotional) involve cognitive tasks such as focus, reflection, perspective taking, mental problem-solving, etc.

For more information, please contact Stephanie Jones at stephanie_m_jones@gse.harvard.edu / 617.496.2223

OUR VISION FOR THIS WORK

Through a concerted outreach effort, the Taxonomy Project will be shaped by multiple stakeholders and we expect it to serve as a central driver in the ongoing effort for consensus in the field. Through our website and online platform, we envision this project to result in tools and products that are easy-to-access, easy-to-use, and that will support:

- **Researchers** to select measures that can accurately capture the impact of programs, strategies, interventions, etc.
- **Policymakers/district leaders** to identify common themes across settings and systems that often use different frameworks or standards (e.g., early childhood, college and career readiness, K-12, out-of-school time, etc.).
- **Funders** to develop guidelines and evaluation metrics that work for grantees with programs based on different frameworks or that target different skills.

PROJECT DELIVERABLES

Coding
- Coding system
- Database of coded frameworks
- Literature review and project report

Website
- Online, searchable thesaurus that shows how terms are related to each other and where they are connected to specific evidence
- Interactive visuals that make it easy to look within and across major frameworks of the field (identify what is unique and what is shared)

Outreach
- Briefs describing project findings
- Buy-in from field (interviews, meetings, presentations, etc.)
- Beta testing and rollout of website

WHAT IS NEEDED NEXT?

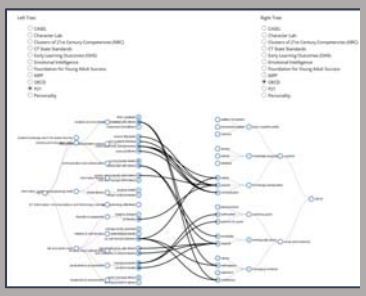
Based on feedback from stakeholders about what would be most useful for practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and funders in the field, we are also seeking funding for future work that expands the Taxonomy Project to:

Link to programs	Link to measures & strategies	Add additional frameworks	Link to state standards
Outcomes			
• Users will be able to identify the evidence-based programs that align with specific frameworks	• Users will be able to see where and how measures and strategies align with frameworks	• A more robust, comprehensive database of frameworks from which to draw information	• Users will be able to see where and how state standards align with programs, strategies, measures, etc.

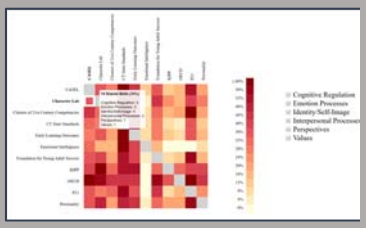
EXAMPLE VISUALS

Users can use these interactive visuals to better understand how frameworks and terms may differ or overlap.

What is inside the major frameworks of the field?



How does one framework compare to others?



Which frameworks focus on similar skills?

How are skills from one framework related to different terms/skills across the field and within other frameworks?

For more information, please contact Stephanie Jones at stephanie_m_jones@gse.harvard.edu / 617.496.2223