

Elementary Career Counseling by Jennifer Curry

A few years ago, I was giving a presentation to graduate students from various education disciplines. I asked, “At what grade level should we start to promote career and college readiness in schools?” Overall, the group consensus was that career and college readiness should begin in high school. I was disappointed, although not surprised, by this answer.

The misconception that high school is the time to begin career and college preparation is nothing new, but vastly incorrect. Like any area of development, career development is sequential and builds over time. For example, we don’t expect students to arrive to high school and take algebra, geometry, or calculus without any prior math courses. Can you imagine how they would react? Yet, there are some schools and districts where the same thing happens with career and college development; some students are not given a cohesive career curriculum until they are in late secondary education and are still expected to know how to make thoughtful career and college choices. In order to properly prepare, students should have access to quality, elementary career and college curriculum that is consistently delivered through a comprehensive school counseling program. Indeed, students in elementary school love career exploration and their natural curiosity, imagination, and sense of adventure lend to creative investigations of the world of work. School counselors should seek to make career and college exploration fun and exciting. Following are some essential ways to engage students, parents, and teachers in the most formative years of career development: pre-kindergarten through 5th grade.

PreK-1st Grade:

Students

In the early years of elementary school, students should be introduced to careers in their community. Not all students will have family members with careers, but all students will live in communities where individuals do work. Community helpers are some of the most logical and easy world of work careers to introduce. Some examples include: doctors, firefighters, police officers, cashiers, bakers, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), mail carriers, construction workers, teachers, librarians, trash collectors, and so on. All of these individuals help our community to prosper. To assist students in identifying community helpers there are lots of books, games, and activities that school counselors might choose to use such as, “*Career Day*” by Anne Rockwell (see book list for more). School counselors might also consider using career puppets to teach kids about the career or allowing students to color pictures of community careers (for free downloadable coloring pictures see XXX). Once students have mastered identifying community helpers, school counselors should then introduce tools of the trade used by community helpers, vehicles driven by community helpers, and the clothes that community helpers wear. This allows students to better understand the work that helpers do and how it connects to what they are learning in school. For example, a baker uses measuring cups and measuring spoons. Measuring is a math skill. School counselors can bring a lot of different “tools of the trade” to the classrooms and have students connect the tools to what they are learning. Another tool example is a doctor’s stethoscope. This tool relates to health, a subject that

most students in PreK-1 are familiar with. After introducing students to the tools of the trade, the school counselor can give each child a picture card with a career and a can of play-doh and ask the students to sculpt a tool of the trade the community helper uses for the career displayed. At the end of the activity, I like to have students do a gallery walk where the students walk around the room and view the tools sculpted by their classmates.

Teachers

The key message to share with early elementary teachers is that careers matter and are an essential part of the overall curriculum. Equally important, school counselors should share with teachers that children can realistically understand careers as early as kindergarten (Gottfredson, 1981). Teachers may help by connecting classroom content to careers. For example, most early elementary teachers have a science unit on weather. Teachers might include weather careers as part of the unit, such as meteorologist and climatologist. More ideal, school counselors and teachers may consider co-facilitating lessons that integrate career and content. A great example is a kindergarten engineering unit. Engineering combines math and physics concepts. The school counselor may introduce what an engineer does and why the work of an engineer is important. Next, the teacher and counselor co-facilitate an engineering activity. One really fun activity is to have students build hexbug mazes and structures. Hexbugs are inexpensive, micro nano-robots. Students might be placed in groups and challenged to see who can build the highest hexbug tower or longest hexbug maze. Materials might include legos, magnetic blocks, wood blocks, paper towel rolls, and more. Students can measure their structures and explain their process for building. At the end of the activity, they get to let their hexbugs run through the mazes or climb up the towers.

Teachers might also consider how to integrate career with field trips. If a teacher is planning a fire station field trip, having the firefighters discuss what training they had to become a firefighter would be helpful and what subjects in school prepared them to be firefighters would also be instructive for students. Another example for teachers planning writing curriculum, U.S. geography lessons, or even using books such as *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown, could be to plan a field trip to the post office. The students can write a post card beforehand that they take with them to send and they could learn what training and tools a mail carrier needs from the local postmaster.

It is important to encourage teachers to keep a lot of career clothing on hand for dress up and fantasy play. Some examples include firefighter, baker, astronaut, doctor, and so on. Other ways to integrate career in free time include career puzzles, books, and play centers.

Parents

For parents, early elementary is a time of opening career doors. Encourage parents to discuss their own careers as well as the careers their children see when they go to the grocery store, the doctor's office, the post office and more. In our home, we encourage our son to "try on" different careers in everyday life. When we are cooking I will ask him if he would like to be a chef. I give him an apron, a chef's hat, and have him do as much of the cooking as possible (i.e., adding

seasonings, stirring, running the mixer). Afterward, I ask him what he learned about being a chef and we discuss what he liked or didn't like about being a chef.

2nd and 3rd Grade:

Students

Students in 2nd and 3rd grade are particularly adept at understanding how objects relate to each other. For example, they understand that planets are different from stars or meteors, but that all of these objects are found in space. Similarly, they know that there are animals that live in the desert, animals that live in the ocean, polar animals, and animals that no longer exist (e.g., prehistoric animals, extinct animals). Piaget (1977) called this ability to classify objects *seriation* and it is very useful in career and college development. Students in 2nd and 3rd grade understand the connections between groups of careers and the differences, or nuances, between careers. Therefore, the 2nd and 3rd grades are an ideal time to introduce career pathways and clusters. It is also a great time to add depth to students' career understanding and diversify their knowledge of careers. For example, students in early elementary likely recognize the career of doctor. During these grades, teachers, including P.E. teachers, and counselors might consider introducing specializations of the medical field. A great way to do this is to look at standards for a particular grade. The school counselor might review the health standards for 3rd grade and realize that in his or her state, 3rd graders learn about nutrition, the food pyramid, the importance of exercise and healthy weight, and the skeletal and muscular systems. The school counselor may review all career clusters and explain how career clusters relate similar careers. For the described unit, the school counselor might review some specialized careers in the career cluster of Health Sciences including nutritionist, dietitian, orthopedist, and orthopedic surgeon. To help students begin to understand the connection between careers and college, school counselors can highlight the career pathway of one of the careers in this cluster (i.e., explain how someone chooses a career, such as nutritionist, and that a pathway is the process one takes to become a nutritionist through ongoing education). At the end of the unit, school counselors may choose to have a fun, culminating game such as career jeopardy with pathway and cluster questions, career baseball (answer questions to move your team through the bases), and Career Tic Tac Toe. Always introducing the elements of movement and fun will help. As an elementary school counselor, I was fortunate to have a classroom, so I would actually turn my classroom into a game board for games like Career Tic Tac Toe and the students were the game pieces. I made large Xs and Os that they carried to their spots as they answered questions. If the weather is good, you might also consider drawing the game board outside with sidewalk chalk. The possibilities are endless: career hopscotch, career checkers—remember, the point of the game is to learn, but to have fun while learning!

Teachers

Because learning career clusters is crucial to future career development and understanding future career pathways, it is important that students connect school and the world of work as much as possible. School counselors should partner with teachers before the school year begins to help teachers determine links to the curriculum for career clusters. Many schools are beginning

microsocieties and second and third graders can learn a lot about citizenship, careers, social responsibility, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy from these types of activities. Microsocieties may be developed in the whole school or in a classroom (www.microsociety.com). The concept is that for a time period each school week, students run their own society. Each person is assigned work and they earn a “wage” based on the kind of work they do (this might be fake dollars or credits of some type). Students try out different types of work throughout the year and earn various wages. Their wages can be saved and they may visit a “store” to make purchases at select times throughout the month. Items are donated to the store by community partners. There are also opportunities for students to be entrepreneurs. For example, at one school, a student wanted to sell brownies. His mother agreed to help him but his teacher insisted that the student had to pay for his own materials for the brownies, and that if his mother helped, he had to pay her a wage. He also had to compensate his parents for overhead as he used their kitchen and oven to cook the brownies. The student did make a profit, but he also learned about business expenses. Another teacher had a class garden and her students had to take turns working as gardeners. The vegetables, fruits, and flowers they raised were sold within the school community to parents, teachers, and staff. Other students who were not gardening had to run the store and make change for customers (customer service work), some students did supply ordering and logistics (i.e., make supply lists for seeds, soil, lime, fertilizer), and others served as accountants who budgeted (i.e., estimating costs of needed materials, determining how much to charge for products, projecting potential profits).

Parents

Second and third grade is the ideal time to host family night activities. For example, school counselors and teachers might co-host a Family Fun Night and have kids and parents rotate through “Fun with Fractions” games. Game examples include the Connect Four Fractions game, Fraction Pizza (art activity with parents), Fraction Domino War, Equivalent Fractions Spoons Game, Equivalent Fractions Missing Numerator Board Game, and so on (all available on Pinterest). If possible, get local businesses to provide door prizes for kids and parents, dinner, and child care for smaller siblings. School counselors should give a short presentation (10 minutes) prior to beginning the family fun on the importance of fractions for career development. Who uses fractions in their daily work? Lots of workers including architects, construction workers, doctors, pharmacists, musicians, bakers and chefs, stock traders, and many more. There are some short videos that exemplify this on your tube that counselors may wish to use in their presentation (e.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nU_kdjeGACI). At the conclusion of Family Fun with Fractions night, families might be able to make their own delicious recipe for fraction, success such as no bake cookies or small dessert pizzas using fractions if the school can secure donations for these items.

4th and 5th Grade:

The last grades of elementary, 4th and 5th grade, are crucial to career and college readiness. In terms of career development, students need to develop the mindset that learning is lifelong and that they will likely need to pursue some type of postsecondary training for any career they pursue. In classroom presentations, school counselors should begin to help students understand

the progression of K-12 schooling (elementary, middle, high school) and then what postsecondary options are generally available to students. At this time, it is ideal to have students begin to investigate careers using technology and introduce them to Occupational Outlook Handbook, O*Net, and social media. To encourage interaction and to engage students in personally and meaningfully, school counselors might choose an interactive activity such as placing students in groups of 4, and have each group watch a video of how to get into a specific career (for example here is a video about how to become a doctor <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kskWZSRAoeg>). Then, students list the skills, training/education, exams or competencies, physical requirements, personality or dispositions a person with this career should have, and some ways to learn more about the career. Next, have students look up the career on Occupational Outlook Handbook or O*Net to fill in any information they missed. Next, have students in each group mind map collaboratively, using markers and chart paper, all that they learned about the career and present it to the rest of the class. Hang the mind maps in other classes so other students also get the benefit of learning as they pass by the mind maps. Other activities include having students develop career posters and have a student run career fair with the types of information listed above, or developing career trading cards of three to five careers that they explore online and list the information they learn on Occupational Outlook Handbook. For the trading card activity, have students take 5 minutes to trade cards with other students in the room with the goal of trading at least 2 cards.

Teachers

Students in 4th and 5th grades should be pushed to develop self-regulatory habits as they begin the transition to middle school. Self-regulation includes stress and time-management and the ability to organize their own materials. Academic progress monitoring should also begin at this age with students understanding that they may monitor their own grades and adjust their performance to pursue greater competence in their academics. School counselors and teachers should brainstorm ways to assist students in taking greater responsibility for their academics, including academic goal setting at the beginning of each grading period, identifying students with difficulty organizing materials, and seeking opportunities to encourage students to think about promoting students' leadership, conflict resolution skills, and time management. One ideal way to foster better time management is to have students implement their own time-on-task strategies for homework. Often, in late elementary students and parents complain that homework takes hours every night. By helping students break down their work into time-on-task segments (i.e., work for 15 minutes with a 3 minute break), students are better able to focus for shorter periods of time.

Parents

Working with parents of this age group means preparing them for the middle school transition and the changes to come. Helping parents recognize that their students will need to take greater self-responsibility and that middle school comes with a host of interpersonal, academic, and social nuance is critical to assisting students develop as future employees. Parent workshops should include information on middle school success skills and how middle school academics are crucial for preparing students for high school. Some specific parent workshop topics may

include: Middle School and Social Media (covering cyberbullying, setting boundaries for your child's social media participation, determining how much and how often to monitor your child's social media use); Middle School and Changing Academic Expectations (covering study skills, organizational skills, personal responsibility); and Recognizing Signs of Stress (covering the balance between helping your child too much and too little and recognizing when to step in and assist).

Conclusion

In summary, the elementary years are an ideal time to focus on career and college readiness. Elementary students love to be engaged in a variety of hands on activities and their natural curiosity and creativity make career exploration so much fun. Elementary years are about expanding students' career knowledge and opportunities. If elementary school counselors focus on providing a developmental, sequential career curriculum for students, then middle school counselors are able to naturally transition these students to the next phase of career development: making meaning of their personal interests, aptitudes and skills as they relate to careers.