

LONGITUDINAL PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION PROGRAM AS A MEANS OF SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH

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***Abstract:** Career choice represents an important phase in the life-long process of career development, as it directs an individual in a significant manner, affects the individual's close as well as more distant professional perspective and thus is one of the most important steps in a person's life. The objective of the theoretically oriented report is to assess career readiness and risks of career choice on the part of pupils. This will be the basis for a discussion of the concept of a longitudinal professional orientation program as a means of supporting the mental health of pupils.*

***Key words:** career choice, secondary school choice, professional orientation, career development, career maturity, career readiness, career education, preparation for the choice of profession*

1. Introduction

According to Super (1990), the choice of profession can be considered one of the most important developmental tasks of adolescence. Career choice is a multi-criteria decision-making process that involves the choice of study or vocational training, as well as a specific profession and a person's whole career path (cf. Průcha, Walterová, Mareš, 2009).

When making their first directional choice at the end of compulsory education, primary school pupils most often make decisions about the type of secondary school, branch of study and educational institution they would like attend to receive a secondary education. For some of them it means, at the same time, considering their general professional orientation or choice of a specific profession. Only a tiny number of pupils that have just completed their compulsory education enter the labor market (cf. Highlights, 2010).

Psychologists agree that pupils are not, due to the developmental aspects of adolescence, mature enough to make a responsible choice over their profession (cf. Hořánková et al., 1995; Vágnerová, 2005 and others). They often get into situations in which they are not able choose a direction on their own and feel helpless to various extents. As

demonstrated by the research, students in the above instances often make these decisions at a time not considered to be adequate (cf. Trhlíková, Eliášová, 2009). Pattonová and Porfeli (2007) therefore emphasize the necessity of including career education into the formal curriculum of elementary schools so that the entire primary school population undergoes systematic preparation for their career choice.

The objective of the paper is to assess the career development and career maturity of adolescents and to specify the risks of career choice on the part of pupils at primary schools. This will be the basis for a discussion of the concept of a longitudinal professional orientation program as a means of supporting the mental health of pupils.

2. Career development of pupils

The theoretical basis of a dynamic understanding of career development was first elaborated by *E. Ginzberg* and his associates. On the basis of their research, they expressed the belief that career choice is a not one-time act, but a developmental process lasting from the prepubescent period until the age of about twenty (Zunker, 1997 in Nilsson, Akerblom, 2001). During this process, all individuals pass through three periods which, to some extent, correspond to their biological age (cf. Ginzberg et al., 1951):

1. **A period of imaginative choice** (*fantasy stage*) lasts from early childhood to the age of 11. During this period a child fantasizes about what they will be based on various social impulses and their own needs. Their image of their future profession is formed without having sufficient knowledge of what that particular profession requires of them and without having relevant knowledge about their own qualifications to practice such a profession. This is done primarily on the basis of play. Children in this period are convinced that they can choose any profession. During this fantasy period, they still ignore reality, their own skills and time perspective: three important components of the career choice process.
2. **A period of tentative choice** (*tentative stage*) runs from 11 to 16-17 years of age. This period is characterized by familiarization with the requirements of professions. The individual attempts to make a career choice based on self-cognizance and self-image. They still do not take sufficient account of the objective requirements of society and the world of work. The deciding factors are their interests (11-12 years of age), personality prerequisites for the exercise of the profession (13-14) and values (15-16).
3. **A period of realistic choice** (*realistic stage*) lasts from 17 years of age to early adulthood. During the period of realistic choice the person is able to consider subjective factors (interests, abilities and values) and objective factors (occupational requirements, the situation of the labor market, and social needs) while deciding on a career choice and make a reasonable compromise between them.

The most structured theory of career development was advanced by the American psychologist *D.E. Super*. According to Super (1979) career development is a com-

plex multi-factorial conditional process that does not appear in isolation, but takes place throughout a person's life.

In Super's career development theory, it is the **self-concept of a person** which plays an important role and which he considers to be a result of the phenomenal experience of a self-identity. Self-concept or a perspective of one's self is what a person thinks of himself, an image he has about himself. Such an image is the result of physical, mental and social maturation, interaction with adults and observation of their work behavior. The aforementioned facts have a significant impact on the career aspirations, choice of profession and further career path of an individual (Štikar et al., 2003). Self-concept is a driving force that forms a career pattern people follow throughout their whole lives (cf.. Nilsson, Akerblom, 2001).

Super understands career development as a part of an individual's general developmental process, which is in progress throughout their entire life (Bubelini, 1981). On this basis he identified and characterized a total of five developmental periods: *growth*, *exploration*, *establishment*, *maintenance*, and *disengagement*. The heading of each developmental period outlines the main tasks to be achieved during the course of each of them. At first, Super considered these stages to be successive, i.e. following in order in a constant sequence of time (Vendel, 2008). He later admitted that not everyone goes through all the stages chronologically.

Pupils go through the first two stages while making their choice over their future profession while still at primary school:

- 1. Growth stage** - the growth stage is usually passed through between the ages of 4 and 13. In this period it is play and imagination activities that predominate. Later it is social activity that gradually grows and the importance of hobbies and skills increases (Štikar et al., 2003). According to Vendel (2008), the main tasks of the developmental stage of growth are crystallization, definition, specification and implementation of a career choice. It is the individual that assesses their skills, values, and determines their general range of choices, narrows their preliminary choices down to a specific field and then undertakes the necessary steps to make it happen.

In the period of growth, according to Super (1957), people begin to develop a self-concept, and the development of this self-concept is determined by identifying with persons who are close to them. Studies have shown that this leads to the adoption of many stereotypes about professions. During their school years, people acquire attitudes towards occupations that reflect traditional gender stereotypes.

In the growth stage, ideas are formed about occupations on the basis of personal experience, militated by family, friends, and the mass media. The first notions about occupations are usually formed during this period by direct contact with the professions of everyday life. A second source influencing ideas about occupations and their requirements is the information obtained from the social surroundings of the individual, primarily from their parents and teachers. These influences affect notions about occupations as well as professional aspirations. They also affect how pupils perceive professional requirements and how they

assess their own qualifications to practice a profession. Also affecting the individual just as much is information provided by mass media (e.g. newspapers, magazines, advertisements, commercials, TV series, TV shows and movies) that show important aspects of the world of work and create professional stereotypes. Krátká (2010) states that identification with characters of the audiovisual world significantly affects professional orientation. As Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson (2006) have stressed, notions of jobs created during the growth stage may have long-term effects on career decision-making, especially during later stages of development.

- 2. The exploration stage** – the exploration stage is characteristic for the ages 14–24. Individuals in this period often change their interests. They become interested in a large number of different disciplines, directions and activities without managing to set any main priorities. According to Štikar et al. (2003), the search for a profession prevails in the exploration stage (during which the choice of professions is narrowed), but does not stop there. Individuals begin to collect specific information about themselves and about the world of work. They use this information as a foundation while adjusting their interests and skills, and when trying to apply their self-concept at work and other life roles (Super, 1957). Stereotypes obtained during the growth stage are transformed under the influence of new knowledge about the world of work and more precise information about the individual professions. During the exploration stage, notions of professions are largely based on direct contact with persons working within a given profession and from their initial work experience. Professions are assessed with regard to individual abilities and skills, but a huge influence is also played by self-concept and self-evaluation.

In his work, Super has provided many constructs and explanations for career behavior in the various stages of life. It is also important to stress the importance of the concept of *career maturity* as a prerequisite for the adequate, successful building of a career.

3. Career maturity of pupils

Studies carried out have repeatedly confirmed that career maturity is important for a successful choice of profession, or career readiness. Career maturity reflects a person's readiness to take an informed role in the age appropriate decision over the choice of profession and also cope with the career's developmental tasks (cf. Super, 1990; Vendel, 2008). A low degree of career maturity, on the other hand, manifests as indecision while choosing a profession.

A model of career maturity contains both a *cognitive dimension* (i.e. ability to choose occupations), and an *affective dimension* (i.e. approach to choosing a profession). While determining a person's career maturity, their level of career decisiveness, career planning, career awareness and professional identity are also tested and evaluated.

Knowledge and understanding of career maturity in primary school pupils is important both for systematic career education, and effective career advice. In the Czech

environment, however, this topic has not yet been empirically addressed. We therefore refer to foreign sources, which have synthesized the theoretical and empirical knowledge of career maturity and readiness (e.g. Crites, 1978; Super, 1990; Herr, Cramer, Niles, 2003).

3.1 The taxonomy of difficulties to choosing a profession

While assessing the career maturity of American adolescents, Gati, Krausz and Osipow (1996) created and empirically verified a *taxonomy of difficulties in career decision-making*. This taxonomy includes three main categories: lack of readiness in career decision-making, lack of information, and inconsistent career information (fig. 1).

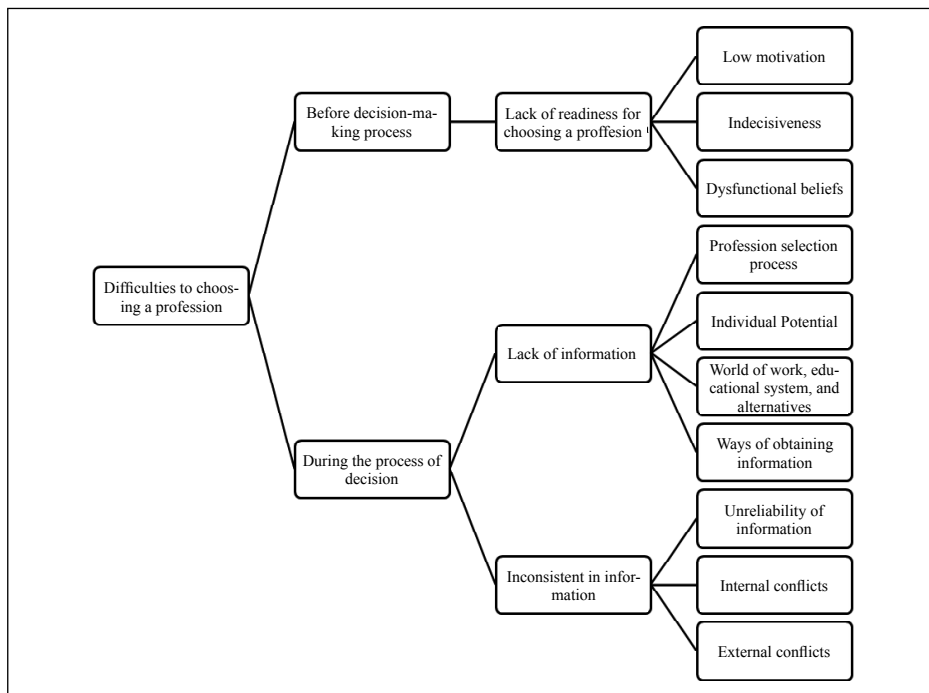


Fig. 1 Taxonomy of difficulties to choosing a profession. Source: Gati, Krausz, Osipow (1996, p. 512)

1. **A lack of readiness for choosing a profession** is the result of three types of difficulties which occur before the start of the decision-making process. This concerns *low motivation* to choose a profession, because education and work are not perceived by pupils as an important part of life, or because of the subjective sense that the events in one’s life lead to a correct choice on their own, so it is not necessary to systematically involve one’s self in the decision-making. Manuel-Adkins (1992 in Vendel, 2008) says that the most frequent problems encountered by career advisers are inaction of pupils and the postponing of decision-making.

A second cause for a lack of readiness is *indecisiveness*, due to, for example, an inability or the refusal to make any decisions at all, the need to support and confirm their own decisions, a tendency to avoid commitments, or a fear of failure. A third cause may be a lack of readiness due to *dysfunctional beliefs* (i.e. irrational expectations of the individual). An example irrational expectations is the belief that there is an ideal choice of profession that will meet all individual requirements and criteria.

The other two categories (lack of information and inconsistent information) specify categories of obstacles which may arise in the course of the decision-making process.

2. Most pupils know relatively little about how to obtain career information. **A lack of information** includes insufficient knowledge about the profession selection process, individual potential, the world of work, the education system, available alternatives, and about ways of obtaining information.
3. **Inconsistent information** may be due to *the unreliability of information* about one's own abilities, personality characteristics, preferred alternatives, professional interests, the educational system, possibilities, the characteristics of the world of work, etc. Another reason for inconsistent information may be *internal conflicts within the individual*, for example an unwillingness to compromise, several similarly attractive options, dissatisfaction with the available options, conflicting interests, or lack of ability. Inconsistent information may also occur as a result of *external conflicts*, primarily due to disagreements between the person making the decision and the social social environment connected to the choice of profession. Noeth et al. (1984 in Vendel, 2008) point out that conflicts between a pupil's own decision and the wishes of those around them are a frequent result of the unrealistic expectations of parents and teachers.

3.2 The risk of career choice for Czech pupils

The main risk of career choice for Czech pupils results from their lack of preparedness for such an important decision (cf. Hlad'o, 2008). Adverse factors can be considered as:

1. *little awareness about the world of work and individual professions*, i.e. about necessary health conditions, required knowledge, skills and, above all, about the actual performing of the profession and their prospects on the labor market;
2. *ignorance of the education system*, i.e. its structure, offers, demands of the individual types and levels of schools, formal and informal curricula, etc.;
3. *insufficient level of self-knowledge*, i.e. a summary of one's abilities, talents, aptitudes, and physical and psychological assumptions;
4. *short-term perspective orientation*, i.e. focusing primarily on immediate objectives;
5. *unclear vision of their future*, i.e. absence of a life plan.

According to Gajdošová, the results of research carried out in the Czech Republic aimed at ascertaining the level of technical information in the career choice process for pupils point to the fact that many of them have “non-complex, incomplete, very sketchy information about secondary school study, instructional or educational fields they can study, and on their relationship to a future profession. Young people almost never know their personal qualifications for further studies, nor do they know what general and special abilities, interests, attitudes and personal characteristics they have for the individual studies and professional disciplines, and are therefore unable to take advantage of them when choosing a profession they would be successful in (2006, p. 140).

4. Longitudinal program of professional orientation

The question under debate is the role primary schools play on a pupil’s career choice. Pupils usually rank the influence of teachers on career choice behind family or peers, and they evaluate their assistance as less beneficial (cf. Hlad’o, 2010b). An explanation for this can be found in the empirical knowledge that the support provided by primary schools is focused on the final stage of school selection, rather than on the path leading up to it, on which most pupils blunder about (Smetáčková, 2009). Because pupils spend a large amount of time in school, teachers have a considerable amount of potential to become a key source of career information, advice and assistance during the choosing of a career.

Primary school has traditionally been considered an institution which may affect student decisions over career choice. Through various types of educational strategies and tools, a school can successfully shape attitudes towards work, professions and responsible career choice, help pupils in forming a real professional goal and perspectives, equip them with the skills necessary for introspection and information about the world of work and the educational system. It may also develop the capabilities and skills that make life changes, the transitions between educational levels, and the transition from school work easier (cf. Hansenová, 2007).

So that intervention on the part of primary schools is effective, it is necessary to structure the preparation of pupils toward a comprehensive program that will include the systematic development of all the skills necessary for a rational career choice. On the basis of the analysis and synthesis of the research findings (Hlad’o, 2009; Hlad’o, 2010a) and the learning points of the thematic heading of the World of Work (Jeřábek, Tupý, 2005), we compiled a *proposal for a longitudinal professional orientation program*, including the division of the educational content into individual stages:

1. *The first stage*, whose requirements must be met no later than the end of the 1st semester of the 8th year, should be aimed in particular at attracting pupils’ interest toward career choice and toward motivating them to have an active and individual approach. The motivation of pupils while choosing a career is an important phenomenon, as it sets in motion a pupil’s psychological processes and leads them toward a more responsible and more active approach. In addition to motivating pupils, education should be focused on developing the primary skills associated with self-knowledge, decision-making, action planning, communication, cooperation, and coping with stressful situations.

2. In the *second stage*, whose requirements must be met no later than the end of the 2nd semester of the 8th year, the focus should be placed on deepening the skills the pupils learned in the first stage. The main emphasis must be placed on molding and practicing those skills connected with searching for, categorizing, evaluating and using information from the sphere of education and the world of work. This stage should mainly be about acquiring appropriate techniques and strategies related to the application of a variety of information when deciding on the type of secondary school and the field of education, so that it corresponds with the principles of responsible career choice and reflect the abilities, skills, characteristics and interests of the pupil.
3. *The third phase*, whose requirements must be met no later than the end of the 1st quarter of the 9th year, should be focused on the comprehensive development of skills related to information literacy and on creating the individual realistic perspectives of the individual pupils. Activities should lead toward a deepening of pupils' experience with categorizing and applying information to a career choice, planning the decision-making steps, toward the systematization of knowledge and the integration of all the knowledge and skills associated with this decision-making. It is necessary to pay special attention to methods of information gathering and to the choice of criteria for evaluating specific educational institutions. Pupils should also be more systematically acquainted with the mechanisms of the functioning of the labor market.
4. In the *fourth stage*, which is appropriate to implement from the end of the 1st quarter of the 9th year till the period of the first round of the acceptance process, should entail preparation aimed at developing the knowledge and skills acquired in previous stages, as well as on the issue of the entrance exams, and the preparation of alternative measures should the pupil not be accepted to the high school of their choice. Special attention should be paid to the issue of coping with stressful situations and practicing elements of autogenous training.
5. In the *fifth stage*, in the period after the admission process, when pupils' interest in career choice decreases, schools can include the teaching of entrepreneurship and self-expression in the labor market to their lessons. This includes communication with potential employers, writing a CV, responding to job listings, the selection of appropriate clothing, etc.

We agree with Gajdošová that during the course of the longitudinal program of professional orientation (in addition to providing a system of education-career information) the primary school should:

- monitor and evaluate the physical, psychological and social development of its pupils and their individual characteristics that are significant from the point of view of their future profession;
- develop general and special skills in pupils, shape their study and extracurricular interests and enhance interests significant in relation to the choice of profession, shape their positive attitudes towards working and self-education;
- create conditions for correcting pupils' breakdowns and troubles in learning and behavior that affect their professional development;

- systematically and over the long-term provide pupils with individual assistance in the creation and clarification of professional ambitions and life plans, and in their confrontation with the needs of society, assist them in the assessment and evaluation of the prerequisites for further study or occupation, and assist them through counseling in deciding on the goals they wish to accomplish upon completing compulsory education (2006, p. 137).

In connection with preparing pupils to choose an occupation, it is necessary to draw attention to the invaluable role of career advisers, but also to class teachers and to educators teaching all subjects. We agree with Friedmann (2006) that the teaching of subjects provides sufficient space for quality work on the part of teachers, since they can systematically develop the pupils' interest in the field, provide qualified information about fields of study, content and the prospects of the individual professions on the labor market, etc.

5. Conclusion

Career choice represents an important phase in the life-long process of career development, as it directs pupils in a significant manner, affects their close as well as more distant professional perspective and thus is among the most important steps in a person's life.

According to Münich and Mysliveček (2006), it determines the attitude towards further education and specialization, career and, consequently, the social and economic status of the individual. It thus forms the socio-economic differences within the future adult population. Whether the choice corresponds to a person's capabilities and interests is also important from the perspective of healthy development of their personality, individual satisfaction, success and use of their social potential. Inappropriate decisions can carry potential risks, which may be reflected in the mental health of the individual (e.g. long-term unemployment, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, social isolation, exclusion from certain social groups, the falling into socio-pathological phenomena, etc.).

The requirements of career choice are evaluated and experienced subjectively by pupils. To a large extent, students are aware of the importance and long-term impact of career choice on the further direction of their lives (cf. Hlad'o, 2009). As a result of concerns relating to the need to make important life decisions, to bear full responsibility for them, and to the demanding requirements that are imposed upon them, pupils develop emotional fluctuations. In addition to emotional tension, uncertainty and fear, pupils also evaluate as problematic the obscurity of their own interests, unclear notions about their further educational course and professional future and the associated doubts over carrying out their decisions. Negative emotions during the choice of profession indicate that this is a stressful situation that individuals perceive as unpleasant and threatening.

On the basis of a synthesis of theoretical and empirical knowledge, it can be stated that pupils really need intensive preparation and systematic guidance before making their first directional choice. A key role in the preparation of pupils in the choice of occupation is the school. School preparation should precede their own decision-making process and should lead to gaining motivation, self-knowledge, a range of sufficient

information and awareness of essential aspects and criteria. One of the options for fulfilling these objectives is to develop a longitudinal program of professional orientation that would provide pupils with the required skills for independent and responsible decision-making within the framework of the formal curriculum.

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LONGITUDINÁLNÍ PROGRAM PROFESNÍ ORIENTACE JAKO PROSTŘEDEK PODPORY DUŠEVNÍHO ZDRAVÍ

Abstrakt: Volba povolání představuje závažnou etapu v celoživotním procesu kariérového vývoje, neboť jedince významným způsobem směřuje, ovlivňuje jeho blízkou i vzdálenější profesní perspektivu a řadí se tak mezi nejdůležitější kroky v lidském životě. Cílem teoreticky orientovaného příspěvku je zhodnotit kariérovou zralost a rizika volby povolání žáků. Na tomto základě bude navržena koncepce longitudinálního programu profesní orientace jako prostředku podpory duševního zdraví žáků.

Klíčová slova: volba povolání, volba střední školy, profesní orientace, kariérový vývoj, kariérová zralost, kariérová připravenost, kariérová výchova, výchova k volbě povolání