Skills & Competencies for Youth Success in the Workplace
February 28, 2019
About Pathways to Education Canada
Pathways to Education is a national, charitable organization breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Its award-winning program is creating positive social change by supporting youth living in low-income communities to overcome barriers to education, graduate from high school, and build the foundation for a successful future. Through the collective power of partnerships, Pathways to Education’s innovative program is preparing youth for tomorrow.

Acknowledgments
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On February 28, 2019, Pathways to Education Canada convened its fifth Community Knowledge Roundtable. This one-day event brought together youth-serving organizations, post-secondary institutions, researchers, policy makers, employers, and young professionals to share their experiences and knowledge on how to support young people as they transition out of high school into post-secondary education and the world of employment. Specifically, the event offered an opportunity to discuss the skills, competencies, and dispositions needed to succeed in the 21st century workplace.

The roundtable began with a presentation on competency development by Pathways to Education's Director of Research and Evaluation, Konrad Glogowski. It then transitioned into a panel discussion on skills and competencies for success in the workplace. The panelists, including employers, non-profit leaders, and young professionals, shared their experiences, knowledge, and effective approaches to helping young people succeed in an increasingly knowledge-based and competitive economy.

Throughout the day, attendees had numerous opportunities to engage in small group discussions to share their knowledge and expand on some of the themes explored by the panel. On several occasions, panelists joined group discussions to share their expertise and engage in more focused and less formal conversations. The discussions focused on soft skills and competencies that are proving to be indispensable to young people as they enter today's job market.

The interactive and inclusive format of these discussions promoted attendee participation and offered valuable opportunities for attendees to interact directly with the panelists as well as each other. The resulting conversations centered around several common themes related to effective competency development—including barriers to building competencies; relevant skills in today's workplace; and the importance of schools, community organizations, and corporate organizations working together to foster these key skills in youth.

The presentation by Pathways Canada outlined an extensive literature review and research scan conducted by the organization to capture and synthesize existing research on competency development and its alignment with the supports offered by the Pathways Program. Specifically, the presentation explored competencies and dispositions that can help young people successfully complete high school, transition into further education, training, or employment, and maintain a positive trajectory into young adulthood and the labour market.
Titled “Mindsets for Success: Competency Development and the Pathways to Education Program”, the presentation highlighted the importance of non-cognitive skills and competencies in helping young people achieve both personal and professional success. Academic mindsets, self-regulation, resilience, and personal agency were highlighted as being of particular value, in addition to ensuring that young people are provided with supportive mentoring relationships and environments that buffer against adversity and promote positive development.

The presentation also provided several insights into developmental relationships that Pathways Program staff develop with youth, and the impact of these relationships on student success. It highlighted the critical supports offered to Pathways students by the culture of high expectations, caring relationships, and opportunities for contribution and participation that are inherent in the program. Referring to a recent pilot study by Pathways to Education, Konrad Glogowski identified several key findings that attest to the program’s impact on young people’s readiness for life after high school. The study supports the notion that young people enrolled in the Pathways Program develop strong self-regulation skills, academic perseverance, and a strong grasp of how to successfully transition to meaningful employment.

The event also provided attendees with an opportunity to explore the employer perspective on the skills they seek in young applicants, why these skills are crucial, and how young people today can best prepare for their future. The conversations also focused on what schools, community programs, post-secondary institutions, and employers can do to help young people acquire the skills and competencies they need to transition into the world of employment. The youth perspective, offered by a Pathways alum, confirmed the need to develop relevant skills that will give young people a competitive edge in the workplace.

The pages that follow provide a summary of the event, including insights gathered from the discussion panel, small group conversations at individual tables, and the presentation on the Pathways to Education research on competency development. The final page includes a list of third-party resources mentioned during the event that offer more focused and research-based insights into positive youth development, employability skills, competencies, and employment readiness.
Non-cognitive skills are personal characteristics related to motivation, integrity, organization, and interpersonal interactions—they are behaviours, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings that can be improved throughout one’s lifetime.

Competency is the ability to apply a set of related knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform a complex task. Skill is the ability to perform a task in any familiar domain.

Pathways Canada’s Research and Evaluation Department began the task of conducting a literature review on non-cognitive skills in order to understand the current state of the literature on youth competency development, identify competencies that align with the program, and identify methodologies and instruments.

To assess the extent to which the Pathways Program supports the development of selected competencies.
Mindsets for Success: Competency Development and the Pathways to Education Program

**Academic mindsets**, or growth mindsets, are important for youth development because they enable youth to transcend momentary setbacks in order to focus on long-term goals, not be derailed by difficulty, and cultivate the belief that intelligence is malleable.

**Self-Regulation** is important because it makes it possible for young people to manage their focus, delay gratification, control impulses, and stay on task as they work towards a meaningful objective. It also enables youth to have better relationships, better habits, and general success in life.

If academic mindsets and self-regulation are desirable outcomes, how can we help young people develop them?

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**Caring Relationships**
Students who are exposed to positive messages from caring adults internalize them as their own competencies, skills, and attributes. The Pathways Program is youth-focused and strengths-based.

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**Opportunities to Participate and Contribute**
Interactions provide opportunities for youth to engage in authentic decision-making and leadership opportunities, and to participate in engaging, challenging, and interesting activities that promote a wide variety of personal skills.

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**Culture of High Expectations**
Staff in the Pathways Program model that adversity is not a reflection of the student's personal shortcomings, but a characteristic of their environment that can be overcome with the right supports and resources.

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I think there is still this idea out there that we have to change young people, that there’s something wrong with them ... but there isn’t. Creating that environment, tapping into their strengths, having that strengths-based lens. Seeing that this is a student with assets and strengths is absolutely critical.

- Feedback from focus groups with Pathways practitioners
Panelists agreed that relationships within the community, school, and corporate sector for successful youth development are pivotal. Understanding and educating youth for the labour market and competencies needed for in-demand jobs requires a feedback continuum between the community, school, and the corporate world. All panelists felt that the importance of communities, schools, and the corporate sector working together was important for adolescents to develop the skills they need for success beyond graduation. A continuum between these three pillars can provide youth with the appropriate competency development and social networks that will support them as they enter the labour market.

**Youth Development**
Panelists agreed that relationships within the community, school, and corporate sector for successful youth development are pivotal.

*We all have a role to play in supporting youth to develop skills.*
- Fabio Crespin

**Labour Market**
Understanding and educating youth for the labour market and competencies needed for in-demand jobs requires a feedback continuum between the community, school, and the corporate world.

**Community**
Networking, hard and soft skills development.

**School**
Experiential learning, skills education.

**Corporate**
Partnerships with community organizations and schools.
Both panelists and attendees highlighted competencies they believed were most important for youth to be successful beyond graduation. Regardless of professional backgrounds, top competencies extended beyond corporate, educational, or community-sector borders. One important note that panelists stressed was the importance of multiple competencies, with no competency succeeding in a silo.

“We have to be building a cohesive—hard skills and soft skills—competency in all people, including our own children, so that they can succeed.”
- Annie Kidder

**Resilience**
“So we can definitely all see the labour market requires **resilience**, team work, showing up on time.”
- Fabio Crespin

**Adaptability**
“It’s flexibility and **adaptability** to learn new concepts or technologies more so than what you know in your brain, but how elastic is it, how strong is that muscle.”
- Jodi Levy

**Collaboration**
“Specific skills that we’re looking for authenticity, passion, curiosity, simplicity and **collaboration**.”
- Jodi Levy

**Agency**
“I find a good strategy in my workplace is being hungry and **being ambitious**. Having that conversation with the employers of ‘hey what can we do for professional development?’”
- Jenny Lai

**Growth Mindset**
“When starting a new position or job, it is important to have the **growth mindset**, ‘I can do it, I belong here.’”
- Jenny Lai

**Self-Regulation**
“**Self-regulation** to sort of take those steps and move forward from one area to the next.”
- Attendee
Barriers to Competency Development

While having competencies can promote success beyond high school graduation, not all adolescents are given the same opportunities to develop them. Some barriers to competency development that our panelists highlighted most frequently include lack of a caring adult, gaps in education, and limited networks. These factors most impact newcomers and youth who live in contexts of disadvantage.

Lack of Caring Adult or Mentor
Developmental relationships can help youth develop skills by having a caring adult who sets high expectations and encourages self-reflection.

Gaps in Education
Supporting youth to develop competencies through education varies by teacher practice and school neighborhood, often resulting in inequitable opportunities for students.

Limited Networks
Social capital grown through community organizations and the workplace can help youth build skills and competencies for success beyond graduation.

I think it’s a group of things: repression, school, maybe they don’t have a caring adult, nobody who told them, like I told my son Joe, ‘Joe, I believe in you, son, I believe in you.’
- Fabio Crespin

Try and understand where the gaps are and why are they there—particularly looking at competencies.
- Annie Kidder
Panel Discussion

Growing Competencies

When asked how one would help youth develop competencies, panelists highlighted the importance of education, community organizations, developmental relationships, self-reflection, and personal grit.

**Grit**
“Mentors from Pathways to Education can advise how you should proceed into the situation, but it is you that are experiencing it, and it’s you that needs the grit.”
- Jenny Lai

**Community**
“The power of people, the privilege of being able to help other people raise the bar, to provide a place of meaning, engagement, growth, personal development, self actualization.”
- Jodi Levy

**Education**
“We’re not just looking for individual, heroic human beings, but we are actually saying, ‘This is important. We’ve got to make our schools like that.’”
- Annie Kidder

**Self-Reflection**
“Being able to name your skills, name your competencies … that’s something that I think we could all do better at helping young people do.”
- Sarah Earl

**Developmental Relationships**
“You feel supported and they encourage and foster skills, growth mindset, and that sort of ambition.”
- Jenny Lai
What We Learned

The Community Knowledge Roundtable offered an opportunity to bring together policy-makers, researchers, youth-serving organizations, employers, and young professionals to discuss how to best support young people on their trajectories to rewarding futures. Together, we asked: what skills, competencies, and dispositions are critical for young people to succeed in the demanding workplaces of the 21st century? The answers are clear. Youth benefit from being adaptable and having a growth mindset, a strong sense of agency, and self-regulation skills. Youth succeed when we invest in creating supports that help them overcome barriers and build on their innate strengths and interests. Our keynote presenter, the panelists, and the audience agreed that communities, schools, and employers all have a role to play in preparing young people for the unpredictable world of future employment.

The Pathways research on competency development shows that the Pathways Program helps young people obtain not only their high school diploma—a critical building block in today’s competitive labour market—but also key competencies that help them prepare for and take full advantage of future opportunities. Our research project also confirmed years of insights from practitioner knowledge and ongoing program measurement: when we support young people through meaningful, lasting relationships and environments that buffer against adversity and promote positive development, they develop the skills, dispositions, and competencies that lead to success.
Our research focus on competencies and our results also resonated with the Community Knowledge Roundtable participants. This strengthened our resolve to continue to research and report on how our work supports competency development and career readiness. As an organization devoted to positive youth development and supporting youth in some of Canada’s most under-resourced communities, Pathways Canada is committed to continue our work and provide the supports young people need. Youth participating in the Pathways Program are benefitting from meaningful mentoring and supportive community-based environments that help them grow and prepare for whatever they aspire to in the future. We know that our emerging focus on competency development and career readiness will make their accomplishments even more visible, and we look forward to continuing this critical programmatic and impact measurement work.

‘Success’ goes beyond fulfilling individual goals and extends to having the agency and competencies to influence the world. We need to develop facile thinkers, inventors, and problem-solvers with not only deep content knowledge, but also the creativity and flexibility to apply their knowledge to novel situations.

(Nagaoka et al., 2015, p.13)
Suggested Resources

Aspen Institute of Economic Development

Building the Core Skills Youth Need for Life: A Guide for Education and Social Service Practitioners

Building Workforce Skills in Afterschool

Community Programs to Promote Youth Development

Conference Board of Canada - Employability Skills

Escalator: Jobs for Youth Facing Barriers – Companies and Youth Moving Up in the World

Foundations for Young Adult Success, UChicago Consortium, 2015

The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030
http://bit.ly/CKRs7i

Improving College and Career Readiness by Incorporating Social and Emotional Learning
http://bit.ly/CKRzZm

Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society, OECD, 2003
http://bit.ly/CKRA0r
Suggested Resources

The New Basics: Big Data Reveals the Skills Young People Need for the New Work Order

People for Education
https://peopleforeducation.ca/

Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World: The OECD PISA Global Competence Framework

Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future

Research Matters Newsletter by Pathways to Education Research & Evaluation Department

Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development

Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners, UChicago Consortium, 2012


We All Count
weallcount.com

Youth that Thrive: A Review of Critical Factors and Effective Programs for 12 - 25 Year Olds
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