

# Elementary Career Exploration: A Primer for Postsecondary Planning



**Authored By: Julie A. Cerrito, Ph.D., NCC, NCSC, ACS**  
Assistant Professor, School Counseling Graduate Program Coordinator  
Department of Counseling and Educational Leadership  
Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania - Bloomsburg

## Introduction

The process of career development is a lifelong journey that begins in childhood and continues through adulthood (Drier, 2000; Gibson, 2005; Harkins, 2001; Hartung et al., 2008; Magnuson & Starr, 2000). During the elementary school years, young learners discover their interests, values, talents, and skills that are applied to the world of work as part of becoming future ready.

**Thus, childhood provides a necessary foundation in acquiring skills that assist in later career planning and decision making.**

The importance of career awareness and exploration with elementary school students is well established (Cerrito et al., 2018; Magnuson & Starr, 2000; Schultheiss, 2008). School experiences prepare students for life experiences recognizing that work is an essential element in individuals' lives (Hutchinson et al., 2016). National organizations, such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019), support students' career development in achieving success in both school and life. Career interventions and planning with school aged populations have been strongly correlated with positive academic outcomes and school success (Carey & Harrington, 2010a, 2010b; Herr et al., 2004). ASCA Student Standards, which include Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College, Career, and Life-Readiness Standards for Every Student (2021), emphasize the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed for academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development.

Additionally, the National Career Development Association (NCDA, 2004) provides a framework of guidelines for career development competency and includes the three areas of: 1) personal social development, 2) educational achievement and lifelong learning, and 3) career management. Associations such as ASCA and NCDA lend substantive support for the importance of career planning and interventions across the lifespan beginning in childhood. "Viewing career development as an event rather than a process sets up students for failure as many students have not developed the developmental precursors required for effective educational and career planning" (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022, p. 306). Therefore, it is important for career development programming to occur across all levels of development within schools.

## Constructing Solid Career Concepts at an Early Age

Childhood career awareness provides a necessary developmental foundation that encourages elementary school students to begin exploring the range of career possibilities that await them. Children are typically career curious and adept in exploring the occupational choices that exist in their surrounding communities. Ripe with these possibilities, the developmental time span of elementary school allows children to engage in pretend play by trying on various work roles and responsibilities. As parents and professionals, we encourage those aspirations which may lead to later achievements. Career connections formed in elementary school provide building blocks leading to later career decision making (Helwig, 2004; Magnuson & Starr, 2000).



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Through proper placement of these career building blocks, elementary school students essentially become the architects in constructing their own careers. Consider how buildings are constructed. Engineers would agree that a solid foundation is necessary to ensuring a strong and lasting structure to support additional levels. Professional painters use primers first to enable the paint to properly adhere and produces a pleasing aesthetic. If we apply these principles to fields such as education and counseling, we recognize that children crawl before they walk. They learn the alphabet and phonetic sounds before mastering reading independently. They develop number recognition before adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing. Similarly, there is a process for constructing careers. That process occurs along a continuum beginning in elementary school and continuing through middle school, high school, and into adulthood.

**There are various junctures that can be considered pivotal points for career development – elementary school is, without question, one of them.**

Understanding that elementary students' careers are under construction allows for scaffolded learning in supporting children's career readiness. Scaffolding is one way that parents and professionals can bolster and support children's career development. A teacher, or educator, uses scaffolding to enhance learning and aid in the mastery of tasks (Hong Ng & Cheung, 2018). This can be done by systematically building on students' experiences and knowledge as they learn and acquire new information. The importance of scaffolding in education can be applied to career education programming as well. Curry & Milsom (2017) shared a story from an elementary school counselor who used puppets, pictures of preferred and non-preferred activities, and various books to expose kindergarten students to careers. When students entered first grade, the school counselor used the base knowledge obtained in kindergarten about careers to begin discussing career clusters. By the end of first grade, 80% - 90% of the students were able to match careers with the appropriate cluster.

Key differentiators for each grade level are typically used to recognize the differences in developmental milestones and career readiness. To account for such differences, tasks should be simpler for students in grades PK-2 and more complex and challenging for grades 3-5. Comprehensive programming that is tailored to each grade level allows grade level concepts to build upon each other that can also be supported through use of scaffolding techniques.

## **Early Career Education Programming & Integration in Schools**

Career education programming also requires a solid foundation in elementary school (Hartung et al., 2008; Magnuson & Starr, 2000). Students who are not on the appropriate course trajectory by eighth grade may not meet their college and career aspirations and the effects may be irreversible (ACT, 2008).





Students fare better in postsecondary decision making when they have been exposed to the planning and preparation years in advance of when postsecondary decisions need to be made. Preparation is key and should start early. The task of choosing a lifelong career is less daunting when it is explored in stages. The process of chunking, a concept used frequently by teachers and counselors, is an excellent example of this. Chunking is the process by which large pieces of information are further divided into smaller units, or chunks, that are easier to retain in short-term memory. As a result of this cognitive process, individual pieces of information are bound together into a meaningful whole. Expecting adolescents and young adults to accurately predict their happiness in a career without providing all the resources to do so is similar to asking someone to effectively aim at a target while being blindfolded.

**Career development that begins late in adolescence lacks the skill building and introspective components needed to solidify a successful career decision.**

(Gottfredson, 1981)

Research indicates that it is essential to prepare students at younger ages for college and career readiness (ACT, 2013; Arrington, 2000). Lack of planning often limits postsecondary options as students transition out of high school (Arrington, 2000). Kolbert et al. (2016) indicated that by not planning effectively, students limit or eliminate career choices which can result in lower pay and fewer career opportunities. This aligns with Linda Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise which describes how individuals eliminate possible career opportunities based on gender, academic ability, personal interest, and beliefs on attainability.

According to Gottfredson's theory, students will have eliminated the majority of their career options by the end of their elementary school years (Gottfredson, 1981). This underscores the importance of career awareness and exploration programming during the elementary years. Career preparation programs that begin in elementary school guide students through completing developmental tasks that motivate them to set and realize specific goals (Maree, 2018). Success can be defined as where preparation meets opportunity. Thus, preparing students through systematic career awareness early in life allows students to recognize and realize opportunities when they are presented. It also allows them time to consider other alternatives in order to make the best-informed decision as they consider future career and postsecondary opportunities.

It is important to integrate career exploration into the total educational curriculum. Career planning does not need to be a standalone feature in schools. It can be connected to other curriculum areas required in education and often dovetails with subjects such as reading, writing, language arts, math, and science.

This is especially true given the positive correlation between career planning and academic success. Educators can find innovative ways to integrate career development with academic development. Understanding the value of educational time in a school setting, it is critical to embed career development into academic and social/emotional concepts that are already being addressed. The simultaneous implementation of Social Emotional Learning, along with fundamental college and career planning concepts, allows counselors to better support student achievement across numerous key indicators for long-term success, including increasing motivation to stay in school, reducing academic stress, identifying the importance of academic opportunities, and student confidence in the classroom. The importance of integrating elementary career development into the total educational curriculum is essential as it serves as a foundation, or primer, for building skills needed at subsequent developmental grade levels. Without addressing developmental career concepts in childhood, a substantial void exists. This void will almost certainly prevent purposeful planning for deeper conversations that often occur in middle and high school as students draw closer to important career and life decisions.



Kuder Galaxy, an early career awareness program for elementary school students, serves as an auxiliary that can help to fill the missing void in elementary school career programming. The online platform provides opportunities for child play through interactive games, activities, videos, and lessons. The activities are built upon the tenets of John Holland's Theory of Vocational Choice, a career theory that has produced a vast amount of research in career development. Galaxy is the only elementary career awareness system that is rooted in Holland's research regarding the importance of the person-environment fit for choosing a career.

Galaxy also supports the use of grade level differentiation of activities by chunking various concepts such as what is work, why do people work, and how to prepare for work.

These concepts are developmentally presented through the various grade level themes and associated activities. The program can be utilized by students independently or with educator collaboration, making use of scaffolding concepts that are valued in the education profession. In these ways, Galaxy provides both utility and accessibility for users and supporters. It also provides the needed link between academic, social-emotional, and career development with recognition of how the three are connected. The program provides lesson plans that align and connect with content in academic areas helping students to measure gains in knowledge through career awareness activities. Given the recognition in research regarding early career awareness and planning as a primer for later career decision making, Galaxy serves as an essential foundational program in schools.

“Parents and career counsellors are often not properly equipped to provide guidance to the young children, to help them interpret what is happening in the world, to contextualize rapid technological changes, and to foresee the impact of change on children’s career-lives” (Maree, 2018, p. 1). This is where an early career awareness program, such as Galaxy, can become an invaluable resource in schools. Students must be provided with tools and knowledge to make informed decisions about academic plans and future options (Kolbert et al., 2017) and career programs need to be systematic and coordinated across all levels of development within schools (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Kolbert et al. (2017) also indicated that curriculum related to postsecondary planning should use standards, competencies, and indicators to plan the curriculum, implement activity-based interventions, evaluate student outcomes, and report data to stakeholders.



Galaxy accomplishes those tasks and dovetails seamlessly with the middle and high school program, Kuder Navigator, which allows for adequate and appropriate exposure to a complete K-12 career curriculum through differentiated grade level content and concepts that build upon each other in a developmental sequence. McFadden and Curry (2018) examined state leaders and school counselors’ roles in career development in elementary school and found that only 4% of state education leaders believed that career development efforts were aligned across all three levels (elementary, middle, and high school). Understanding that career development is lifelong, many early career learning tasks begin in childhood.

### Beginning the career exploration process early provides enhanced learning opportunities for all elementary students in the quest to be future ready.



Through Kuder Galaxy, I envision a complete culture shift for what it means to be ‘college ready.’ Getting our kids, from the time they enter the structured school system, which are arguably their most impressionable years and feeding them information on careers, in a language they can comprehend, is absolutely brilliant.

**Stacy Speller**

Student Success Coach  
Bethune-Cookman University

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