Prerequisites for professional identity formation at school: how to help a student to find an authentic professional way?

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Presuming that teachers and career consultants or coaches may read this article, I would like to begin by asking: "If formerly at school someone had told you about the difficulties and obstacles your current profession has to deal with, would you have ever chosen your career? Where would you be now otherwise?" In addition, I would like to ask you the following question: "How did you decide to become what you are now? Who / what and when helped you?"
These questions are related to your or your student's professional identity and professional identification.

Professional identification process

Professional identification is a process of professional identity formation and can be explained from educational, psychological, sociocultural and philosophical perspectives.
Essentially, professional identification is explained by sociocultural and psychological concepts.
From a psychological point of view, professional identification is defined as the inner transformation of the personality, as well as the changes in personal attitudes, and expectations towards the profession. It is also linked to the transformation of professional and personal values, self-conceptualization, and the perception of personal internal relations to a profession.

From a psychological perspective, we begin a formation of our professional identity when we start understanding ourselves, our attitudes, values, and goals, as well as realizing how we see the world and what our hopes and plans for the future are. This knowledge is the main condition for our personal and professional self-conceptualization.

While speaking about professional identity formation, it is crucial to take into consideration a person's sociocultural environment. From a sociocultural point of view, professional identification is related to a professional culture, a person's social and cultural context. We need to consider the networks a person belongs to and groups (family, friends, work groups etc.) one is connected to. In early 1998 Ohlen and Segesten wrote about professional identity as about the feeling of belonging to a certain social group and being a part of some professional group (i.e., belonging to teachers, nurses, social workers, or other communities).

Other scientists, like Brott and Myers (1999), Ibarra (1999), Enyedy, Goldberg, Welsh (2006) explained professional identification as a process of interaction between various structural elements, like external conditions, requirements for specific professions, professional knowledge and personal characteristics of each individual. All these elements have an impact on structural changes in values and attitudes. Professional self-conceptualization is the process and result of these inner changes.

How can professional identity be formed at school?

We shouldn't consider professional identity as something poorly comprehensive or "unreal". Our identity, this our "Me" is very complex and professional identity is just one aspect of it; therefore, in some way, we might decide how to form it or, as educators, how to help students form it on their own.

In my doctoral thesis (Crisafulli, 2009) I discussed the significant impact of personal story, innate and acquired characteristics, gained life and work experiences, acquired professional knowledge, and information about the profession on professional identity formation. Fundamentally, when we are thinking about school, we should consider the importance of deep acknowledgement with each student. Educators should know a student's life story, attitude, and professional and life experiences. As representatives of schools, we should create the external conditions within the school for a young person to know him (her) self better and realise his/her potential in the best way.

Let's reflect on this a little bit: What tools do you use at school to understand a student better, or how do you inspire a student to know himself/herself better? What activities are the most effective in your school in discovering and letting out the superpowers of each student? Exactly these tools and activities are the prerequisites for the student's professional identity formation at school.

At school, we can take a second step towards professional identification. We might follow the suggestions by Adamson, Ferrer-Wreder, and Kerpelman (2007). These scientists discuss that a strong professional identity depends on a person's positive perceptions of the world surrounding her/him and on positive attitudes towards the professional future. Thus, students might be encouraged to think positively about their professional and personal futures already at school. Positive expectations for the future create better conditions for a smooth professional identity formation process in the future.

You might wonder how this can be achieved through daily educational activities. Educators possess tools to introduce students to the variety of existing professions. They can also teach students not to give up, to face challenges and overcome the obstacles they meet every day. Teachers and career consultants also have the power to inspire students to be problem solvers and to handle difficult situations every student faces. This means that by educating a person to be autonomous in his/ her decisions and actions, we also empower him/ her to take an active role in his/her professional identity formation.

Educating for autonomy is one of the prerequisites for professional identity formation at school. Although I believe many teachers are already encouraging students to know themselves better, it is still essential to highlight the importance of using educational tools and conditions for empowering students to internalise professional values and the professional culture of their future careers.

One of the possibilities at school might be a creation of the "professions-friendly" educational environment when, for example, during the lessons (from maths to chemistry etc.) teachers or career consultants:

- introduce students with a wide range of professions, highlighting the main differences among them;
- show videos about professions and discuss their differences;

- introduce professional values and competencies of different professions. They might also explain what knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics should doctor, teacher, police officer, plumber, programmer etc. possess as well as discuss what is a "correct" and "wrong" attitude and behaviour, or what unpleasant obstacles every profession needs to face etc.;
- introduce students with so-called pictures of different professions' representatives;
- present the characteristics of different professions (i.e., introduction of professional values, required knowledge, etc.) to students;
- invite parents/relatives of students/teachers to lectures where they can present their personal professional stories. Personal stories about difficulties and mistakes or bad experiences are extremely powerful and important for professional identity formation, because students may really ask themselves whether they would be able to face these situations and "whether it is for them";
- reduce myths about professions (like gender-based ones that "high technologies and engineering are not for women" or "to be a nurse or kindergarten teacher is not for men" etc.)
- integrate professional knowledge into the curriculum (i.e., to integrate the problem-solving method into lessons, using the examples from different professional fields or inviting the representatives of various professions to work together on creating problems and solving them together);
- inspire and enable students for conscious and practice-based learning, while teaching them to be more attentive to their environment or giving everyday life examples;
- organise visits to organisations and companies.

Summing up, the first phase of professional identification can start already at school, but it requires special educational conditions for its smooth development. From an educational point of view, the logic of the construction of curriculum content is crucial for professional identification. Visual tools, people and connections, discussions and involvement, changes or integration of curriculum content – all this is important for professional identification.

Students construct new and more realistic attitudes and knowledge about professions when career consultants cooperate with the school community (teachers, parents, administration) and they work together on the creation of integrative educational content elements.

Self-conceptualization and autonomy in the formation of professional identity

Continuous education for conscious learning and autonomy are those educational tools that facilitate the acquisition of professional knowledge and the internalisation of professional values. Together with the acquired skill to analyse and consider objectively the environment and the context surrounding them, students receive a tool to understand which profession "is interesting to get more information about'' and "might be his/hers", and which one "for sure is not about him/her".

Students' real and objective self-assessment and active participation in their learning process are other two significant educational elements that facilitate early professional identity formation. For example, here you might ask yourself what methods and techniques do you use daily to develop

students' skills that are important for conscious and active, autonomic learning and objective self-assessment?

All techniques and didactic methods that empower students' self-reflection, self-concentration, self-assessment, and connection to other people are useful. External evaluation and mentoring are also important because representatives of different professions help students to form realistic attitudes about professions and empower students for conscious learning.

Presenting benefits and meaningfulness of learning

A student who knows the reason and meaning of learning for his/her future is more motivated to reach the learning goals and accelerates his/her professional identity formation. Thus, at school, it is useful to integrate meaningfulness and benefits elements into curriculum content. Education for conscious learning is another educational prerequisite for professional identification during school years.

When a student considers the curriculum content useful for his/her professional future, meaningfulness is attributed to the student's learning content and thus the learning process becomes more conscious. Student's conscious and personalised self-conceptualization leads to professional identity formation. Simple questions like: "What does this mean to me?" or "Why is this subject important for my future professional life/ studies?" create conditions for professional identity formation at school. It means school policymakers, curriculum content creators, educators and career consultants should work together to create the external conditions for student's acknowledgement with different aspects of a wide range of professions and attribution of meaningfulness to the learning content considering learning's benefits to the future profession.

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