

Research Spotlight

**COMPETENCY
DEVELOPMENT**

MARCH 2022

About Pathways to Education Canada

Pathways to Education is a national charitable organization breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Its award-winning program, which provides students with a holistic combination of financial, social, and one-on-one supports, is proven to promote positive youth development by meeting the needs of students living in low-income communities during the critical years of high school.

In close partnership with local organizations, schools, and volunteers, Pathways Program staff identify priority barriers youth face and help them map out a tailored plan to achieve their goals. With this support, many Pathways alumni pursue post-secondary education or training or gain meaningful apprenticeships, internships, and employment opportunities.

Suggested citation:

Pathways to Education. (2022). Competency development: Research spotlight. Toronto: Author.

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Pathways to Education Research Spotlights explore specific topics in the field of Positive Youth Development by presenting current, evidence-based knowledge in a plain-language summary.

Intended Audience

The Spotlights are designed for professionals who directly contribute to the well-being and development of youth. This includes those who work directly with youth, such as mentors, educators, child and youth workers, youth program front-line staff, and social workers, as well as those who work indirectly with or for youth: youth mentoring program managers or youth researchers. These Spotlights can also be helpful to parents or non-parental adults, such as aunts, uncles, neighbours, community leaders, and other informal mentors.

Methodology

This Research Spotlight draws on a literature review of relevant peer-reviewed, English journal articles in ERIC, PSYCInfo, and Google Scholar. We focused on studies published within the past 10 years, however we also considered earlier foundational publications, in addition to grey literature. The primary search terms employed were: soft skills, competency, self-regulation, development, skills.

This research was compiled through the lens of focusing on youth living in situations of risk and disadvantage, and so the information gathered has been presented to apply to that population. It is particularly relevant to those of a high school age, approximately age 13-18.

Competencies

Young people need more than academics in order to succeed in the 21st century. They must have the ability to utilize various skills and attitudes that enable them to complete complex task and work with others.

WHAT

What are competencies?

- Competencies are often referred to as soft skills, non-cognitive skills, social emotional skills, employment skills, and more.
- Competencies are patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, such as attitudes and personal traits (e.g. growth mindset, self-regulation, agency, self-efficacy)¹.
- Competencies are important for individual success. For example, young people who believe their intellectual abilities are predetermined are less likely to take on challenges and put in effort, especially in the face of adversity².
- Members of society who are adaptable, resourceful, and aware of those around them are "increasingly becoming the hallmark of a well-functioning society", particularly to achieve sustainable development goals and participate in democratic institutions^{3,4}.
- The Sustainable Development Goal on Education (SDG 4) requires that countries support young people through education systems that address learning needs, as per Target 4.7 "ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development [...]"^{5,6}.

HOW

How are they developed in adolescence?

- Adolescence is a time of dramatic change during which young people experience shifting dynamics with their parents and peers, and increased responsibilities. This is a critical phase for their cognitive, social, and emotional skill development⁷.

- People are not born with fixed competencies or social emotional skills. Instead, these skills are developed throughout one's lifetime and shaped by experiences⁸. However, opportunities and experiences that youth are exposed to can vary significantly based on socioeconomic status⁹.
- Because skills are more malleable in early years and adolescence, developing skills and competencies early enables young people to refine and enhance their skills as they prepare for post-secondary education and the labour market, giving them a head start^{10,11}.
- Youth programs help young people develop competencies people regardless of their socioeconomic background or race/ethnicity^{12,13} by providing opportunities to learn and interact with caring adults who encourage reflection^{14,15,16}.

So what?

- Competencies lead to better short- and long-term developmental outcomes, such as prosocial behaviour, academic achievement, lower levels of emotional distress, healthy eating, and reduced substance use^{17,18,19,20}.
- By helping young people to be critical thinkers and problem solvers, competencies prepare them to meaningfully engage in their communities and civic society, lead fulfilling lives, achieve personal goals, and influence the world around them²¹.
- Competencies have been found to be better predictors of success than standardized scores or cognitive skills^{22,23}.

"STUDENTS WHO HAVE A SENSE OF BELONGING AND PURPOSE, WHO CAN WORK WELL WITH CLASSMATES AND PEERS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS, WHO CAN PLAN AND SET GOALS, AND WHO CAN PERSEVERE THROUGH CHALLENGES—IN ADDITION TO BEING LITERATE, NUMERATE, AND VERSED IN SCIENTIFIC CONCEPTS AND IDEAS—ARE MORE LIKELY TO MAXIMIZE THEIR OPPORTUNITIES AND REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.

(Jones & Kahn, 2017, p.4.)



- Research shows that self-control, emotional stability, persistence, and motivation are stronger predictors of long-term outcomes such as post-secondary attendance, earnings, and retirement savings²⁴.
- Competencies such as self-efficacy were found to be better predictors of income at the age of 25 than cognitive skills²⁵.

Why are they especially important for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds?

- Students from affluent backgrounds typically report higher competencies than their peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds²⁶. This could be due to differences in extracurricular opportunities and the fact that students with a lower socioeconomic status have more challenges to overcome and fewer resources²⁷.
- An OECD study (2021) showed that competency development dips at the beginning of adolescence. This makes high school years a critical time to focus on competency development because of the positive effects they have on educational attainment and social outcomes as young people begin to plan their futures^{28,29,30}.
- Competencies have been shown to improve mental health³⁴ and guard against emotional distress³⁵. This is important for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who, on average, report lower life satisfaction than their socioeconomically advantaged peers³⁶.

Pathways to Education is making a difference

- Pathways offers evidence-based programming that focuses on more than just academics, through one-on-one and group mentoring, activities, and workshops, Pathways addresses the developmental needs of the whole person. Research shows that participation in this type of high-quality program is associated with a more positive attitude towards school, higher future aspirations, improved grades, reduced drop out rates, and stronger competency development³⁷.
- Based on the principles of Positive Youth Development, Pathways supports competency development by offering structured experiences and activities that provide opportunities for young people to take initiative, challenge themselves, and develop new skills and attitudes^{38,39}.
- Activities are given weight through developmental relationships with caring adults. These relationships contribute to competency development by offering a sense of connection, personalized guidance, and encouraging self-reflection⁴⁰.
- Studies show that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel less socially connected at school and experience a lower sense of belonging and less positive relationships with teachers than students from affluent backgrounds⁴¹. Pathways provides youth with a safe place where they can feel socially connected and experience a sense of belonging and positive relationships, conditions necessary for personal growth and competency development.

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