

Module 4: Be Productive

Thematic Areas: *Integration, Work Skills, Job Placement, Financial Literacy Civic and responsibility, Vocational Guidance.*

Introduction

The school, between learning and developing skills for workforce integration.

Inter-American Democratic Charter Corner:

Article 11: Democracy and social and economic development are interdependent and are mutually reinforcing.

Today's youth must face a particularly complex labor market. On one hand, there has been an increase in educational opportunities in the region, leading to higher expectations for well-being. On the other hand, in practice, these aspirations often clash with the difficulties young people face during the school-to-work transition, challenges in entering the labor market, and negative work experiences, creating a situation of “generational disenchantment.”

The region has achieved the highest educational coverage in its history. Several reports note that nearly all primary school children are enrolled, access to secondary education has grown significantly, and younger generations spend, on average, two more years in school than older generations (UNESCO, UNICEF, and ECLAC, 2021). The World Bank (2023) also notes that in 2022, the net enrollment rate in primary education exceeded 95% in most Latin American countries.

At the same time, youth employment remains precarious and relatively stable over time. The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2024) warns that “the youth unemployment rate in the region reached 13.8% in 2024, nearly three times higher than that of adults. Moreover, 6 out of 10 employed young people work under informal conditions.” The mismatch between expectations and labor opportunities increases frustration and discouragement among youth, which can lead to conflicts over lack of opportunities (ECLAC, 2024, p.53).

In Article 12, the Inter-American Democratic Charter emphasizes that poverty, illiteracy, and low levels of human development are factors that adversely affect the consolidation of democracy. In this context, the role of schools is reaffirmed as essential for providing relevant and quality education that promotes the development of human potential, and alleviating poverty¹ and facilitates and promotes successful youth integration

¹ Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001). Available at:
http://www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1_en_p4.htm

into the labor market. Current labor conditions are varied, and having the necessary tools and training alone is not enough to secure an excellent job.

Schools can be a suitable space to identify these disparities and help young people learn about labor rights and mechanisms to defend them. They can become spaces to discuss the role of work in life experiences and to guide youth in exploring their interests and concerns when choosing a profession or job.

a. Get ready for work and Develop work-related competencies and skills at school.

Youth labor market entry is one of the central elements marking the transition from school to adulthood, a transition that begins to manifest, for example, in the ability to generate one's own income, reducing to some extent economic dependence on parents, and the capacity to establish a personal life project.

The contribution of the school is fundamental in facilitating and supporting this transition, providing the framework and useful tools to overcome the challenges of the labor environment. However, this transition does not occur without facing a series of challenges, among them are the following:

- Continuously develop skills and competencies to perform specific roles and adopt innovative technologies in the workplace.
- Build adaptive capacities to adjust to changes in the labor environment.
- Strengthening employment intermediation services to make the connection between job offers and job seekers more solid and efficient.
- Improve the relevance of training offerings so that they respond to the changing needs of the world of work.

The development of labor skills is a process aimed at improving the abilities, knowledge, and attitudes of young people, so that they can successfully perform their future work tasks. A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context.²

School plays a fundamental role in the development of competencies and skills, as it provides the necessary foundations for students to successfully get ready for work, be entrepreneurs and integrate into the world of work. The development of competencies in school can encompass various aspects, such as:

² OECD (2003), "The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies Executive Summary". Available at: [https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/EDPC/ECEC/RD\(2010\)26/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/EDPC/ECEC/RD(2010)26/en/pdf)

Development of basic skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reading and writing: effective oral and written communication. ▪ Mathematics: problem-solving and data analysis. ▪ Technology use: computer skills, basic software, internet, etc.
Promotion of socio-emotional skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teamwork and inter-team collaboration (networks). ▪ Assertive communication. ▪ Adaptive, situational, and/or distributed leadership. ▪ Adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to understand and adjust to the environment. ▪ Conflict resolution and methods to reach agreements ▪ Critical and creative thinking.
Technical and vocational training	Some schools offer workshops or technical training programs that prepare students directly for specific occupations (for example: carpentry, electricity, nursing, IT), while others help students explore vocational options and prepare in areas that are of interest to them.
Promotion of values and work ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Responsibility and commitment. ▪ Punctuality and respect for rules and agreements. ▪ Respect for others, honesty, and a sense of collaboration.
Vocational and professional guidance	Through talks, interest assessments, and guidance fairs, students are guided to understand their aptitudes and interests, enabling them to make informed decisions about their future careers.
Projects, internships, and simulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participating in school projects, science fairs, or business simulations allows students to develop skills such as planning, organization, and decision-making. ▪ At more advanced levels, some schools include professional internships, service-learning activities, and community work.

Source: Own elaboration

The development of labor competencies can be achieved through various means, such as on-the-job training, dual education, tutoring and mentoring, direct experience, online learning, and service-learning, among others. There is a wide variety of tools, methodologies, and strategies to develop labor competencies; however, there are some key ideas that can be considered both in the school environment and in the workplace, for example:

- Design technical training plans linked to the skills and competencies intended to be developed in young people, considering their interests and the opportunities offered by the environment.

- Have a policy framework in place that reinforces and guides coordination between sectors, revalue technical and vocational education, improve and give greater emphasis to teacher training, direct education and training toward development of skills and adopt a proactive approach to make updates and improvements, promote and strengthen internship and apprenticeship programs, among others (OAS, 2024).
- Strengthen work-based learning and apprenticeships to facilitate smooth school-to-work transitions and foster skills development that responds to the learning needs of young people (OECD, 2024).
- Develop innovative and flexible learning programs and pathways that foster the development of core competencies: social and emotional skills, cognitive skills, basic digital competencies, and relevant skills for achieving environmentally sustainable economies, so that young people acquire transferable abilities that allow them to adapt to environments where jobs disappear, emerge, and continuously transform (ILO, 2023, p.6).
- Provide work-related learning opportunities so that young people, from secondary school onwards, can apply and develop their skills and competencies in real situations, which requires efforts to strengthen links with companies and productive sectors, generating curricula relevant to the needs of the environment (ECLAC, 2024, p.31).
- Promote lifelong and collaborative learning, creating work teams and study groups to share experiences, developing mentors and/or coaches to provide personalized feedback and guidance, and fostering a continuous learning process.

b. Transitioning to the labor market: a key element in the social integration of young people into adult life.

Integrating into the workforce provides young people with a sense of legitimacy and social recognition, facilitates their inclusion in broader networks, and enables active participation in other social, economic, and cultural spheres. Work is therefore fundamental for social integration, civic participation, and the realization of individual aspirations, while also allowing young people to contribute to the economy of their communities. For this reason, when youth employment is weak or precarious, both their personal well-being and key aspects of broader socioeconomic development are negatively affected.

In this sense, it is highlighted the need to deepen and enhance youth employment strategies and facilitate the school-to-work transition, acknowledging the challenges that young people face in the labor market in terms of unemployment, informality, and inactivity. Likewise, vocational guidance, employment intermediation, and public

employment services are some of the areas where the Ministries of Education and Labor can work together are emphasized.³

Along the same lines, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS) has developed a fundamental ethical and regulatory framework for the training and work of young people, in both educational and work contexts. The IACHR (2011) points out that respect for the dignity and human rights of children and adolescents is essential to promote their comprehensive development and fair participation in the labor market. This ethical approach links the development of job skills with training in principles that guide responsible behavior, respect for diversity, and active participation in society.

In this way, the OAS, through the IACHR and other related bodies, seeks to make ethics a central component of youth training and work, creating respectful and fair work environments that favor the full realization of young people's potential. This reaffirms the need to transform training and work practices to integrate ethical training with technical skills, promoting the development of active and responsible citizenship that respects human rights and contributes to more just societies⁴.

On the other hand, the post-pandemic transition strongly impacted workers in Latin America, especially young people. In 2023, the unemployment rate among youth aged 15 to 24 was three times higher than that of adults, while their employment rate was 21 percentage points lower. Additionally, the youth informality rate in the region was 1.3 times higher than that of adults, revealing persistent and structural gaps in employment, participation, and informality, along with several other dimensions of job quality (ILO, 2024).

This reality is compounded by other challenges for young people not participating in the labor market. For every three young people who work, one neither studies nor engages in paid work.

In this context, the concept of labor market insertion can apply to different situations; it is increasingly common for people to change jobs and adapt to new scenarios, whether for personal reasons, such as starting a career, or due to life circumstances that require relocation, or returning to the labor market after a break.

Moreover, it is essential to highlight the need to adapt to new realities and environments resulting, for example, technological advances and transformations that are

³ OAS (2024). The World of Work in the Americas: Reflections and Recommendations on the Region's Top Priorities. Available in: <https://www.rialnet.org/?q=en/WorldofWorkAmericas>

⁴ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the OAS. (2011). Report Juvenile Justice and Human Rights in the Americas [Report]. <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/children/docs/pdf/juvenilejustice.pdf>

changing the employment dynamics in the world and the region and that imply both the destruction of jobs and their creation (OAS, 2024 p.14). In all cases, it is important to understand that each career path is unique, and employment opportunities can arise in various ways that, with adequate support and effective strategies, can make a significant difference.

A large category of young people, upon completing their studies, fails to enter the workforce, generating situations of disconnection and a sense of not belonging to either the educational or labor spheres. Determining factors explaining the existence of these groups reflect the challenges of the education system and the adverse labor market conditions young people face, as well as a marked segmentation in work and caregiving roles.

Without a doubt, analyzing the school-to-work transition has become increasingly complex. Most young people do not follow the usual stages of studying, job searching, and working; instead, their situations change frequently. Therefore, traditional labor market indicators must be combined with others that allow a comprehensive analysis of this dynamic period and identify elements that facilitate or hinder the full labor market integration of young people (Gálvez-Gamboa, 2023).

In this process, the role of the State and participation of different actors is crucial to facilitate successful school-to-work transitions strengthen forums for multisectoral dialogue, incorporating local, regional, and sectoral perspectives and implement a comprehensive, coherent, and coordinated set of public policies and create pathways or bridges between the formal education system, the job training system, and all educational levels to allow people a transition between these systems and recognition of their learning (OAS, 2024, p. 30).

For most countries in the Americas, youth employment and social integration appear as prioritized items on national agendas; in fact, in recent years, a wide range of initiatives in terms of policies, plans, and programs have been implemented with the goal of improving youth employability.⁵ (IDB, 2020).

⁵ Regarding this, see:

Brazil: Programa Jovem Aprendiz, which promotes access to formal employment for young people aged 14 to 24 through technical and labor training.

Chile: Subsidio al Empleo Joven (SENCE) and INJUV programs for labor inclusion and skills development.

Colombia: SENA Jóvenes en Acción for technical training and dual education.

Argentina: Programa Jóvenes con Más y Mejor Trabajo, which integrates training, internships, and career guidance.

Advancing toward successful school-to-work transitions requires reducing the uncertainty that characterizes this period and quickly generating relevant experiences for upward career trajectories.

c. Develop Financial literacy and Civic responsibility.

One of the key pillars for achieving successful career paths for young people is having adequate financial literacy and civic responsibility. Therefore, the development of these skills has become a priority. Incorporating these topics into teaching processes is a task promoted by a wide range of international organizations that recognize their importance for development, poverty reduction, and the formation of informed and engaged citizens.

- The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) promotes financial literacy as an essential skill from an early age; it encourages its integration into formal education systems and highlights its role in responsible decision-making in increasingly complex economic contexts (OECD, 2020).
- The World Bank links financial education with social inclusion and economic empowerment and considers financial literacy key to fostering economic stability and reducing poverty (World Bank, 2014).
- The Organization of American States (OAS), through various bodies and programs, actively promotes financial and civic literacy, mainly from the perspective of financial inclusion and education for democratic citizenship. In this regard, it has the RIPSO program (Inter-American Network for Social Protection), which has fostered conferences and partnerships focused on financial inclusion as a driver for economic and social growth (RIPSO, 2014).
- The program “Democratic Principles Strengthened through Education and Policy Dialogue” promotes curricula and teacher training to engage students in democratic participation, with an emphasis on dialogue, political discourse, and collective action. Digital literacy is encouraged as a tool to support social cohesion and is aimed at improving access to information as well as financial and democratic services (OAS, 2023).

In this way, the OAS implements a comprehensive approach that encompasses:

- Financial inclusion: access to and responsible management of money.
- Civic education: promotion of values, rights, duties, and democratic participation.
- Digital literacy: essential to enhance both areas.

These actions can be summarized as: *train to include; educate to participate; digitalize to reach.*

International organizations agree that financial and civic literacy should be educational priorities. Investing in these competencies not only empowers individuals but also contributes to collective well-being and the construction of fairer and sustainable societies. Finally, among the recommendations of these organizations, the following can be highlighted:

- Include financial and civic literacy programs in school curricula.
- Promote partnerships among governments, educational institutions, and international organizations.
- Foster active and critical civic participation from an early age.

d. Reflect on vocation and work from the school perspective.

Many young people may wonder *which path to choose work as a means of survival or work as a vocation*. This decision helps initiate a constructive debate with students starting from their school years.

A possible response to the initial question is that one does not necessarily have to choose between two paths; rather, a reflective process can be developed that combines personal interests, technical and social skills and competencies, and the realities of the present and future labor market.

Choosing a profession or trade is a crucial step in the transition from education to the world of work and requires making significant decisions. One's working life will encompass a substantial part of adulthood, which does not mean remaining static in a single position or profession. Adapting to constantly changing contexts also requires flexibility to face changes that may demand seeking a new job or profession.

Given the rapid evolution of the world of work, linked to demographic, climatic, and technological changes, it is necessary to be prepared to confront and manage these changes by developing competencies, engaging in lifelong learning, and being aware of emerging opportunities (ILO, 2021, p. III)

Today's youth (Generation Z or Centennials)⁶ They are characterized by higher demands toward workplaces: higher salaries, more free time, flexibility to work remotely, and greater social and environmental responsibility, representing a significant shift in expectations and priorities compared to previous generations. Young people emphasize that they need to be encouraged to find and follow their passions. They feel that vocational

⁶ Generation Z refers to those born between 1997 and 2012.

education, with its practical and job-specific focus, can make the transition from school to work smoother (OECD, 2024 p. 28).

Given this situation, it is important for schools to begin the process of reflection on which area of the labor market aligns most closely with each young person's dreams and expectations. For this purpose, it is essential to create spaces that support the discovery of their vocations. This process includes some of the following aspects:

- Knowing oneself, understanding personal interests, skills, values, and personality.
- Identifying passions and activities that bring enjoyment, even in leisure time.
- Recognizing natural strengths and abilities and seeking opportunities to apply them.
- Connecting personal interests with areas of the labor market can provide the greatest satisfaction.

The school can provide students with a broad overview of the labor market reality and the competencies it demands from workers. It can also provide learner orientation and career guidance, including by engaging with employers through workplace visits, career talks and job shadowing, and providing information on skills in demand in the world of work and the relationship between education and employment (OECD, 2024 p. 32). Additionally, it is essential that the school facilitates and supports the individual reflection process, helping each young person to identify their strengths and weaknesses, skills, and abilities, and enabling them to successfully connect these aspects.

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Case for Discussion:
BE PRODUCTIVE
Participation, youth, and work.

John and Julie are in their final year of high school; they are at a crucial moment in their lives, where the decisions they make now will have a significant impact on their future.

John is focused solely on entering the workforce, as he needs to help his family and seek a way to achieve economic independence. He also believes it is an effective way to gain work experience that will help him better define his interests and, in the future, have the resources and clarity about his skills to pursue studies or technical courses that allow him to enter the job market quickly. To achieve this, he is researching employment opportunities in his community and considering which skills are currently most in demand.

Julie, on the other hand, is reflecting on her vocation, which is an important and valuable process. She wants to continue studying, as she has her parents' support and strong motivation. To determine the type of studies she wants to pursue, she has taken vocational tests both at school and through free online programs. She has also spoken with counselors, academics, and professionals in the scientific field she is interested in exploring. She is trying to identify the areas and subjects she is most enthusiastic about, as well as researching the different educational paths—such as universities, technical institutes, or specialized programs—that can help her make an informed decision.

They could support each other. John could tell Julie about the practical skills needed in the workplace, helping her visualize how theory applies in the real world; while Julie could guide John toward educational resources or short courses related to his career interests. At this crucial point in their lives, they can remember the importance of remaining open to various possibilities and not fearing change; what matters is continuing to explore until each finds the right path.

Guiding Questions:

1. Which of the two characters do you identify with more? Why?
2. What factors should young people consider when deciding between working or continuing their studies?
3. How do family and social contexts influence the decisions young people make?
4. In what ways can young people like John and Julie, who have different plans, support each other?



OAS

5. Why is it important for young people to actively participate in shaping their future (by staying informed, asking questions, exploring)?
6. What kind of guidance or programs would you like your school to offer to help with these decisions?