

Students Cannot Learn Soft Skills in a Vacuum

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Soft skills should be taught across the PreK-12 curriculum because they are essential for success in education, future careers, and personal life, enabling students to effectively collaborate, communicate, adapt to new situations, solve problems, and build positive relationships, which are crucial skills employers look for beyond academic knowledge alone; integrating soft skill development throughout schooling allows for gradual growth and real-world application in various learning environments.

Experts argue that teaching these soft skills should not be done in a vacuum or in other words, not in isolation. Research indicates that soft skills play a pivotal role in facilitating learning and collaboration within academic settings (Kuh et al., 2008). For instance, effective communication skills enable students to articulate their ideas clearly, actively participate in class discussions, and seek clarification when needed.

In the realm of education, academic success is often perceived as solely dependent on one's mastery of technical knowledge or *Hard Skills*. However, becoming an outstanding professional always takes more than the books – There is always an X factor. While hard skills are undeniably significant for academic success, the invisible catalysts are, in fact, soft skills. Soft skills, including teamwork and creative problem-solving, represent a vast spectrum of **interpersonal** and **intrapersonal abilities** that are in great demand in academics and workforce. They are the driving force behind cohesive teams, influential leaders, and adept problem-solvers.

Key points:

The Problem: When soft skills like communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and adaptability are not taught across the curriculum, the main problem is that graduates may lack the essential interpersonal skills needed to succeed in the workplace, leading to difficulties in collaboration, problem-solving, and career advancement.

Impact: Leads to a negative impact on team dynamics. Poor communication and interpersonal skills can disrupt team cohesion and productivity, leading to conflict and inefficient work processes. This affects the graduate's employability and overall performance.

The Solution: Intentionally weave soft skill development into existing curriculum across different disciplines, using real-world scenarios and project-based learning to practice these skills.

Ensure educators are equipped with the knowledge and strategies to effectively teach soft skills in their classrooms. They need to incorporate group projects, presentations, simulations, and case studies that necessitate collaboration, problem-solving, and communication skills.

Teachers must encourage their learners to provide constructive feedback to one another and engage in self-reflection to identify areas for improvement in their soft skills.

Benefits: Equips students with valuable life skills and making them more competitive in the job market. Graduates with strong soft skills are more likely to secure jobs and succeed in their careers. Soft skills are transferable across different industries and careers, providing individuals with valuable life skills beyond the workplace.

Enhanced collaboration – Teams with members possessing strong soft skills can work together more effectively and achieve better outcomes.

Positive workplace culture – Strong interpersonal skills contribute to a more positive and supporting working environment.

Recommendations:

Where possible, encourage students to obtain work experience at the same time as they receive classroom instruction. Many researchers argue that soft skills can be mastered by pairing classroom learning with work experiences where the skills can be practiced and demonstrated. Creating structures for employers to tell students about how they are doing using soft skills in the workplace could improve students' ability to practice and reflect on those skills.

When soft skills like communication, teamwork, and critical thinking are not taught across the curriculum, students may struggle to succeed in the workplace due to a lack of real-world learning opportunities, essential interpersonal skills; impacting their ability to collaborate, adapt to challenges, and effectively navigate professional situations. To address this, schools can integrate soft skill development into various subjects through active learning activities, group projects, and regular feedback, leading to improved student engagement, better career preparedness, and a more adaptable workforce.

Real-World Learning Opportunities by Grade Level

Not all real-world learning opportunities are appropriate for all ages. To make learning more real-world, different approaches should be taken at various grade levels.

Elementary school

Implement project-based learning that is hands-on and engaging. Project-based learning brings more real-world relevance than traditional education because it is collaborative and more focused on building problem-solving skills rather than regurgitating information.

1. When possible, bring in expert guests and mentors that expose kids to diverse types of careers, though truly authentic learning is more difficult when kids are still learning the basics of reading and writing.
2. Simple life skills like cleaning up, comparing prices, and time management should be taught, with special emphasis on social skills. Avoid going too in-depth into financial literacy, which kids will not absorb at this age, or real-world problems, which can be overwhelming for younger kids.
3. At this level, students can begin building their career portfolio. This is a living document which can follow them with their educational experiences. Building a solid foundation for College & Career Readiness is extremely important. If we start teaching these key skills as young as possible, students start realizing they can contribute to something much bigger than themselves. This is key to building a solid community of responsible people.

Unbelievably, there is a way to foster a culture of post-secondary planning in elementary school — and that is important. Elementary students are busy learners. They are doing the important job of laying the foundation upon which the rest of their education will be built.

They are working to understand basic math and literacy concepts, of course, but there is much more going on. They are discovering how to interact with their peers. They are beginning to understand *how* to learn and how *they* learn best. They are becoming social creatures, encountering differences for the first time, and discovering things that pique their interests. They are capable of setting goals.

All of this, though it seems far afield of the specifics of college and career planning that older students do as they approach graduation, is especially important.

The name for some of this is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and providing SEL activities for K-5 students will facilitate the development of social and emotional abilities that become the "soft skills" that are in such high demand in the workforce and so useful for college and career readiness, like:

- **Self-Efficacy** - Believing that we *can* do what is required to get the job done is not a simple platitude; it is often half the battle. Confidence and persistence are byproducts of this SEL concept, and students begin cultivating these skills in the early grades.

- **Teamwork** - Few people are ever in a learning or professional environment alone. The ability to work cooperatively is universally valuable, and it is one of the first SEL concepts that students learn, often through play.
- **Goal-Setting** - For young kids, goal setting comes from developing impulse control by creating good habits through repetition. It is a skill that will serve them very well as they start to realize their post-secondary goals (college is a big commitment!) Learning to patiently wait for recess or do a classroom job every day lays the foundation for honoring commitments later.
- **Effective Communication** - To get what we want and need in any relationship — whether in our educational, professional, or personal communities — we must communicate effectively. Elementary school is where we all begin to learn how to navigate social cues and adjust our communicative abilities accordingly. Additional guidance from adults in the form of a science-backed SEL curriculum helps our youngest learners navigate them.
- **Empathy** - Empathy is a keystone of emotional intelligence, and it is consistently recognized as a core characteristic of effective leaders. What is lovely about elementary-aged students is their incredible capacity for empathy. SEL activities, discussions, and group work celebrates and encourages empathy at a formative moment in students' lives.
- **Decision-Making** - Making constructive choices about personal behavior and understanding the consequences (good and bad) of those choices is something most adults are still learning to master. Incorporating it into the SEL curriculum at an early age and weaving it into later college and career readiness initiatives is increasingly a priority for student outcome nerds like us.

Young children *are* capable of the kind of future-focused self-conceptualization that we are constantly asking students to engage in when we ask them to participate in college and career readiness. Often, they do not even know that they are doing it!

Creating spaces for them to dream as big as possible and providing an environment that encourages social and emotional learning and exploration are two of the most important things that educators and school communities can do to set students up for resonant, relevant, and rigorous college and career readiness.

Middle school

Learners of this age are ready for a curriculum that addresses real-world problems. For example, students could work on a sustainability project, learning about the environment and collaborating with experts to develop solutions for their community.

1. Project-based learning should allow for more independence and choice. Such as, students get to choose which project they would like to complete during each theme based on their interests and which skills they want to gain.
2. Middle schoolers are ready for more authentic projects with real audiences.
3. Life skills instruction can introduce more complex skills like cooking, investing, and budgeting. Digital media literacy should also be a focus, as kids spend more time online.
4. Taking Career Exploration to the next level:

In the middle grades, a context for college and career readiness starts to take shape. Middle school can be identity-making, or at least, it can certainly feel that way! While identities are dynamic things, they begin to emerge in earnest right around this time. Students start to figure themselves out.

Many states have college and career readiness standards and directives that begin in middle school, which makes sense! As students begin to understand their interests and what they excel at and engage in the "mental time travel" that inspires actual aspiration, those directives are simply a way of asking students to apply these burgeoning skills and enthusiasm into a vision for the future.

College and career readiness in middle school should have a heavy exploration focus in a low-pressure environment. Students are already picking up paintbrushes, athletic equipment, coding languages, and clarinets. College and career exploration at this stage should primarily channel that natural curiosity into a series of questions, like:

- What do you like to do?
- What do you think you are good at?
- What brings you joy? What makes you feel confident?
- What feels challenging?
- What do you want to learn to do better?
- What is your favorite class? Your least favorite?
- What do you do in your free time?

It is an excellent time for students to explore what makes them who they are. Building a college and career framework that supports the middle grades often means implementing assessments. For instance:

Learning Style Assessments

At this point, most students already have an idea of how they learn best, even if they cannot necessarily articulate it. Administering a learning assessment can give students a vocabulary for what they already feel is true about themselves. Then, once they understand that they are a kinesthetic (or visual, or spatial, etc.), they can create strategies for getting the most out of school.

Personality Typing

So long as they are not delivered as absolute and immutable categories, personality typing can also play a key role in college and career readiness for middle schoolers. Meyers-Briggs, Holland Code, and Jungian typing assessments and activities are all useful tools for students who, again, need an expanded vocabulary to describe the ways that they experience the world and relationships.

Skills And Interest Assessments

For middle schoolers, it can feel bewildering to have to answer the question: "What do you like and what are you good at?" The answer to both questions is crucial to college and career readiness, but even as adults, they can be tough to answer confidently. Skills and interest assessments to the rescue! By providing a series of scenarios and asking students to choose the ones that appeal most to them, you can start a conversation that is far more productive.

All these assessments can inform something important — career exploration and discovery. In middle school, we can begin to make all these newfound discoveries about ourselves and present to students a world of fulfilling career options to explore just as we equip them with knowledge about what they know and do best.

Students do not necessarily want to be ballet dancers and astronauts forever. Once they understand how they can apply their unique skills and talents to the workforce, they will be ready to dig into exploring new pathways, well-prepared for the high school college and career readiness experience, where they will start to turn their dreams into actionable plans.

High school

Real-world learning is the most important at this stage, when kids are about to enter their adult lives. Offerings at this level should include work experience and learning opportunities where students can explore different career paths. Thinking outside of the box, 12th graders can spend a sizable portion of a week engaged in a virtual or in-person internship.

1. Project-based learning should emphasize authentic audiences and always serve a real-world purpose. Additionally, high schoolers should be encouraged to design their own project-based on real-world problems, rather than being given a pre-designed project to complete. This experience more closely mirrors what projects are like in adult life, and teaches important project management skills like taking initiative, setting timelines, and communicating with stakeholders.
2. At this level, educators can explicitly focus on college and career path exploration, allowing each high school student to explore their options and prepare for their chosen next step. They can be given the opportunity to build a

21st century career portfolio with a resume, opportunities for practice interviews and even gain certifications through online programs or electives.

3. Life skills education at this stage can more directly cover in-depth financial literacy topics like credit debt, and money management.

College and Career Readiness for High School Students

Wait, how did high school sneak up on us? How did we go from circle time to study hall, from eighth grade "prom" to AP Chemistry? Well, we are here. And once we are here, post-secondary life is imminent for students. In these upper grades, the importance of building a solid college and career readiness framework becomes most apparent.

Career Discovery

Career discovery as a foundational element of postsecondary readiness cannot be overstated. The "gold standard" of the college-going graduate is so ingrained and pervasive that for a while, there was a kind of cultural neglect of everything that happens, well, afterward.

Encouraging degree attainment above everything else left a lot of Millennials scratching their heads after college commencement ceremonies. A college degree can undoubtedly confer many benefits, but we must widen the focus. After all, college lasts just 2-4 years for most people. Isn't it more useful for students to consider *why* they may want to traverse that path?

Helping students *really* explore their shortlist of careers: what they pay, where they tend to be, and adjacent fields helps place the education and experience that they will need to acquire along the way into a deeper context. Because Gen Z is more financially pragmatic than their older Millennial siblings, it is no longer enough to say, "Do what you love." A college and career readiness framework that supports secondary career exploration must include:

Careers That Align with Student Interest Assessments

This is a wonderful place to start. Often, more careers align with student interests than their standard Occupational Outlook Handbook can hold or the handful of pages in the back of a freshly bubbled Career Aptitude Test might suggest. It is important to be sure your students have access to the avenues that lead to further exploration.

For instance: as a culture, we love to direct our artistic learners toward graphic design. And that may capture the interest of your burgeoning resident Banksy. But what about Industrial Design, Animation, Advertising or Merchandising, UX, or Motion Graphics?

Or, what if it would serve that student better to pursue a job that offers a predictable schedule and work-life balance so they can pursue their passion in their own time and decide for themselves whether they want to try to profit from it?

Few people are *only* good at one thing or interested in a single topic. Allowing career discovery to branch out into adjacent and exciting options gives students more options as they consider what they may want to do later in life.

Cost And Quality of Life: Financial Literacy for High Schoolers

Every career pursuit has an associated cost, and we do not just mean the sticker price of your basic 4-year degree. Increasingly, the most innovative school districts are adding financial literacy initiatives to the college and career framework they use. That means giving students a way to explore:

- The cost associated with pursuing the education required for a chosen career
- How scholarships, grants, and savings defray that cost and how to leverage them
- How to navigate paperwork associated with the FAFSA, state aid, loans, and more
- The long-term costs of student loans and how they affect take-home pay, creature comforts, and milestones like home buying or starting a family

This includes tools that allow students to see *where* the jobs are, how much it costs to live in the region, and how long those jobs might be there.

All of this is less splashy simple directives to "Do What You Love" or "Hustle Harder," but they allow students to go into the world clear-eyed and confident in their choices.

Help Students Discover New and Rising Careers

Finally, any college and career framework that does not include the careers that are just beginning to appear on the horizon is incomplete. The Bureau of Labor Statistics is a valuable tool for students, but it tends to lag a little because it is a snapshot of what *is*, not necessarily what *will be*.

College Planning at the High School Level

Now, finally, we get to College Planning. Why? Because it is not always helpful to sort through beautiful private liberal arts schools in Vermont or a public university known chiefly for its football team if you are pursuing a career in data analytics or veterinary medicine.

The years and money that students spend on school should work toward their end goals, so it makes sense to allow those goals to take shape first.

A career portfolio is a wonderful way to showcase students' skills and their accomplishments. It will help learners stand out in a competitive workforce. But you cannot just throw it together and "see what sticks." It must be prepared with the "end in mind." Upon graduation, this living document should reflect the students' professional and personal brand.

Career Portfolios at each level (be it Elementary, Middle School or High School) should include both hard and soft skills. Hard skills are specific competencies relevant to the job, such as coding or bookkeeping. Soft skills, on the other hand, include skills like teamwork, communication, cultural competency, empathy and more. [Source: Twelve Skills: The guide to becoming a stronger leader and accelerating your career Paperback – July 11, 2023 by Ed Barrows (Author), Laura M. Downing (Author)]

The portfolio should be designed so that teachers/advisors should assess soft skills based on portfolio content and interactions during interviews.

Conclusion

A real-world education should involve hands-on learning experiences, a focus on problem-solving, and opportunities for students to engage with mentors and authentic audiences. By redesigning education to emphasize these elements, we can better prepare learners for the challenges they will face in higher education, the workforce, and life in general.

By providing students with real-world learning opportunities and fostering critical thinking skills, we can empower the next generation of entrepreneurs, nonprofit leaders, and innovative thinkers to make a meaningful impact on the world.

Sources

Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A170304 to MDRC.

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