



Nurturing Student Development of Life/Career Abilities

Abstract

Life/career abilities cannot and should not be taught or tested in the same manner we handle other subjects. This presents a challenge but we must not ignore this domain because it is difficult to measure with traditional tools. Life/career abilities *can* be taught, but not in the traditional way. Begin to use a **nurturer** mental model to evoke the parental role in developing a child's behavior. Using a nurturing approach is one way to define the teaching practices needed to develop students' life/career abilities.

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Introduction

A career-ready student must possess the abilities to work effectively on diverse cross-functional teams, take initiative, persist and persevere in the face of setbacks and challenges, be creative, and react swiftly and thoughtfully to make sound decisions. There is no doubt that readiness for the workplace of today and the future requires a strong academic foundation and technical expertise. But, more and more educators are acknowledging that authentic workplace readiness involves the third domain of learning, which includes behaviors, mindsets, and character traits. This domain of intangible readiness traits is variously known as non-cognitive skills, employment skills, soft skills, and social-emotional skills. The Successful Practices Network (SPN) prefers to call this domain *life/career abilities*.

Efforts to teach life/career abilities can lead to frustration and disappointment, not because they cannot be developed, but because the objectives are vague and traditional teaching approaches are ineffective. The three key strategies for developing life/career abilities are: 1) begin with the end in mind, 2) measure what matters, and 3) nurture growth. This paper focuses on strategy #3, nurturing growth, to help teachers employ practices for developing life/career abilities each day through their interactions with students¹.

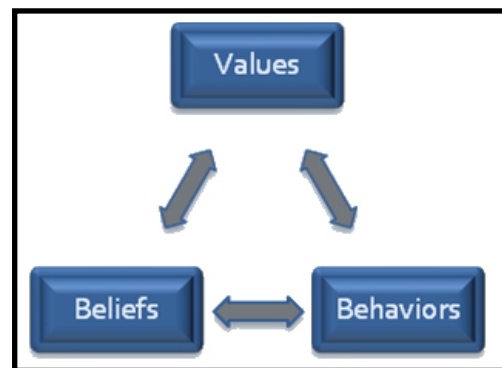
Values, Beliefs, and Behaviors

An important construct in understanding how to develop life/career abilities is to understand the underlying psychological differences among values, beliefs, and behaviors. While interrelated, they develop differently and require diverse learning approaches.

Values are the basis for human behavior and motivation. They are abstract, hierarchical, and dynamic concepts that essentially describe what we seek to achieve. Values such as loyalty, honesty, and service are often developed in concert with the family, peers, or community. These values are invisible until they manifest in behaviors.

Beliefs are judgments about ourselves and the world around us. Beliefs are the way individuals see the world. An example of a belief is student efficacy, or whether a student is optimistic about future success. Like values, beliefs are invisible and significantly influence behaviors.

Behaviors are the observable actions of an individual, some of which are clearly driven by values and beliefs. In asking teachers to give feedback to students regarding their development of life/career abilities, the focus has to be on behaviors that are observable, such as punctuality or collaborating in a team.



¹. Further information on defining and measuring these abilities can be found in the SPN white papers, *Life/Career Abilities Framework: Begin with the End in Mind* and *Data Practices for Developing Life/Career Abilities*.

SPN's *Life/Career Abilities Framework* distinguishes among values, beliefs, and behaviors by defining three categories of abilities: **Guiding Principles**, **Learning Mindsets**, and **Life/Career Competencies**. These distinctions are important when considering how best to develop these abilities in school.

Values = Guiding Principles
Beliefs = Learning Mindsets
Behaviors = Life/Career Competencies

Encouraging Development of Life/Career Abilities

Direct instruction can help students understand the connection between values, beliefs, and behaviors. But educators must embrace a different approach to teaching and learning in developing life/career abilities. This is because the traditional approach sees “teaching” as imparting new knowledge with expectations that students will retain and recall that knowledge – present-practice-test. This model works well when teaching vocabulary, for example. However, when learning becomes more complex, such as seeking to modify behavior, enhanced teaching strategies are required. These strategies include developing the context for students, providing applications of knowledge, and encouraging student reflection. Instruction does not change individuals’ deeply held values.

Parenting is a good analogy for the teaching approach required for developing life/career abilities. **Nurturing** is a term that applies to the parental approach and to the instructional approach needed to facilitate development of life/career abilities.

Developing life/career abilities is one of the important contributions of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in educating students. Other subject areas can also create learning experiences for students to reflect on choices as they connect guiding principles and learning mindsets to the world through their behaviors. With reflection, students can evolve in the development of their behaviors. Most facilitation of life/career abilities will be done through giving students feedback on their projects and performances of technical as well as academic skills.

Guiding Principles Are Seeds for Growth

Shared values define a family, bind members of a community, express the culture of an organization, and contribute to a healthy society. Family values are the starting point that guides each child in behavioral development.

The most important step for the school in embracing life/career abilities is to agree on a set of principles to be embraced by all **staff** and **students** and guide the behavioral growth of each student. Examples of guiding principles include respect, service, honesty, compassion, loyalty, courage, empathy, and citizenship.

Guiding Principles Values/Character Traits Characteristics to know and share	
Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define your own Emphasize the ones shared by entire school Tell stories to illustrate Offer visual reminders Repeat often 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rate students on principles Connect to rewards and punishment

The guiding principles selected must then be extensively publicized throughout the school. Staff should tell stories about the behaviors that reflect these guiding principles. However, extolling virtues of related behaviors should not extend to formally evaluating student behavior based on these principles.

In research on high-performing schools (Daggett, 2004), it was found that a learning environment which embraced guiding principles assisted students in achieving rigorous academic standards. The guiding principles created a culture that permitted learning to occur; they enabled instruction to be more orderly, meaningful, and successful. Guiding principles must become part of the school culture. Three elements define a school's culture: *artifacts*, *conversations*, and *procedures*. Schools can support guiding principles by displaying artifacts that represent them, such as student awards, inspiring quotations, and other visuals. In conversations with students, teachers should reflect on their words and listen and give feedback to students in keeping with the guiding principles. With respect to procedures, make certain that school rules, codes of conduct, and daily routines are all consistent with guiding principles.

Learning Mindsets Contribute to Healthy Growth

Learning mindsets are invisible drivers of the way students act in school. Mindsets are not behaviors, but many student behaviors that teachers observe are influenced by mindsets. To continue the parenting analogy, one role of parental nurturing is to maintain a child's healthy development by providing nutrition that will support normal growth. Negative learning mindsets are an impediment to intellectual growth like poor nutrition is to physical growth.

In *Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success* (ASCA, 2014), the American School Counselors Association summarizes the distinction between mindsets and behaviors and described the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students need to achieve academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development. The "growth mindset," defined by Carol Dweck (2006), has become prevalent in school improvement efforts. However, having a growth mindset as opposed to a "fixed mindset" is only one of several essential mindsets.

SPN's Life/Career Learning Mindsets

- **Balance:** "I will develop myself mentally, emotionally, and physically."
- **Belonging:** "I am comfortable as a member of this learning community."
- **Commitment:** "I will apply my talents and skills to achieve the best result."
- **Efficacy:** "I can succeed."
- **Growth:** "I can improve my abilities through effort."
- **Hope:** "I choose to be optimistic about future events."
- **Relevance:** "This work has value and purpose for me."

Research and practices around "Deeper Learning" (*Deeper Learning Competencies*, 2013) define four academic mindsets that are important to academic success: student perceptions around community, efficacy, growth, and value.

From research, standards, and working with model schools, SPN has identified seven distinct learning mindsets. These learning mindsets are defined in the Life/Career Abilities Framework.

As with guiding principles, the first step is for a school community to agree on which learning mindsets will be the focus. The next step is for teachers to begin to explore the mindset each

student holds. Since mindsets are developed by prior experience, each student brings a different perspective, or mindset, developed by those prior experiences. Since mindsets are invisible, it will take conversations and a strong relationship to learn the degree to which a student possesses positive learning mindsets.

Influencing mindsets is a long-term process that often requires an individualized approach based on where a student resides on a continuum from negative mindsets to positive learning mindsets. Praising students and offering encouragement is important but may not be sufficient. Teachers should identify students who are far from embracing a particular mindset and look for opportunities to engage them in a conversation, using questions to help them reflect how a behavior, learning experience, or an example of their work moves them closer to that positive mindset.

Learning Mindsets	
Beliefs	
Characteristics on which to reflect	
Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge that not everyone has same mindset Listen to students Compare and contrast behaviors related to mindsets Ask students to reflect on behaviors Offer encourage and support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume all students have the same positive mindset Rate students on mindsets

...cultivating growth mindsets involves a gradual process of releasing responsibility to students for them to become more self-sufficient learners, and praise is a communications technique that tends to be more helpful earlier in that process of building agency. Later on, adults can ask students questions that prompt them to reflect, so that they're progressing down the path toward independence. (Briceño, 2015)

Life/Career Competencies Are Visible Evidence of Maturity

Life/career competencies are defined as observable behaviors that contribute to career and college readiness as demonstrated over time through a variety of learning experiences that complement acquired skills and knowledge. Competencies define the degree to which students have grown in life/career abilities.

Five elements are critical to nurturing competencies: **relationships, expectations, providing experiences, modeling, and feedback.** Behavior is deeply influenced by human emotions, and frequent, positive interactions build **relationships** essential for beginning nurturing behaviors. Another essential element is establishing **expectations.** Using “presets” — i.e., having students

Examples of Life/Career Competency Behaviors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Big Picture Awareness - <i>Make Meaning!</i> 2. Career Smarts - <i>Focus on the Future!</i> 3. Collaboration - <i>Team and Trust!</i> 4. Communication - <i>Talk It Over!</i> 5. Creativity - <i>Think Differently!</i> 6. Engagement - <i>Get Involved!</i> 7. Information Skills - <i>Google It!</i> 8. Leadership - <i>Step Forward!</i> 9. Observation - <i>Pay Attention!</i> 10. Perseverance - <i>Don't Give Up!</i> 11. Problem Solving - <i>Figure It Out</i> 12. Productivity - <i>Do a Good Job!</i> 13. Self-control - <i>Take Care of Yourself!</i> 14. Self-direction <i>You Matter!</i> 15. Self-reflection <i>Think About It!</i> 16. Social Facility <i>Meet and Greet!</i> 17. Task Responsibility - <i>Own it!</i>

think about a behavior before being in the situation to exhibit that behavior — greatly influences a student’s decision-making and therefore the student’s response.

- Five Elements of Nurturing Behaviors**
1. **relationships**
 2. **expectations**
 3. **providing experiences**
 4. **modeling**
 5. **feedback**

Parents nurture developing behaviors by **providing experiences** — diverse and frequent opportunities for children to practice those behaviors. Providing experiences can take many forms, such as making play dates with other children, enrolling children in arts or sports activities, traveling as a family, or assigning appropriate chores around the home. Teachers

can plan learning experiences that present opportunities for students to exhibit appropriate behaviors, often through group work, projects, and challenging performances.

Throughout our development, we consciously or unconsciously imitate some of the behaviors we observe in others. Consequently, an essential way for teachers (and parents) to nurture life/career abilities is by **modeling** the expected behaviors.

The final element of nurturing is providing **feedback**, not in the form of a grade, but as constructive and consistent reminders when a learner’s behaviors do not meet expectations and acknowledgment or praise when they do.

Soft skills cannot be developed in the same way that skills for solving, for example, equilibrium prices and quantities.... These skills have to be developed through constant personalized feedback. (Mihnea Moldoveanu, quoted in Rotman, 2015)

Life/Career Competencies Behaviors/Soft Skills Characteristics on which to <u>give feedback and rate</u>	
Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define • Demonstrate • Model as a teacher • Role play • Describe body language • Set expectations • Give feedback • Use separate evaluation system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore the importance of behaviors • Wait until the end of the school year to give feedback • Raise or lower achievement grades based on behavior

Feedback can occur in multiple forms. *SPN Life/Career Competency Rubrics* is a resource for teachers on providing feedback. It identifies nearly 100 individual student performance measures to provide greater detail for the 17 recommended life/career competencies. For each performance measure, there are four levels to describe student competence: Beginning, Developing, Proficient, and Exemplary. Teachers could select from the rubrics for appropriate performance measures and use these to give students feedback. For example:

- Select rubrics to provide more information for students on employability skills.
- Add rubrics to plans for and evaluation of work-based learning activities to give students and employers more specific language to describe learning.
- When developing a rubric to evaluate a project or performance, select some evaluation criteria from the rubrics.
- When setting up a student recognition program, use the rubrics to provide more detail in the criteria for the award.

- When giving oral feedback to students on the quality of their work, use the rubrics to provide appropriate and specific language.

Sample Rubric

3. Collaboration	Practices teamwork, supports others, learns from others, assumes/fulfills role responsibly, negotiates to resolve conflicts			
<i>Performance Measure</i>	Exemplary	Proficient	Developing	Beginning
Listens and Cooperates With Team Members	Consistently listens to others and their ideas; helps the team reach its full potential.	Listens to others' points of view and makes a definite effort to understand their ideas.	Sometimes listens to others, but often assumes others' ideas will not work. Tries to work well with the team.	Does not listen to group's opinions and ideas; wants things done own way.

Life/career competencies *can* be taught, but not in the traditional way. Begin to use a **nurturer** mental model to evoke the parental role in developing a child's behavior. Using a nurturing approach is one way to define the teaching practices needed to develop students' life/career abilities.

Summary

Schools must move forward thoughtfully with curriculum, instruction, and assessment approaches to incorporate the life/career readiness domain. This applies not just to CTE programs, but to instruction in all subjects at all levels.

Many schools are undertaking an intentional and systemic approach to developing life/career abilities. A systemic process begins with defining the objective. The Life/Career Abilities Framework from SPN is an excellent starting point.

One important leadership strategy is to introduce data tools for planning and evaluating life/career initiatives. Data tools are described in the white paper, *Data Practices for Developing Life/Career Abilities*.

Life/career abilities cannot and should not be taught or tested in the same manner we handle other subjects. This presents a challenge but we must not ignore this domain because it is difficult to measure with traditional tools.

School-wide guiding principles set the foundation for developing positive behaviors. Encourage students to identify and reflect on mindsets that can be barriers to developing life/career competencies. Finally, teachers should embrace a nurturing mental model in their classroom practices rather than the direct teaching model to help students develop into confident career-ready individuals.

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