

NAVIGATING FUTURE PATHS: A STUDY ON CAREER CHOICES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS AMONG STUDENTS FROM A TECHNOLOGICAL HIGH SCHOOL IN ALBA IULIA (ROMANIA)

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ABSTRACT: Selecting a career and career trajectory poses a significant and challenging endeavor for many recent graduates of secondary schools, particularly due to the limited availability of personal and professional counseling and guidance in Romanian educational institutions during high school years or the period preceding enrollment in the high school or vocational cycle. Despite county-wide events organized to showcase each school's educational offerings, there is insufficient emphasis placed on understanding the motivations behind high school graduates' choices of specific educational institutions after the admission and enrollment process. This study, conducted in a technological high school in Alba County, addresses precisely this aspect, shedding light on students' perceptions regarding life success, counseling and career guidance, and the factors they deem influential in academic and professional success. The selection of this educational unit is deliberate, as it houses the first dual vocational school in Alba County and ranks among the pioneers of such institutions in the country. The results presented in this article are derived from an extensive longitudinal study. The data showcased herein specifically pertain to the ninth-grade cohort of the academic year 2022-2023.

Keywords: education; admission; counseling and guidance; professional development; career path;

Introduction and Context of the Study

As previously discussed in a prior work, the educational process is notably focused on building confidence and future perspectives (Alexandrescu, 2009, p. 496), involving the acquisition of desirable behaviors for students and graduates (Jig"u, 2009). For graduates of the lower secondary cycle faced with the choice between high school and vocational school, it is crucial to consider that admission to theoretical high schools represents the first step toward accessing university education. Thus, only those demonstrating the capacity to become competent specialists in their chosen fields of study for higher education should have access to high school education (Achiri, 2014, p. 179-179). This does not imply exclusion of other students from high school education; however, vocational schools may represent a more advantageous medium- to long-term option for them. This choice helps prevent situations where university graduates engage in fields entirely unrelated to their training.

Additionally, young individuals commencing their education at a vocational school have the opportunity to continue their studies and enhance their skills through evening courses or later enrollment in university (Mucea, 2021, p. 110; Mucea, 2023, p. 104).

It is essential for young individuals to accumulate knowledge related to the planning and development of their careers concurrently with their professional training, enabling them to apply this knowledge in personal, familial, and professional contexts (Clenciu, 2016, p. 34). All this information is particularly significant within the framework of the new model of lifelong learning, which encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning (Samoil", 2011, p. 61). Nevertheless, many middle school students transitioning to high school or vocational schools lack essential knowledge about the profession they chose at the beginning of the high school or vocational cycle, as highlighted by Ion (2015, pp. 25-26). Thus, this situation underscores the need for a more effective counseling and guidance system

for students, emphasizing the importance of establishing a planned educational trajectory based on the interests, aptitudes, and individual competencies of the students (Mucea, 2021, p. 111; Mucea, 2023, p. 105).

Educational policies based on school choice have gained popularity as they ensure equal opportunities in education (Gheba, 2018, p. 103). To create harmonious future prospects for students, where they develop desirable behaviors from all perspectives, it is essential for families and schools to share common principles and objectives regarding students' educational and career guidance (Jig"u, 2009). If there is coherence between the strategies provided by these entities, students have the chance to have a consistent educational trajectory, supported by consensus among the most important decision-making institutions regarding their academic and professional direction and future.

Simultaneously, business involvement in education can significantly contribute to building a solid professional future for young individuals, with positive effects on social well-being throughout society. To achieve this goal, Romania has adopted dual vocational education, which involves a partnership between schools, parents, students, and economic agents. According to the Romanian Ministry of Education, dual education is a form of organizing vocational and technical education based on a collaboration agreement between the economic operator, the educational institution, and the administrative-territorial unit, as well as individual practical training agreements between the economic operator, student/parent-guardian, and the educational institution (Mucea, 2021, pp. 111-112; Mucea, 2023, pp. 105-106).

In this context, this article presents the findings of a sociological investigation conducted in a technological high school in Alba Iulia, which is the first high school where dual vocational education has been implemented in Alba County. The aim was to observe the reasons underlying the choice of this school by ninth-grade students from the 2022-2023 academic year, embarking on their academic and professional training in a new schooling cycle, either in high school or

vocational classes. This sociological endeavor is part of a broader longitudinal research conducted in this high school, encompassing the survey of multiple student generations. The presented results are specific only to the ninth-grade generation of the aforementioned academic year.

Study objectives, methodological aspects and profile of respondents

As mentioned earlier, in others papers, this research is longitudinal in nature. Thus, in alignment with the objectives outlined in previous works, the current study's goals are as follows to elucidate the perspectives of high school and vocational students on the significance of career and life success. Furthermore, it seeks to discern the motivations underpinning their selection of a specific profession and educational institution, specifically the Technological High School "Alexandru Dom'a" in Alba Iulia. Notably, this institution houses the inaugural dual vocational school in Alba County, known as the "coală Profesională" German" Alba" (SPGA), inaugurated in 2013 and counted among the pioneering educational establishments of its kind in Romania (Mucea, 2021, 112; Mucea, 2023, 106-107).

The vocational education provided by SPGA adheres to the German model, wherein students engage in practical training directly with the school's partner economic entities, thereby attaining comprehensive professional training predominantly within industrial settings. Beyond the practical exposure in companies, this educational approach affords students additional advantages, foremost among them being the professional scholarship awarded by the partnering economic entity. This supplemental scholarship complements the stipend provided by the Romanian state to all students enrolled in vocational school courses. A secondary objective of this sociological inquiry is to gauge the perceptions of ninth-grade students during the 2022-2023 academic year at the focal educational institution; this involves an examination of their general perspectives on careers, consideration of success factors, scrutiny of daily activities

with career implications, and an assessment of the influence wielded by family, peer groups, and societal factors on their career choices. Concluding the study, a final objective is to delineate students' perceptions regarding counseling and career guidance. This encompasses an exploration of their involvement in such sessions, courses, or workshops during their high school tenure, as well as an evaluation of the current status of counseling and vocational guidance within the educational curriculum for students enrolled in the dual vocational school (Mucea, 2021, 112; Mucea, 2023, 107-108). I mention that the comprehensive results are scheduled for publication upon the completion of the entire research, following the administration of questionnaires for the 2023-2024 school generation, which represents the tenth generation embarking on dual vocational school courses.

This research employed a sociological survey methodology based on questionnaires. The self-administered tool was designed for individual completion by students in a classroom setting. A total of 92 questionnaires were distributed, filled out, and entered into the database. These responses encompassed all ninth-grade students present in classes during the study period. The research focused on the entire ninth-grade student population during the 2022-2023 academic year at Technological High School "Alexandru Dom a" in Alba Iulia. The inclusion criteria did not differentiate based on the form of education (high school or vocational), gender, or background. Additionally, students graduating from middle school within the same institution were not categorized separately, and distinctions were not made for students based on repetition or transfer.

Regarding the respondents' gender, 85.9% are male, and 14.1% are female, with their ages ranging from 15 to 18 years. The majority of the ninth-grade students, 64.1%, are 16 years old at the time of the study. They are followed by 32.6% who are 15 years old, and 2.2% (14 years old) and 1.1% (18 years old). In comparison to previous studies, the respondents' age in this academic year is higher. This is attributed to the fact that, unlike in earlier

studies, the students were surveyed towards the end of the school year. Consequently, the majority of ninth-grade students had already reached the age of 16. Simultaneously, 54.3% of respondents come from rural areas, while 45.7% are from urban areas. The distribution of respondents based on the chosen type of education is as follows: 46.7% represent students in high school classes, while 53.3% are students in vocational school. Despite the fact that, in the 2022-2023 academic year, the number of high school classes is smaller than the number of vocational school classes, the percentages of participants in the study are not significantly different. Two explanations can be considered in this case: on one hand, vocational school classes may operate with a smaller number of students than high school classes, and on the other hand, absenteeism or school dropout rates in vocational classes may be lower than in high school classes, leading to a higher attendance of high school students at the commencement of the study.

The Reasons that Underpinned the Choice Made

Equality of opportunities in education primarily involves ensuring equitable access to educational resources, as students' academic outcomes are directly influenced by these resources. One of the processes that threatens equal opportunities in schooling is the differentiation among schools, specifically the fact that students' socio-economic characteristics become more crucial than the specific facilities of each school (Hatos, 2008, p. 141). Consequently, significant disparities arise between theoretical high schools and national colleges, on one hand, and other technological, professional, and vocational schools, on the other hand (Mucea, 2021, p. 114; Mucea, 2023, p. 110).

Students choose between a high school and a vocational school based on a variety of personal, academic, and career-related reasons. One common motivation is the interest and passion for specific fields or professions. Many students opt for a high school to acquire a solid academic foundation that will open doors for further studies at the university level. On the

other hand, vocational schools attract those who seek practical knowledge and skills in a specific field, preparing them for a quicker and more direct career path after graduation. Factors such as parental influence, social environment, and local opportunities can also impact this decision. It is crucial for students to analyze their passions, interests, and long-term goals before choosing between high school and vocational school to ensure they make the right choice for their educational and professional future. Certainly, there are situations where students may choose unknowingly, or due to objective reasons, are assigned to certain classes or schools (e.g., low admission scores, limited options/schools in the computerized allocation)¹.

Before delving into the ninth-grade students' perceptions of career and vocational training, we aim to determine how many of the participating students selected their current high school as their top preference. Consequently, 51.1% of respondents indicated that this school was their preferred choice and their first selection. In contrast, 48.9% expressed that the high school they are currently attending was not their initial preference. Also, we aimed to elucidate the factors influencing their choice of this particular school. To achieve this, respondents were provided with a list of reasons or given the option to propose an unlisted reason that motivated their enrollment in this educational institution. Hence, 64.1% indicated that the presence of friends already attending the school was a factor in their choice. When combined with the 26.1% who mentioned selecting the school because their former classmates had chosen it, wanting to continue studying with familiar faces, it becomes evident that the desire to attend the same school as friends or previous peers was a significant influence for many freshmen. At the same time, for 19.6% of the pupils surveyed, the presence of siblings as pupils or former pupils of the school was a reason for choosing this educational establishment. At the same time other reasons are also observed such as: too low admission average to choose other high schools, so they had no other options (62%), proximity of the school to home (37%) and school facilities (37%). At the same time for some of

them it was their parents' choice (13%). A considerable portion of the ninth-grade students surveyed (42.4 %) asserted that they autonomously made the decision to enroll, unaffected by any of the reasons discussed.

Even though the reasons for choosing this educational institution were diverse, at the end of the ninth grade, when the students were surveyed, 70.7% of them state that they will continue their studies at this school, while only 4.3% express a desire to transfer to another school. On the other hand, 25% are still uncertain about whether they will continue at the school where they were admitted or if they plan to transfer to another school in the tenth grade.

I would like to point out that 67.4% of the surveyed students participated in the "High Schools and Professions Fair" when they were in the eighth grade. This event was organized by the Alba County School Inspectorate and the Alba County Council. Within this event, technical high schools and vocational schools presented their educational offerings, each school having an individual presentation stand. Additionally, this event also saw the participation of economic agents who have partnerships with educational institutions, companies where students engage in practical activities. These annually organized events primarily target middle school students, especially those in the eighth grade, providing them with the opportunity to explore both educational institutions for further studies and the specifics of various professions presented by economic operators in Alba County.

Traditionally parents play a significant role in the choice of high school for their children. Usually they provide counseling and guidance, ensure the necessary financial resources, contribute to the emotional stability of the student, and bring in a deep understanding of the child's abilities and preferences. The active involvement of parents in communication with school staff and in the decision-making process contributes to making an informed and tailored educational choice for the student. The research further supports this, showing that 33.7% of students consulted their parents whenever they were selecting a high school, and 32.6% of students did so frequently.

Factors and activities influencing career choice

In examining the influence of young individuals on career choices through a sociological lens, survey findings reveal that 60.9% of the surveyed youths assert that they select their careers based on their own opinions, while 47.7% believe that family exerts a significant influence on this decision. Concurrently, 20.7% of respondents consider that society as a whole plays a role in shaping the career choices of young individuals, and 18.5% believe that this decision is influenced by school or teachers. Simultaneously, 12% of respondents attribute a significant influence on this choice to their friends, and for 10.9%, the influence stems from mass media or social networks.

It is highly challenging to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all factors influencing career success, particularly in the contemporary context where the perception of success or professional achievement has shifted among young individuals. Without claiming to perform a detailed examination of all factors and the interconnections between them and success, this section of the article will present a few examples that young people were queried about, which may be related to success in life. For the majority of respondents, family support is highly important for life success (71.7%), along with individual preparation (48.9%) and sports involvement (43.5%). Additionally, 28.3% of students consider school to be very important, 20.7% deem friends to be highly important, while only 9.8% of the surveyed students believe that volunteer activities are very important for success in life.

The percentage distribution differs when we talk about these factors as important, and not very important. Therefore, the majority of students, 47.8%, regard school as important, 46.7% consider sports to be significant, 42.9% believe individual preparation is important, and only 33.7% attribute importance to volunteering, while only 25% consider family to be important.

Following the research, it is evident that volunteering is perceived as minimally and insignificantly important for success in life by

the surveyed individuals. This perspective is shared by 56.5% of the responding students. Simultaneously, even though high school students have chosen their educational institution based on friendships with peers, neighbors, acquaintances, or former classmates, 39.1% of them believe that friends are of little to no importance for success in life. Lastly, 23.9% of students express a low to very low level of importance attributed to school for success in life.

The percentage distribution varies when considering the importance of sports, as only 9.8% of students find it to be of little or no importance. Similarly, 8.7% of students consider individual preparation to have a low to very low impact on success. It is noteworthy that 3.3% of students view family as slightly important for success in life. Regarding the family aspect, none of the respondents deemed family as not at all important for success in life.

Perception of career counselling and guidance

Career counseling and guidance activities for students are essential initiatives conducted within educational institutions to assist students in exploring their educational and career options, identifying their interests and abilities, and making informed decisions about their future careers. These activities include individual or group counseling sessions, skills assessment tests, presentations on various career fields, discussions about educational opportunities, and practical training sessions. The ultimate goal is to support students in developing a clear vision of their careers and to guide them towards the resources and information needed to achieve their professional goals.

Prior to delving into the perspectives of students on career and/or personal and professional training, it is important to highlight that all dual professional classes include an hour dedicated to "counseling and career guidance". The following are the key subjects of discussion during these hours: career planning and growth, learning management, interpersonal communication, self-knowledge and personal

management, the labor market, and lifestyle and work. The students participate in these classes in the same manner as they would in any other class because their participation is not recorded in the school catalogs, but rather, absences are. Referring to the previously mentioned counseling classes, 60.9 percent of the ninth grade respondents state that they took part in career guidance and counseling programs offered by the school, while 39.1% did not do this.

Whether they participated or not in counseling and career guidance activities, students were asked to indicate the extent to which these activities offered by the school are important for success in life. The majority of respondents, 50%, believe that the importance of these activities for success in life is moderate, while only 9.8% attribute very high importance, and 34.8% attribute high importance to these activities. On the opposite end, 4.3% consider the importance of counseling and guidance for success in life to be low, and 1.1% believe that these activities have a very small impact on success in life. The preceding percentage distribution includes responses from all students, regardless of their participation in such activities.

In conclusion, programs for career counseling and advice offered by educational institutions are essential in helping students discover their interests and skills, research potential careers, and make well-informed decisions about their futures. These events include talks on educational opportunities, skill assessments, presentations, counseling sessions, and hands-on training, among other components. The main purpose is to direct students toward the resources they need to reach their professional objectives and assist them in creating a clear career vision.

Conclusions

In order to support students in exploring their educational and professional alternatives, identifying their interests and abilities, and making educated decisions about their future jobs, educational institutions must provide career counseling and guidance services. These events include talks on educational opportunities, skill assessments, presentations on various job fields, individual or group counseling, and hands-on training sessions. The ultimate objective is to assist students in creating a distinct career vision and point them in the direction of the tools and knowledge required to meet their professional objectives.

As mentioned in the introduction, the results presented are specific to the ninth-grade cohort during the academic year 2022-2023; previous articles have addressed aspects specific to other student generations. Additionally, I intend to publish a longitudinal analysis spanning five years, examining the differences in opinions among the various high school generations where the study took place. By observing variations in attitudes towards multiple educational aspects across student generations, I aim to uncover potential disparities in their perception of the importance they attribute to education and training in general, as well as to work and occupations, taking into consideration the students' future perspectives.

The choice of school is primarily influenced by the group of acquaintances, friends and colleagues. The current or past presence of siblings in the school also influences this. Proximity to home or the average admissions rate of pupils should not be omitted from the discussion. While the aforementioned aspects are indeed crucial, even more significant are the skills, competencies, aptitudes, and interests of the students, ensuring that the choice of a profession or career is made knowingly or based on the youths' aptitudes. Even more so considering that we still have students who have never benefited from career counseling and guidance activities.

Notes

1. Also known as automatic allocation, it is a process of assigning graduating middle school students to high schools or vocational schools, managed through a computerized system. The purpose of this process is to facilitate and streamline the distribution of students among secondary education institutions. In this process, students submit preferences regarding the high schools or vocational schools they wish to attend. Subsequently, a computer algorithm assesses these preferences, taking into account criteria such as graduation grades, distance from schools, the capacity of schools to admit students, and other relevant factors. The algorithm then allocates places to students at high schools or vocational schools based on these criteria, aiming to ensure a fair and efficient distribution.

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