



What Works in Education?

Using Evidence to Improve Education

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What impact do guidance and counselling programs have on students?

Sandra Escapa and Albert Julià

Throughout their time in school, students constantly prepare to overcome the different challenges they encounter. They often need some type of support, guidance or counselling to improve conditions for facing both their educational challenges and the decisions that they have to make about their future. In this review of the evidence, we ask to what extent do guidance and counselling programs become tools that improve students' situations, where do they have an impact (on educational performance, their personal or emotional situations, their relationship with their peer group, self-confidence, etc.) and what characteristics should they have to be as effective as possible.

“For too long, education has been subject to inertia and based on traditions, and educational changes have been grounded in unfounded intuitions and beliefs. The ‘What Works’ movement irrupts into the world of education with a clear objective: to promote evidence based policies and practices. [Ivàlua](#) and the [Jaume Bofill Foundation](#) have come together to push this movement forward in Catalonia.”



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What impact do guidance and counselling programs have on students?



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Motivation

Students proceed through different levels of education or grades that prepare them for the educational or professional stages to come, with varying levels of success. Throughout their schooling, students have to make important decisions about their future that will shape their educational path or professional career later on. These decisions are especially determined by their performance in school and level of knowledge about the different opportunities available to them. Providing orientation, counselling and guidance services may be determinative for students' self-confidence, expectations for the future, educational or academic performance, emotional health and other aspects. [1]. This assistance may be especially significant for less privileged students, as they often come from families with lower educational and cultural capital, which are therefore often unable to provide the information

and advice that children and young people need or lack the willingness or ability to obtain them from teachers and other educational figures and transmit them properly to their children.

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Educational transitions are a key moment in the schooling of children and young people. Students' educational performance and expectations may be affected in the transition from elementary to high school due to the changing demands, the new teaching cultures or the changes of school [2] [3]. Some countries like Finland and Austria have developed models for counselling students that pay close attention to transitional processes to answer students' questions and guide them in their curricula [4] [5]. In Quebec, for example, this counselling and guidance starts in elementary school [5] [6]. Some studies show that guidance and counselling in transitions to high school and after high school help students with the least resources to become more committed to their studies and to school [7]. As such, they are less likely to lag behind or drop out of school in the future [5].

Counselling may help students to navigate through different educational paths and options and maintain or increase their expectations and commitment. In Catalonia, there are different services that schools can include to perform these functions aimed at advising, following up on and giving support to students. The most prominent of these are: a) guidance counselling, which monitors students throughout their time in school in order to record, support and guide their studies at all times; b) social educators, social workers and psychologists, who tend to work with students' basic needs, risk situations and vulnerability and behavioral problems; and c) Psycho-pedagogical Counselling and Guidance Teams (EAPs), which support teachers and schools in responding to the diversity of the student body, focusing on students with special educational needs and their families.

Despite the recognition and demand for these types of services or programs in different regions, few studies have been conducted to evaluate their effectiveness for students in different respects. In order to provide some clarity on the advisability of counselling, guidance and guidance curriculum programs, this review rigorously evaluates the main cases based on a selection of meta-analyses.

Which guidance and counselling programs are we talking about?

Guidance and counselling services may become important tools for academic development. Both guidance and counselling are forms of aid that skilled and qualified individuals offer to students of any age in order to help them to manage their own life activities,

Both guidance and counselling are forms of aid that skilled and qualified individuals offer to students of any age in order to help them to manage their own life activities, develop their own points of view and make their own decisions in school.



develop their own points of view and make their own decisions [8] in school. These actions should not be confused with tutoring and mentoring programs (like extra tutoring, educational mentoring and peer tutoring) or with behavioral programs—which were previously covered in past reviews in the “What Works in Education?” series [9] [10]—even though they often employ similar strategies or pursue common goals. In order to understand the types of programs that we are talking about more specifically, below we summarize the categories of guidance and counselling programs and services, the types of goals they aim to achieve and the most prominent features that may cause variations in their impact.

There are many different programs and strategies that can be implemented in school settings to provide counselling and guidance services to students. Of the various programs that have been evaluated systematically and rigorously, those based on the Anglo-Saxon concept of counselling stand out. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), counselors provide three main categories of services:

- **Individual planning:** The different programs that include individual planning consider evaluation and counselling of both students and the group (class) to which they belong. Individual planning activities are designed to help students to develop and carry out their personal, educational and career plans. The counsellors and educational professionals coordinate systematic activities during the school year designed mainly to help students to prevent situations that could be harmful (like situations of violence, bullying, mental health problems or dropping out of school), set their personal goals individually and develop plans for their future [11] [12].
- **Guidance curriculum:** Programs that include guides or plans of curricular studies involve sessions structured and designed to help students to acquire skills that are appropriate for their level of development. The programs can be highly diverse (for example, classroom instruction, group activities, the development of interdisciplinary curricula or even workshops in collaboration with parents), since they can cover different areas of student development in personal, social, academic and professional terms. Examples of the areas covered by guidance curriculum sessions in some programs may include study skills, the value of education, the establishment of objectives, conflict resolution, how to deal with transitions to higher levels of education, etc.
- **Responsive services:** Responsive programs or services are characterized by providing special and non-systematic assistance (more on-demand) to students facing problems or difficulties that could interfere with their personal, relational or educational development. Within this category are services offering individual counselling, advice and counselling for small groups and counselling regarding difficult situations, specific problems and immediate needs. To a lesser extent, we also find peer counselling services, which are similar to peer mentoring programs.

The objectives of these programs and services vary greatly and may be grouped into three categories:

Table 1.
Type of programs and services according to the guidance and counselling objectives

Academic guidance	These include counselling and guidance programs for students that are aimed at improving their academic performance. Evaluations of these programs measure this impact both with grades and, to a lesser extent, standardized tests.
Personal/social guidance	These include programs and services that have an effect on students' behavior, empowering them to make decisions and show self-confidence beyond what is related with educational transitions and the curriculum. They also have an effect on students' emotional state, mental health (anxiety, depression) and self-esteem.
Guidance on educational path or professional career	Guidance and counselling services and programs aimed specifically at giving answers and improving skills in educational transitions, as well as providing future guidance both in remaining in school and in shifting to the working world (professionalization). These programs are often addressed to high school students, but there are also examples of programs applied to universities.

Source: Authors' creation.

Counselling and guidance programs may have very disparate effects, depending on their particular aspects. Here are the most prominent characteristics that can make their impact vary, according to the literature reviewed:

- **Participant profile:** The programs and services reviewed include a very wide variety of participant profiles, both regarding their socio-economic situation or origin (ethnicity) and their current age or level of education. They are usually cross-cutting and most do not focus on specific profiles beyond their current level of education or grade. In this regard, there are guidance programs for elementary school and others that apply to the university. However, it is most common for guidance and counselling programs to be implemented in high school.

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- **Duration and frequency:** The many different strategies used to advise and guide students make the duration and frequency of the programs and services very different. These range from limited guidance services that may only last one or two sessions of two hours each to programs that last the entire school year (nine months) and include up to 200 hours of different activities and sessions. However, most programs are based on one or two sessions.

Most of the evaluations conducted focus on the United States, where the most frequent profile is that of the school counsellor, who is mainly trained in psychology, and to a lesser extent in social work.



- **Counsellor profile:** Some of the reviews included assess which professional profiles have the most significant effects. Most of the evaluations conducted focus on the United States, where the most frequent profile is that of the school counsellor, who is mainly trained in psychology, and to a lesser extent in social work.
- **Group or individual sessions:** There are many strategies for designing actions to guide and advise students. The reviews included in the study range from individual interventions to group sessions, whether with just a few members or all the students of the same classroom or year, as well as specific workshops involving small groups or a computer.

It is important to note that not all the studies that have been reviewed here provide information about all the variables indicated or that have the same criteria, which makes comparing them difficult. We must also add that a high level of concentration of reviewed studies refer to the “same” context: approximately 90% of the studies included in the different meta-analyses come from the United States.

Questions influencing the review

Based on the review of the evidence presented in this document, we aim to answer the following questions:

1. Are counselling and guidance programs useful for improving students' situations?
2. What are the aspects that improve to a greater extent (for example, educational outcomes, personal situations, self-confidence, security and knowledge) when guiding students through educational or professional transitions, etc.?
3. What are the characteristics of the most effective guidance and counselling programs for students in connection with the aims they pursue?
4. At which stages of education are they most effective?
5. Are there differences in the programs' impacts depending on different groups of students (that is, according to their socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics)?
6. In the case of possible interventions in the region, is it advisable to extend these types of programs and services to Catalonia? What conditions should they meet?

Reviewing the evidence

The programs and strategies to guide and advise students are not unknown in Catalonia. As indicated above, there are different strategies to try to cover these kinds of functions. It must be said, however, that the distribution of the different services is very uneven and disparate in Catalonia, as is the evidence about their potential results and impacts. In fact, the lack of evidence for the impact of these kinds of programs and services on different countries

is very frequent, except in the United States, which has a long tradition of evaluating its guidance and counselling programs. Despite this American tradition, the limited amount of meta-analyses in this area of research is equally significant.

For this review, we have selected the eight most important meta-analyses ([Table 2](#)) published on the impact of guidance and counselling programs and services for students, most notably those conducted by Whiston et al. [13] [14], as they are more recent and include a wide range of evidence from experimental and quasi-experimental programs.

The studies covered by these reviews are very diverse. Some analyze the impact of guidance and counselling programs in all their breadth and diversity, both with regard to the different stages of education and to the different potential impacts from which the students may benefit. Others are more focused on guidance and counselling programs developed at higher levels of education (like the university) or post-compulsory high school, which seek to prepare and guide students to take the next steps in their educational path or make the transition to the job market. Based on this collection of meta-analytical studies, this review aims to answer the questions posed above.

Table 2.
Counselling programs: meta-analyses reviewed

Meta-analysis (country of reference)	Number of studies included	Type of guidance	Levels of education included	Average length of the program	Measurement of the effect*
Whiston et al. (2011) [13] (United States)	118	Academic, personal/social guidance and guidance on educational path or professional career (focused on individual planning and guidance curriculum).	Elementary to high school (different years).	Not detailed.	Overall effect = 0.30^h Guidance Guidance curriculum and care services = 0.35 Individual planning = 0.26 Responsive services = 0.35 Programmed assessment = 0.19 Behavior and cognitive skills General behavior results = 0.41 General affective results = 0.23 General cognitive results = 0.19 Attendance = 0.30 Problem-solving skills = 0.96 Social skills = 0.33 Discipline = 0.83 Perception of academic functioning = -0.17 Socio-emotional Personal/social development = 0.24 Anxiety = 0.40 Depression = 0.37 Educational outcomes Grade Point Average = 0.15 Standardized scores from achievement test = 0.16 Knowledge of the degree = 0.67 Other = 0.79
Hoag and Burlingame (1997) [15] (United States)	56	Academic, personal/social guidance (focused on preventive programs, guidance, guidance curriculum and psychotherapy).	Elementary to high school (different years).	Not detailed.	Overall effect = 0.61^h Disruptive behavior = 0.69 Anxiety/fear = 0.62 Depression = 0.46 Cognitive skills/results = 0.51 Social skills = 0.49 Differences in student social status Students with low socio-economic status = 0.29 Students with average socio-economic status = 0.79
Whiston et al. (1998) [14] (United States)	47	Academic, personal/social guidance and guidance on educational path or professional career.	Elementary to high school (different years).	Average of 4.9 sessions and length of 7.5 hours.	Overall effect = 0.38^h Early secondary = 0.79 (n=2) Secondary = 0.34 (n=11) University = 0.26 (n=22) Guidance Self-confidence in decision-making = 0.19 Importance of degree = 0.19 Self-efficacy in decision-making in educational path = 0.96 Knowledge of options = 0.43 Knowledge related to the degree = 0.97 Skills = 0.81 Behavior and self-esteem "Professional" maturity = 0.53 Changes in self-perception = 0.31 Changes of attitude = 0.15 Anxiety = 0.59 Depression = 0.02 Educational outcomes Knowledge related to the (future) degree = 0.97 Skills = 0.81
Evans and Burck (1992) [17] (United States)	67	Academic guidance and guidance on educational path or professional career.	High school (different years).	151-200 hours over 9 months (1 school year).	Improved educational performance = 0.16^s

*Statistically significant effects in bold; ^s = Hedges' estimator; ^a = Glass' estimator; ^d = Cohen's estimator. All three estimators present the standard value of the effect (values at around or less than 0.2 indicate a small effect; values at around 0.5 have a medium effect; values at around or higher than 0.8 have a big effect) [21].

Note: Some disaggregated effects of the selected meta-analyses are not presented in the table because there are few comparative studies (n < 4).

Source: Authors' creation.

Table 2. (continued)
Counselling programs: meta-analyses reviewed

Meta-analysis (country of reference)	Number of studies included	Type of guidance	Levels of education included	Average length of the program	Measurement of the effect*
Oliver and Spokane (1988) [16] (United States)	58	Academic, personal/social guidance and guidance on educational path or professional career.	Elementary to high school (different years).	1 to 30 sessions (average hours 7.9).	Overall effect = 0.82^Δ Early secondary = 1.28 (n=7) Secondary = 1.02 (n=15) University = 0.85 (n=29) <i>Guidance</i> Suitability of the choice = 0.51 Search for information about the “future” educational path or professional career = 0.53 Self-confidence in decision-making = 0.40 Knowledge related to the degree = 0.88 Satisfaction with the choice = 0.49 <i>Behavior and self-esteem</i> “Professional” maturity = 1.05 Changes in self-perception = 0.48 Improved self-esteem = 0.48 <i>Educational outcomes</i> Improved performance = 0.35 Knowledge related to the (future) degree = 0.88 Skills (interviews, writing and problem-solving) = 1.03
Whiston et al. (2003) [18] (United States)	57	Guidance on educational path or professional career (comparing strategies).	High school (different years), elementary school and adults (to a lesser extent).	Average of 5.1 sessions and length of 8.3 hours.	Comparison of overall effects according to treatment strategies:[§] Individual guidance = 0.25 Group guidance = 0.05 Structural workshop/group = 0.20 Classroom = 0.33 By computer = 0.14 Out-of-school counsellor = 0.04
Erford et al. (2017) [19] (United States)	21	Personal/social guidance (children and adolescents with behavioral problems).	From kindergarten to high school (different years).	Not detailed.	Overall effect = 0.57^Δ
Prout and Prout (1998) [20] (United States)	17	Academic guidance personal/social (psychotherapy).	Elementary to high school (different years).	Not detailed.	Overall effect = 0.97^Δ Anxiety = 0.74 Depression = 1.96 Self-perception = 0.74 Social skills = 0.38 Performance = 0.0 Attitude = 0.85

*Statistically significant effects in bold; § = Hedges' estimator; ^Δ = Glass' estimator; ^Δ = Cohen's estimator. All three estimators present the standard value of the effect (values at around or less than 0.2 indicate a small effect; values at around 0.5 have a medium effect; values at around or higher than 0.8 have a big effect) [21].

Note: Some disaggregated effects of the selected meta-analyses are not presented in the table because there are few comparative studies (n < 4).

Source: Authors' creation.

Do guidance and counselling programs and services improve the students' situation? In what respects?

Guidance and counselling programs generally have a positive effect on students. However, these effects vary substantially depending on the different areas related to the students that have been evaluated. This variation is largely explained by the diverse objectives of the different programs. For example, some meta-analyses show very high overall effects, but with a low or virtually no effect on educational performance [20]. Most programs covered by this review measure the impact in more than one area (see [Box 1](#) as an example). Below, we present a synthesis of the different areas where we could evaluate the impact of counselling and guidance programs:

- **Educational performance:** In general terms, our research showed that guidance and counselling programs improve students' educational performance. This improvement has been observed both in the average grades during the year [13] [15] [16] [17] and in the results of specific standardized tests [13]. However, the positive effects on performance are not very noticeable and in some studies they are virtually non-existent [20]. In fact, indicators of educational performance and cognitive improvement [13] are those with the smallest positive impact. We do find very pronounced impacts in the improvement of some educational skills, like improvement in the level of writing or in problem-solving [13] [14] [16]. Although some guidance and counselling programs show positive effects on preventing students from dropping out of school, the evidence for this is very limited [16], and in some cases the effect cannot be separated from other outcomes of educational performance [13].

Our research showed that guidance and counselling programs improve students' educational performance. This improvement has been observed both in the average grades during the year and in the results of specific standardized tests.



- **Attitudes towards learning and commitment to school:** The programs analyzed show a significant impact on some aspects related to the students' attitude towards school and their commitment to it. Some have shown rather positive results in improving school attendance [13], in behavior in the classroom [13] [14] [20] and in reducing disruptive conduct [15], or to an even greater extent, in improving levels of discipline [13].

Some have shown rather positive results in improving school attendance, in behavior in the classroom and in reducing disruptive conduct, or to an even greater extent, in improving levels of discipline.



- **Educational and professional empowerment:** Some of the aspects that have been evaluated in guidance and counselling programs are related to the students' level of knowledge about where they are in their educational path and the decisions that they can make about their future. Here, the results show that these programs have no impact on the students' perception of how the educational system works in general [13] or of the importance of choosing a specific educational degree track [14]. However, we do find a between a moderate

and a high impact on the students' knowledge about the different options that they can choose in either their future higher education or in improving their professional profile prior to entering the job market [14] [16]. Thus, we also detect improvement in the students' perception of the suitability of the educational path that they have chosen, as well as their level of satisfaction with the decision made [16]. These types of programs show significant impacts on the student's self-confidence, especially when making decisions [14] [16].

- **Social skills:** Some of the programs covered by the meta-analyses aim to solve students' problems and difficulties (like programs based on responsive services, for example). In this regard, these programs show significant and moderately positive results in improving the students' social skills and their relational skills with their environment [13] [15] [20].
- **Mental health and self-esteem:** A positive effect is observed on the mental health or socio-emotional well-being of students who participate in guidance programs, and especially in those that have a contact person who responds to their needs or concerns. As mentioned above, the most frequent professional profile that works as a counsellor comes from the field of psychology, so it is plausible to expect an influence on the socio-emotional situation of the students participating in these programs. The gains are observed in improved self-perception [14] [16], higher self-esteem [16] and lower levels of anxiety [13] [14] [15] [20] and scales of depression [14] [16] [20] (though the latter factor is not statistically significant).

A positive effect is observed on the mental health or socio-emotional well-being of students who participate in guidance programs, and especially in those that have a contact person who responds to their needs or concerns.



Box 1.

Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Programs (MCGP) (United States)

The MCGP is a program that was created in the 1980s and has been extensively established in different states in the United States, especially in Missouri. The program has a structure of activities organized and implemented by school counsellors with the support of others like teachers, parents and community figures. The purpose of the program is to address students' needs by facilitating their social/emotional, academic and professional development, helping to create safe and positive learning environments in schools and helping the students to increase their feeling of belonging to the school. At the same time, the program aims to help students to face and solve problems that hinder their development as students and their well-being.

It is a comprehensive program that can cover different levels of education, from preschool to high school. The program's prominent lines of action include: a) a school guidance curriculum; b) individual planning (in cooperation with parents/tutors); c) responsive services; and d) a support system (actions to administrate and assess school guidance programs).

According to those responsible for the program, once it is fully developed, it can attain multiple objectives: a) improvement of the students' academic performance; b) improvement of the students' mental health and social/emotional development; c) achievement of the students' aims; d) professional development; e) a safe and positive learning environment; f) cooperation with parents/tutors, administrators and community figures; and g) accountability through a comprehensive evaluation process.

According to the assessments made about the MCGP, there is evidence that once the program is developed, it boosts the prevalence of moving on to the next year [22] [23] and improves educational performance in different tests [24]. Improvement in the school atmosphere is also observed [23], along with less discipline problems, better levels of school attendance [24], better preparation of the students for their future, improvement in their relationship with their teachers and greater satisfaction with their education [22].

Further information:

Gysbers N.; Bragg, J.; Kosteck-Bunch, L.; Magnuson, C. and Starr, M. (2017). *Missouri Comprehensive School Counseling Program. A Manual for Program Development, Implementation, Evaluation and Enhancement*. Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education [25].

Lapan, R.T.; Gysbers, N.C. and Kayson, M.A. (2007). *Missouri School Counselors Benefit All Students*. Jefferson City, Mo. Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [24].

Lapan, R. T.; Gysbers, N. C. and Petroski, G. (2001). "Helping 7th graders be safe and successful: A statewide study of the impact of comprehensive guidance programs", in *Journal of Counseling & Development*, vol. 79, no. 3, pp. 320-330 [22].

Lapan, R. T.; Gysbers, N. C. and Sun, Y. (1997). "The impact of more fully implemented guidance programs on the school experiences of high school students: A statewide evaluation study", in *Journal of Counseling & Development*, vol. 75, no. 4, pp. 292-302 [23].

What are the characteristics of the most effective programs and services?

One of the findings in our review of the meta-analyses is that the effectiveness of the counselling and guidance programs for students varies greatly, depending on the characteristics of the programs. Therefore, their success depends mainly on the strategies or types of programs used, the students' profile, the level of education in which it is implemented and the type of profile of the counsellor. Below, we present the characteristics of the programs analyzed, according to their impact.

- **Types of programs (focused on individual planning, guidance curriculum and/or responsive services):** In their extensive meta-analysis, Whiston et al. [13] only found 10 studies that addressed individual planning, most of which were aimed at high school students. The results show positive and statistically significant effects for the students. Student services, responsive programs and the guidance curriculum show a greater benefit than individual planning [13]. Although some studies have not found clear empirical support for the benefits of guidance curriculum activities [14], other, more extensive ones have found moderate benefits for these types of activities [13]. Students enrolled in schools where guidance curricula were implemented tended to get better grades (approximately one-third of the standard deviation higher) than those who did not receive these types of activities in the classroom and in the group [13]. Although most studies on the programs through guidance curricula have been produced with elementary school students, students benefit from them to a greater degree during and after compulsory high school [13].
- **Group counselling vs. individual counselling:** There are strategies and programs that have trouble alternating between different types of guidance in terms of individual or group counselling (whether in workshops, the classroom, small groups, etc.). However, there is a tendency to observe better results in individual guidance programs than in group programs [14], except for programs based on responsive services, where smaller groups are more effective [14]. The results show that individual sessions have a greater effect than group sessions per hour invested [14] and cost relatively the same as the group sessions, although they are higher than sessions conducted in the classroom, workshops or computer-assisted sessions [14]. The benefits of group counselling sessions can be substantial, depending on the type of structure of the group (small group, workshops, class groups and others). In this regard, greater benefits are observed in class groups than in workshops or small groups [14] [16] [18]. It should be noted, however, that a significant amount of evaluated programs combine both strategies, group and individual, with more effective results than using one type of guidance alone [20].

There is a tendency to observe better results in individual guidance programs than in group programs.



Another option that has been evaluated in the type of methodology is computer-assisted guidance, which is especially used for guidance curricula. All the evaluated programs have demonstrated a positive effect on students, but less than the effect resulting from programs based on individual planning or the different versions of group sessions [14] [18]. The reviews also show that the programs that did not have a contact person or coordinator specifically trained as a counsellor had unsubstantial or virtually no effects [14] [16] [18].

- **Duration:** There are not any conclusive findings on what the benefit would be concerning the type of guidance and counseling program and how long it should last and the number of sessions. In most of the studies analyzed, the results show no relation [14] or a very small one [16] between the impact of the programs and the number of hours and sessions in which they are conducted. However, it can be seen that the effect (duration) of the sessions varies according to the guidance methodology used to a certain extent.

- **Level of education:** The different studies analyzed do not agree on the level of education when the most significant benefits can be found, considering the different types of guidance programs, guidance curricula and responsive services. Some studies show that these programs are especially beneficial for elementary school students [14] [20], others for high school students [16], and to a lesser extent for higher education and university students [14]. Other indicate that the beneficial effect of these programs varies according to the level of education, along with the type of program implemented [13] (see Box 2).

The different studies analyzed do not agree on the level of education when the most significant benefits can be found, considering the different types of guidance programs, guidance curricula and responsive services.



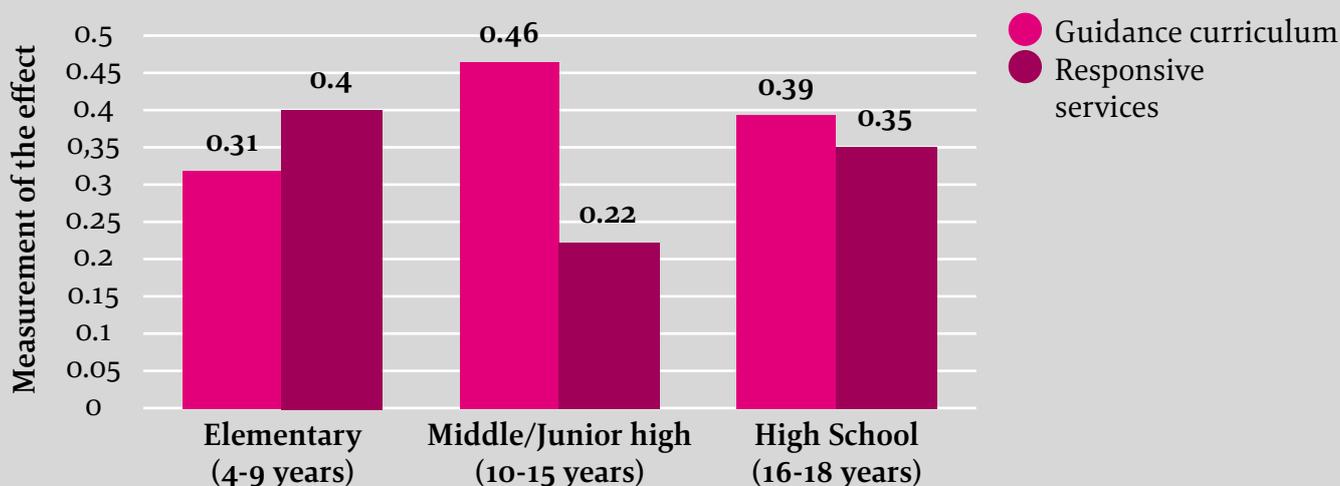
Box 2.

Impacts according to the level of education and guidance strategy

The meta-analysis conducted by Whiston, Tai, Rahardja and Eder [13] brings together a total of 118 assessments focused on the impact of the counselling and guidance curriculum, individual planning and responsive service programs. This is the most extensive meta-analysis conducted to date on the impact that guidance and counselling services and programs have on students. The amount of studies included allows us to disaggregate the analysis according to different characteristics.

One of the questions that this study answers relates to the differences in the impact that the different types of services and programs have on the successive levels of education. Programs and services focused on guidance curricula have a moderate effect on the different levels of education and are especially positive in the final stage of elementary school and the first stage of high school. However, this is also the stage where responsive services have less of a positive impact compared with the first stage of elementary school and the period after compulsory high school (individual planning is not included in the comparison because it has only a few programs distributed across different levels).

It should be noted that this comparison of the levels of education is based on a “synthetic” result that encompasses the impact on academic results, behavior or cognitive skills, and socio-emotional results (it does not differentiate the results in these areas).



The results show that guidance and counselling strategies have varied impacts depending on the students’ level of education or age. Adapting the programs is key to their effectiveness.

Further information:

Whiston, S. C.; Tai, W. L.; Rahardja, D. and Eder, K. (2011). “School counseling outcome: A meta-analytic examination of interventions”. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, vol. 89, no. 1, pp. 37-55 [13].

Carey, J.C. and Martin, I. (2015). *A review of the major school counseling policy studies in the United States: 2000-2014*. Amherst, MA: The Ronald H. Fredrickson Center for School Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation [1].

American School Counselor Association (2015). *Empirical Research Studies Supporting the Value of School Counseling*. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Careers-Roles/Effectiveness.pdf> [26].

- **Counsellor training:** The reviews consistently show that the background of the person who is responsible for the guidance and counselling sessions or who conducts them makes a difference in the impact of the programs. Programs that use counsellors trained in the subject and in the tasks that they have to perform have a more beneficial effect than programs led by people with other backgrounds [14] [16]. Especially significant are programs with counsellors-in-training [14] [16], which train adolescents and/or young adults to develop leadership roles and build the capacity to guide and counsel younger students. Different than peer mentoring programs, these empower adolescents and young people to serve as a contact person for younger students to guide them throughout their education. Other programs have shown an even greater effect when the person in charge is a teacher [13], although this finding is not consistent with other studies [14] [16]. It should be noted, however, that not all evaluations report the profiles or training of the people in charge of the sessions.

The background of the person who is responsible for the guidance and counselling sessions or who conducts them makes a difference in the impact of the programs.



Which students benefit from it the most?

Educational guidance programs are generally formulated to be implemented broadly, and not specifically for certain groups. However, we could plausibly expect more beneficial effects on students that have more trouble deciding in terms of educational expectations. Few studies have shown differences between differentiated socio-economic profiles in order to arrive at robust conclusions. Some studies have even demonstrated greater benefits for students with a medium socio-economic profile than with a low socio-economic status [15], which could cause a possible “Matthew effect”¹ in some programs. However, there are more programs that show an especially beneficial impact on low socio-economic profiles (see the example in [Box 3](#)).

Furthermore, as discussed above, the impact of the programs may vary according to the age of the students (or the level of education), without the evidence indicating any solid agreement on the age cohort that might potentially benefit the most.

¹ A sociological concept that means that whoever benefits the most from the program is who (seemingly) needs it the least (those of medium and high socio-economic status).

Box 3.

Student Success Skills (SSS) (United States)

The Student Success Skills (SSS) model is applied to elementary and high school especially in the United States, but it has also been implemented in 13 other countries. According to the sources of the program, up to 9,000 counsellors and teachers have used this model with over one million students. The main objective of the program is to develop the students' cognitive, social and self-management skills.

The SSS program has eight variants in order to adapt to the needs of the school and the student body. One such variant, College/Career Success Skills, focuses on guidance and counselling to prepare students to develop the academic, social and self-management skills necessary to make the leap to the university and/or a professional career. This module provides material for teachers and counsellors to prepare from one to five lessons per week for students after their compulsory high school.

From 2003 to 2015, a total of 20 evaluations were conducted on the different modules created by SSS. These evaluations showed significant impacts on performance in mathematics and reading comprehension, relationships with peers, commitment to school and studies and improved expectations. These findings are especially significant for immigrant students and those with low socio-economic status.

Further information:

Lemberger, M.; Selig, J.; Bowers, H. and Rogers, J. (2015). "Effects of the student success skills program on the executive functioning skills, feelings of connectedness, and academic achievement in a predominantly Hispanic, low-income middle school district", in *Journal of Counseling and Development*, vol. 93, no. 1, pp. 25-36 [27].

Brigman, G. and Campbell, C. (2003). "Helping students improve academic achievement and school success behavior", in *Professional School Counseling*, vol. 7, pp. 91-98 [28].

Coleman, H. L. and Yeh, C. (Eds.) (2011). *Handbook of school counseling*. London: Routledge [12].

Summary

Guidance, counselling and guidance curriculum programs generally have positive effects on students. However, these effects vary depending on the objectives sought. Our review of the evidence shows that these programs have a rather deep and significant impact on the students' knowledge about the different educational and professional paths that they can choose, as well as on the students' satisfaction with the suitability of the educational path that they have chosen and the decision they have made. They also have a heavy impact on the students' educational skills (writing, problem-solving, etc.) and on their attitudes towards school, improving attendance, behavior in class and especially the level of discipline. These programs also considerably boost self-esteem and self-confidence and reduce levels of anxiety and depression, especially when the contact person is a professional. Furthermore, the studies we reviewed show that these types of programs have a moderate impact on the development of social and relational skills, and a significant but not major impact on the students' educational performance.

The effectiveness and success of the guidance and counselling programs for students vary greatly according to their characteristics: the types of programs used, the profile of the student body, the level of education addressed or the counsellor's profile or training. Even though all three types of programs (individual planning, guidance curriculum and responsive services) have positive effects on the students, the meta-analyses we reviewed indicate that the responsive services and guidance curriculum programs have a greater impact.

Regarding their duration, there are no conclusive findings indicating how much time should be devoted to each type of program to be implemented. However, the results show that regardless of their duration, individual sessions have a greater effect than group session per hour invested. There is also no agreement on the best level of education or grade for implementing these programs. Some studies indicate that they have a greater impact on elementary school students, yet others say they are most beneficial for students after compulsory high school. Nevertheless, guidance curriculum programs seem to have greater effects on the final stage of elementary school and on the beginning of high school. Responsive service programs are most effective in the first stage of elementary school and after compulsory high school.

Generally speaking, the programs tend to succeed when they:

1. Combine individual programs with other group programs (especially those worked on with the class group).
2. Implement different guidance programs throughout the levels of education, giving prominence to different types of programs depending on the grade (responsive service programs work better in the beginning of elementary school and after compulsory high school and guidance curriculum programs fare better in the end of elementary school and the start of high school).
3. Select a counsellor with specific training in the subject who can be a contact person for the student body.

Table 3.
Strengths and weaknesses of guidance and counselling programs

Strengths	Weaknesses
Guidance and counselling programs can improve students' educational performance.	The positive effects are usually rather low and in some cases virtually non-existent.
Guidance and counselling programs can reduce the school dropout rate.	The evidence is very limited.
Guidance and counselling programs are effective in improving discipline, school absenteeism and other forms of disruptive behavior.	There is a lack of evidence to generalize the effects. The evidence often comes from the implementation of programs in contexts that are difficult to compare.
Guidance and counselling programs can better prepare students for educational transitions.	The evidence is limited regarding the transition from elementary school to high school.
Guidance and counselling programs can empower students about the decisions they have to make at different levels of education and improve their self-confidence in making them. We find evidence that the positive effects are greatest in the beginning of high school, and less so throughout and after compulsory high school and in higher education.	There is not enough evidence to confirm the impact on the different levels of education or grades.
The evidence shows that individual and small group counselling programs generally have better effects than group counselling programs.	Individual sessions and small group sessions are more expensive and logistically complex than those based on the class group.
Guidance programs based on guidance curricula are especially effective in high school and after high school.	These programs appear to be less effective in elementary school.
Guidance and counselling programs based on responsive services are especially effective in elementary school.	These programs appear to be less effective in and after high school.
Guidance and counselling programs based on responsive services can improve some social skills like problem-solving and the relationship with the peer group.	There is a lack of evidence to generalize the effects.
Guidance and counselling programs can improve the mental health and self-esteem of students that struggle with problems of this kind.	The effect depends largely on the professional background or training of the counsellor (the effects are especially positive if the counsellor is trained in psychology) and his or her skills.
Whether he or she is a psychologist, social worker or teacher, the counsellor and his or her skills are key to the program's success.	Their professional profiles, often external, come at a considerable expense. Furthermore, they require a level of coordination with the school that is not always easy to manage.
Students with low socio-economic status can improve their educational performance, relationship with their peers and educational expectations. However, there are not many indications of this relationship in the evidence.	There is little evidence of the differentiated impact on socio-economic profiles. Some of the little evidence shows that certain programs only benefit students with medium socio-economic status (there is not enough evidence to know whether students with high socio-economic status also benefit).

Source: Authors' creation.

Implications for practice

Children and adolescents go through different times of transition during their educational path that can lead them to uncertainty and insecurity. As noted in the studies analyzed, guidance and counselling programs can help students to choose the best path for themselves and increase their self-confidence and security in the decisions they make in that regard, alongside other positive impacts on their educational and personal lives. In Catalonia, a number of services are available to schools to guide, counsel and follow up on students, but not in every school and we still lack data to understand their real impact.

The assessments of the different guidance, counselling and guidance curriculum programs in different countries that we studied in this review indicate that these types of programs generally have a positive impact on students. However, what implications do these findings have for policymaking? Based on the review conducted, here are some suggestions to guide future policies:

- **We must incentivize and promote guidance, counselling and guidance curriculum programs in all schools, combining individual follow-up with group work at the different levels of education.** The evidence demonstrates that both individual and group-oriented programs have a positive impact on students in different respects and at different levels of education. The findings show that guidance programs allow students to make better decisions when choosing their future educational paths or professional careers, make them feel more secure, boost their self-esteem and more. Therefore, we must implement these types of programs adapted to each level of education, based on the children's and adolescents' needs at all times. Combining individual follow-up with group-type sessions seems to be the most successful formula.

Therefore, we must implement these types of programs adapted to each level of education, based on the children's and adolescents' needs at all times.



- **We must properly train the future counsellors of these programs.** Although our review of the evaluated programs does not indicate the professional profile or training that has a greater impact on students, what is clear is the need to have a contact person. This contact person may be a psychologist, teacher, social worker, etc., but it is important that he or she has specific guidance-related knowledge and skills. For this reason, it is not only important to implement these types of programs in school, but to prepare and teach the training content to those who will become contact persons for the students so they can be trained as counsellors.

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- **We must evaluate the impact of the different programs currently being implemented in Catalonia (or that may be conducted in the future).** The only way to find out if counselling and guidance curriculum programs and services implemented in Catalonia are really working is to conduct evaluations. Very common in other countries, these evaluations are essential for designing the policies necessary to develop the different programs (with regard to their content, the allocation of the necessary resources and other issues) and to adapt the programs to the situation in Catalonia. Social workers are currently being used as counsellors in some schools. This may provide an interesting opportunity for evaluating the impact of the social worker as a counsellor in Catalonia.

Social workers are currently being used as counsellors in some schools. This may provide an interesting opportunity for evaluating the impact of the social worker as a counsellor in Catalonia.



In short, international research supports the development of guidance, counselling and guidance curriculum programs. However, internationally there are not many evaluations of these types of programs, and furthermore the information on certain important aspects is lacking. Therefore, rigorously evaluating the programs being run in Catalonia is not only an important challenge, but also a great opportunity.

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