



Developmental Guidance and Student Acquisition of Social Competence

Hardin L.K. Coleman¹

Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, United States of America¹

Abstract

In a changing world, it is increasingly important to articulate what are the social emotional competencies that students leaving secondary schools need to acquire in order to be effective learners and citizens and how schools can facilitate the acquisition of such competencies. There is an emerging consensus that CASEL [1] has identified five of those core competencies. They are a) self-awareness, b) self-management, c) social awareness, d) relationship skills and e) responsible decision-making. There is not, however, a consensus as to how schools can facilitate the acquisition of these competencies. This paper will argue that each community needs to articulate the competencies they expect from their children and ensure that their schools implement a program of developmental guidance that helps them acquire these competencies. Developmental guidance is a combination of curriculum that teaches these competencies, experiences through which students can put them into practice, a systematic approach to developing and implementing a post-secondary plan for each student, and a way to assess the success of such an approach. In the same way that competence in literacy and numeracy is developed over a child's career in school through a series of increasingly complex coursework, we need to implement systematic developmental guidance in all schools so that we more effectively prepare our children to take their place in a world that is changing as a result of technological and social developments. There are several barriers to implementing effective developmental guidance programs. One is the lack of consensus as to the role of schools in providing such training. Another is the lack of consensus as to what are those desired competencies. A third is the lack of resources made available to support such implementation.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning, Developmental Guidance.

Introduction

In the United States and elsewhere, remarkable progress has been made since the middle of the last century to provide universal access to a PK-12 education with the intention of preparing citizens to be college and/or career ready. The modern economy of the 20th and 21st centuries has increased the demand for a populace that is literate, numerate and, increasingly, stemerate (i.e., a deep knowledge of scientific principles). To that end, countries have increased their investments in PK-12 education, post-secondary education, and on-going professional development to prepare citizens who can effectively meet the demands of the modern world. Countries who have made effective investments in PK-12 education have growing economies (e.g., China, Finland, Canada, or Singapore). Countries that have not been successful at creating universal access to education (e.g., Venezuela, South Africa,) have economies that are struggling to diversify and compete in the global economy, or are at risk for becoming unsustainable as their reliance on a single source of income (e.g., Saudi Arabia) runs out or loses its value to the global economy.

In the United States, it is clear that states which invest in their educational institutions have high performing economies (e.g., Massachusetts) and those that do not, are underperforming (e.g., Mississippi). It is also clear that students, who cannot succeed in our PK-12 systems, are unable to find stable employment and are more likely to live in substandard housing, have poor health outcomes, and be in unstable social relations. The cost of this failure is significant to them and to their communities. After 30 years of education reform in the United States, we have seen significant improvement in such areas as graduation rates and post-secondary success. At the same time, we have seen the achievement gap between those with economic security grow in relationship to those who are economically insecure. We have also seen a growth in social emotional insecurity across the economic spectrum as evidenced by increases in school violence, substance additions, and psychological disturbance. We have also seen,



around the world, a growth in between group hostility (e.g., violence in Sri Lanka, anti-immigrant activity on the U.S. border) and conflict within national structures over the distribution of wealth (e.g., the yellow jackets movement in France). As we in the United States and elsewhere are experiencing an asymptote in the improvement of academic performance and a failure to reduce the achievement and opportunity gaps between those with economic security and those without such security, it is time to consider what we have to do in education, particularly in the PK-12 context, to improve our ability to provide equitable access to a high quality and effective education to all children.

Design and Implementation of a Comprehensive Developmental Guidance System

After family wealth, demographic group membership and school quality, a significant factor driving effective school performance is the social competence of the student. This is particularly true for students who have at-risk factors such as poverty, housing and health insecurity, or lack fluency in the language of instruction. There is substantive evidence, however, that there are students who have these risk factors who manage to perform well in schools. As Coleman [2] identified, what differentiates these children from their peer with similar risk factors who do not succeed, what we find is that the “resilient” child is exercising the skills that CASEL has associated with social competence (a) self-awareness, b) self-management, c) social awareness, d) relationship skills and e) responsible decision-making) as a way of overcoming their risk status. As Bernatek [3] articulated, successful students who have the a) social, emotional, cognitive skills and competencies, b) attitudes, beliefs, mindsets, and c) character and values that help them to be fully engaged in their learning. It is important to understand that these skills and dispositions can be learned. They are not something with which one is born as they are learned through interaction with one’s environment. It is, therefore, vitally important that we add these competencies to what we teach in schools. If we are successful at integrating an effective social emotional curriculum into our schools then we will be successful at improving our overall performance and, significantly, closing the achievement gap between those who come to school with significant resources and those who come to school with significant at-risk factors.

A solution to this challenge is to establish comprehensive developmental guidance programs in each school as outlined by the American School Counseling Association [4]. In essence, a comprehensive development guidance is a critical component of an effective multi-tier system of support (MTSS) [5]. An MTSS is a way to organize services that are provided to all students, which also understands that, in order to help all students to succeed, we need to be able to systematically differentiate support based on the developmental needs of the individual student. Although conversations about MTSS is often organized around serving students with emotional and behavioral challenges or other issues related to atypical development, I am suggesting that it be a framework that we use to guide how we meet the development needs of all children in schools.

In the context of developmental guidance, an effective program will identified which skills will be delivered in the universal setting, e.g., in the classroom by the teacher or by a specialist coming into the classroom. Which will be delivered in a selected setting, e.g., which skills will be delivered in specialized settings and by whom. For example, some skills may best be learned in a specialize environment such as an internship. If internship are not a part of the universal curriculum, then a selected intervention may need to be created. Finally, some students may need a targeted intervention in order to acquire the desired developmental competencies.

The person or group responsible for the development and articulation of schools should include an articulate developmental guidance program into the system. Such a program starts with an articulation of the developmental outcomes that the school expects for each child and how achieving those outcomes will contribute to his or her performance in school. CASEL provides an evidence based understanding of those outcomes, which need to be articulated for each school system and each school within the system. Each community may want to include other developmental competencies that are relevant for their needs (e.g., multicultural competence, critical thinking, or creativity). A critical step in developing and implementing effective programs is to be articulate out the desired goals and then to organize to achieve them.

Once the desired outcomes are articulated, a system can be designed to meet those outcomes. Such a design process starts with identifying the data one will use to determine that the competencies have been met. Such data would be a combination of system level data (e.g., graduation rates, overall



academic performance, and achievement gap data), school level data (e.g., attendance data, percentage of students prepared to be successful in next level of learning,) and student data (e.g., demonstrated social emotional competence). In order to set up an effective system, it is important to build in a data based feedback loop so that, if the system is not meeting its goals, it knows where it needs to change. For example, a school maybe very successful at teaching and supporting student self-management skills but not social awareness. That can only be determined if they are systematic assessment of program outcomes.

Once the outcomes are articulated and the manner in which they will be assessed are determined, the next step in the process is to design a curriculum that will facilitate the student acquisition of these social competencies. This does not demand a complete redesign of the entire structure of teaching and learning in each classroom, school, or district. In many cases, it may only mean articulating how existing curriculum and support systems already promote this type of student learning. In many cases, it will also entail expansion and/or some redesign. How to implement this expansion and/or redesign should be driven by the data collected about the desired outcomes.

As these curricula are being designed and implemented, this is the time to be cleared-eyed as to who should be delivering the curricula and in what situation. Some these skills, e.g., self-management, are built into the workings of each classroom starting in the earliest grades. One cannot be successful in a school without that skill and most educators need high levels of self-management among their students in order to have a classroom environment that is conducive to learning.

To end, it is important to identify some of the barriers to the development and implementation of a comprehensive developmental guidance system. The first is the belief that not **all** children are capable of learning or having successful post-secondary careers. Following this belief is resistance to allocating the resources need to have a successful program. A related barrier is that resources for such a program may have to come from other sources in an underfunded system. Finally, there is a lack of substantive scholarship that demonstrates the value of such programming.

References

- [1] <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>
- [2] Coleman, H.L.K., (2008). Student accomplishment: Equity and the school counselor's role. In H.L.K. Coleman and C. Yeh (Eds.). *Handbook for School Counseling*. NJ: Erlbaum Press, pgs. 49-62.
- [3] <http://k12education.gatesfoundation.org/blog/what-were-learning-2/>
- [4] American School Counselor Association (2004). *ASCA National Standards for Students*. Alexandria, VA
- [5] Brenner, G.J., Kutash, K., Nelson, J.R., & Fisher, M.B., (2013). Closing the achievement gap with emotional and behavioral disorders through multi-tiered systems of support. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 36(3), pgs. 15-29.