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## Career Counseling in Early Childhood Education

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### *Doradztwo zawodowe w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej*

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to outline how career guidance classes in early childhood education can be valuable for lifelong development. Career counselling is still strongly associated with helping adults, the unemployed, to retrain. It is treated as an expert service primarily related to the labour market. Career counselling should be disenchanting. Undoubtedly, it is a professional service, but it is equally firmly inscribed in the educational process. According to the core curriculum, one of the tasks of the school is to prepare students to choose their further education and profession. The school runs vocational guidance classes, which fit in with lifelong learning. Due to the approaching transition from primary to secondary school, much attention is paid to counselling classes for seventh and eighth graders. However, developing interests and getting to know oneself starts much earlier, so it is worth weaving elements of vocational knowledge into the process.

**Keywords:** career guidance; early childhood education; educational and career planning; primary school; in-school career guidance system

**Abstrakt:** Celem artykułu jest nakreślenie jak wartościowe z punktu widzenia całościowego rozwoju mogą być zajęcia z doradztwa zawodowego w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Doradztwo zawodowe nadal silnie kojarzone jest z pomocą osobom dorosłym, bezrobotnym, chcącym przekwalifikować się. Traktowane jako usługa ekspercka związana przede wszystkim z rynkiem pracy. Doradztwo zawodowe powinno zostać odczarowane. Niewątpliwie jest to usługa profesjonalna, jednak wpisana równie silnie w proces edukacyjno-wychowawczy. Zgodnie z podstawą programową jednym z zadań szkoły jest przygotowanie uczniów do wyboru dalszego kierunku kształcenia i zawodu. Szkoła prowadzi zajęcia z zakresu doradztwa zawodowego, które wpisują się w ideę *lifelong learning*. Dużo uwagi poświęca się zajęciom z doradztwa dla siódmo- i ósmoklasistów, z uwagi na zbliżający się moment tranzytu ze szkół podstawowych do ponadpodstawowych. Jednak proces rozwijania zainteresowań, poznawania siebie zaczyna się znacznie wcześniej, dlatego też warto wpleść w niego elementy wiedzy zawodoznawczej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** doradztwo zawodowe; wczesna edukacja; planowanie kariery edukacyjno-zawodowej; szkoła podstawowa; wewnątrzszkolny system doradztwa zawodowego

## INTRODUCTION

Children are keen observers of the adult world, which also applies to work. They see satisfaction and contentment but also stress, fatigue, and sacrifice. They listen to conversations and comments about work, co-workers, responsibilities, salaries, redundancies or job searches. Furthermore, they form their views based on what they see and hear. School is where they spend a large part of their childhood. Supporting and preparing students to make educational and career decisions is the responsibility of adults (Watson & McMahon, 2022) including the school. The vocational counselling provided at school aims to prepare pupils to make a reflective choice about their future educational path and, in the long term, their profession. This skill is essential in a dynamically changing reality. As Dołęga-Herzog and Rosalska (2014) write, counselling support can be analysed on many levels. It is both a support for the multifaceted development of the student, an element of the didactic and educational offer, assistance in choosing a profession and the direction of further education, prevention of failures in the labour market, and an element of those mentioned above broadly understood lifelong education. The authors stress that nowadays, counselling is perceived more broadly; its multidimensionality and changes in target groups are noted. It is no longer just a service of matching an individual's interests, aptitudes and talents to a particular profession. Contemporary theories of career development, career counselling or lifelong guidance focus on supporting counselees to develop skills related to being flexible, transversal competencies (a.k.a.: transversal, transferable, transmissible) (IBE, 2024) and resilience – the ability of an individual to adapt to changing conditions, to adjust about the environment, to become resilient, plasticity of the mind, the ability to recover lost or weakened strengths and resilience to harmful factors, including those related to the educational and professional environment. Choosing a profession is not a single decision-making act, but a process that lasts over time, beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood. It is a sequence of decisions conditioned by diverse biological, psychological, economic, and social factors. An ill-considered choice of educational and career path may result in frustration and uselessness. The ability to construct one's career is one of the most essential conditions for survival in the modern world. Educational and career choices should be underpinned by self-knowledge and knowledge of the labour market, its trends and requirements. Therefore, special attention should be paid to them during the educational period, when interests and skills are developed, abilities are analysed, or aspirations are formed.

In doing so, it is essential to remember that we are preparing children and young people for a choice of educational pathways and entry into the labour market that may differ significantly from the current ones. Current third-graders will prepare for and work in professions that do not yet exist.

## CAREER COUNSELING IN EDUCATION

The conduct of activities related to professional counselling in kindergartens, schools and institutions is regulated, among other things, by the Education Law of 14 December 2016, listing professional counselling classes and classes conducted as part of psychological and pedagogical assistance as one of the primary forms of didactic and educational activities of a school. In 2019, the Regulation of the Minister of National Education on professional counselling in the educational system (Dz.U. of 2019, item 325) was created. According to the regulations, career counselling is implemented in kindergartens, primary schools – divided into grades I–VI and VII–VIII, secondary schools (industry first-degree, technical and general secondary schools), industry second-degree schools, post-secondary schools and schools for adults. The Regulation of the Minister indicates the curriculum content of vocational counselling, how it is implemented, and the tasks of the vocational counsellor. The same four blocks of curriculum content are defined for all educational stages: getting to know oneself, the world of professions and the labour market, the educational market and lifelong learning, planning one's development and making educational and professional decisions. On the Ministry's website, we can find information that they have been developed by experts in the field of vocational guidance, as well as representatives of schools and institutions, leading authorities, employers and trade unions and labour market institutions in the framework of the project "Effective Educational and Vocational Guidance for Children, Young People and Adults" implemented by the Centre for Education Development in Warsaw (www5).

The regulation on career counselling guides career counsellors while leaving much autonomy for its implementation. Principals, vocational counsellors, teachers conducting general and vocational education classes, class teachers, and school specialists, such as educational psychologists and librarians, are responsible for implementing vocational guidance at school. Pupils and parents should also be involved in building an effective career guidance system. Hughes et al. (2022) describe an intentional career development programme in the form of an innovative multi-agency collaboration. The research offers suggestions concerning the design and delivery of career education in primary schools related to the involvement of volunteers, parents, and employers, embedding career-related learning into the school curriculum, and career resources.

### INTRA-SCHOOL CAREER GUIDANCE SYSTEM. BASIC INFORMATION

An in-school career guidance system (I-SCGS for short) is a comprehensive, holistic, broad and systemic approach to career guidance (www4). Its design and implementation should use all possible resources available to the school, such as students on placement, apps, learning platforms, library rooms and collections or showcases.

It is a framework that sets out activities and shows the “school’s way of thinking” about career guidance. In this view, it is a set of interrelated elements used to achieve the objectives. It is worth remembering that there is no single obligatory model or template. Still, there are elements that the I-SCGS should contain, among which are the legal basis, assumptions, general and specific objectives, addressees, persons responsible for the implementation and execution of the programme, content and duration of implementation, methods and forms of counselling work, collaborators and stakeholders, expected results, methods of evaluation and assessment of the system as well as optional annexes and lesson scenarios. The team responsible for implementing and realising career counselling at school consists of the head teacher, career counsellors, teachers and tutors. The activities planned within the framework of the Vocational Guidance System are addressed primarily to students but also to teachers, parents and the local community. The goals resulting from the system are targeted at these groups. Student-centred goals are related to the roles they will play in the future: employee, co-worker or employer. These objectives will be achieved by developing skills such as critical thinking, searching and verifying information, independent learning, and transferable competencies. The objectives aimed at teachers and parents focus on supporting their counselling competencies and building their involvement in the educational and career decision-support process. Parents are in the group of so-called non-professional counsellors (Bańka, 2005), where career counselling is based on relationship, affection, human solidarity and emotional bonding. The parents, guardians, and family members primarily influence the construction process and often the course of an educational and professional career. Parents are powerful agents in the socialisation of children to work (Oliveira et al., 2020, p. 63). This influence can be both negative and positive, motivating and demotivating, and it can happen that unconsciously, adults transfer their fears and aspirations to their children, presenting an erroneous (stereotypical) image of a given profession. They present their opinion rather than facts by imposing the direction of education, forcing confident choices by financing education and providing maintenance (Barańska, 2023). Therefore, it is worthwhile for the system to ensure that parents’ knowledge of education and the education system, the teaching offer of schools, and the contemporary and future labour market is updated and a factual source of information is identified. The local community is a resource that can support the creation and implementation of an intra-school guidance system. Local employers and entrepreneurs can cooperate by offering placements or excursions depending on the educational level. Allies, institutions that can support the counselling process, are an essential building block for the I-SCGS. These may include, among others, local universities, libraries, lifelong learning centres, career guidance agencies, job centres, foundations or associations. One of the necessary elements in establishing an in-school counselling system is its evaluation. It is a necessary process, and only thanks to it is it possible to introduce effective corrections. The aim of the evaluation is not criticism for criticism’s sake and

not to point out mistakes, but above all, to draw conclusions. It mainly evaluates the effectiveness of the I-SCGS and the attractiveness of the counselling activities in a given school year. It also evaluates the counselling goals and primarily concerns students, the whole teaching staff, and parents. With the information gained, the coordination team can eliminate elements from the system that did not work and introduce new ones. The evaluation should give a clear and readable picture of the situation. Surveys, interviews, and document analyses can be carried out using apps.

It should be disseminated to increase the effectiveness of the in-school guidance system. This should serve, among other things, to exchange good practices and inspire schools to each other. Available to everyone: student, parent and teacher. In the library, hung on the school's website, discussed at pedagogical councils and parent-teacher conferences, also containing recommendations for use the following year.

Knowledge of the structure of the I-SCGS, its objectives, addressees, tools, and evaluation methods will allow effective planning and implementation of guidance at the early childhood education stage.

## CAREER GUIDANCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION. CONTENT, NEEDS, CHALLENGES

In Annex 2, the Regulation specifies precisely what effects career counselling should have. Curriculum content in the case of grades I–VI is divided into A and B; block A applies to grades I–III, and block B to grades IV–VI. All of this, of course, is in a form adapted and assimilated by pupils at the various educational stages. According to the assumptions at the early childhood education stage, in the area of self-knowledge, a pupil or pupil should be able to describe his or her interests and how he or she can develop them, present his or her interests, give examples of different types of interests, give examples of his or her strengths in different areas, take action in task situations and describe what came out of them for himself or herself and others.

The second area relates to learning about professions and the labour market. By acquiring specific knowledge, the pupil plays various occupational roles in play, can give the names of occupations carried out by people in closer and more distant surroundings as well as describe the essential characteristics of work in selected occupations, can describe what work is and discuss its importance in people's lives. In addition, he/she describes the influence of various occupations on the shape of the environment in which he/she lives, points out the importance of abilities and interests in pursuing a given occupation and uses utensils and tools according to their purpose and creatively and unconventionally.

The educational market and lifelong learning are the third content area of career guidance, after which students justify the need to learn and acquire new skills, indicate the content they like to learn, list different sources of knowledge, and attempt to use them.

The final area is planning their development and making educational and career decisions. By acquiring knowledge and developing skills in this area, pupils tell what they would like to become and what they would like to do, plan their activities or those of a group, indicating the primary activities and tasks necessary to achieve a goal, and try to make decisions on their own on matters directly related to them.

Early childhood education in Poland refers to the first stage of formal schooling. As a rule, it applies to children aged between 7 and 10. At this point, it is worth recalling the groundbreaking theories of professional development for its time. The first is Eli Ginzberg's interdisciplinary team theory, and the second is Donald Super's theory (Paszowska-Rogacz, 2003). According to Ginzberg's team, the age coinciding with the early childhood education stage is the period of fantasy (from birth to 11 years of age), in which the child reflects the pleasure associated with performing a given activity in play. It is a transition process from a play orientation towards a work orientation. Over time, he seeks approval for his actions, mainly from his parents. In this way, he assimilates the value system in the field of education and the work observed by his parents. According to the authors, this is an essential stage of professional development. Similarly, the course of professional development is characterised by Super, who describes a growth stage up to the age of 14 and, like Ginzberg, calls the period from 4 to 10 years a period of fantasy, during which needs to play a significant role, social role-play is essential. The essence of this stage is the creation and development of a self-image through identification with parents and significant others. It is essential to remember that the moment of entry into schooling may overlap with developmental crises, as described in the literature by Piaget, Wysocki or Erikson. It is also worth mentioning Mark Savickas' theory of Career Construction (Minta, 2012), which analyses what happens to a young person during the developmental periods in question from a different angle. According to the theory, the role of an actor is the first of the three we enter throughout life, the other two being agent (autonomously acting subject) and author of our career. The actor of social life comes into the world in a family, a place, a time over which he or she has no influence. When children enter the world, they enter into a family in which a specific structure, norms and values are in place, and they take on a role in that family shaped by the culture of a given society. Through socialisation, modelling and imitation, they quickly acquire knowledge of their place in the social structure. When starting primary school, children are set specific goals that are more or less distant, easier, and more demanding to achieve, but these are very often defined and imposed by others. According to Savickas, by the end of primary school, the "young social actor" starts to act more consciously, builds up his autonomy, and attempts to plan and control his actions. The process outlined is nothing less than maturation, moving from dependence to greater independence and self-reliance.

From a counselling point of view, in the preschool and early school years, it is vital to inspire children to learn about themselves, to encourage them to work and under-

take activities that require independence, and to make choices, for example, about what they like, what they do not like (with arguments). At this stage, the cooperation of parents and counsellor, underpinned by observation and constructive discussion, can result in enrolling the child in additional activities, dance, acting, sports, art, and language, and these, in turn, led by specialists, will allow the improvement of already outstanding abilities (Barańska, 2019, p. 316). At the primary school stage, initiatives taken earlier should be continued. Allow experimentation with different activities and classes, support, mobilise but never force. Accept the child's willingness to change. Otherwise, we are denying the child the right to make a mistake or to change a decision; we are belittling the child's opinion resulting from the attempt made. At this stage of education, parents need access to information about opportunities to attend additional activities and events, paid and free. Moreover, especially from a diagnostic perspective, it is essential to remember that interests and predispositions are unstable at this age. Hence, as Rosalska points out, formulating counselling advice based on a standardised diagnosis is pointless (Rosalska, 2012). There are no vocational aptitude questionnaires for children, which, when completed, will determine the profession and indicate the steps to be taken. Career counselling at the early childhood education stage is listening to children's stories about their vision of the world of professions. What is equally important is that career guidance in classes I–VI, the content of which is included in the regulation, is integrated into implementing the core curriculum of early childhood education. It is not an additional activity as in the case of grades seven and eight, so cooperation, as mentioned earlier, with the school's entire teaching staff, joint analysis, construction, and evaluation is essential.

#### SELECTED FORMS OF COUNSELLING WORK IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Knowledge of the effects of the implementation of career counselling at the early school stage and the construction and functioning of an intra-school counselling system allows the best methods and forms of work with children to be selected. The range of forms of work with which career guidance can be effectively implemented is extensive. Among the most commonly used are educational hours, workshops, webinars and workshops carried out by partners, school trips, participation in educational and popular science events, speeches by guests, including parents, educational films, educational games, and visual and artistic forms (e.g. a newspaper, lapbook). A school career counsellor may support teachers implementing career counselling at the early childhood education stage. However, they can also make use of various tools which are increasingly available online, e.g. Career Map ([www3](#)), ORE career counselling ([www1](#)) or modern career counselling in primary school ([www2](#)). The most common and well-known forms are class trips and outings to public facilities, the post office,



the police, the fire station, the library, the radio, and the local factory. Such excursions aim to learn about the specific characteristics of the various professional groups. They also allow the verification of certain opinions that children at this age already have (mainly borrowed from their parents). Counselling practice is familiar with the situation of “infatuation with the external form of a profession”, which consists of considering certain professions as easy and pleasant (e.g. the profession of actor, doctor, journalist, or lawyer). However, appearances are deceiving; they require hard work, continuing education, improvement and responsibility. Another example showing, in turn, that every profession is necessary and socially proper is trips to municipal waste management centres or treatment plants. A rubbish collector, among the toys every boy had – however, the colloquially known “rubbish collector” or a solid waste loader, according to the classification of professions and specialities (KZiS, 2014), does not want to become one in adulthood anymore. Moreover, studies show this is a complex, necessary and still undervalued profession. Such tours’ educational and vocational value makes it possible to reduce the social and cultural stereotypes still present regarding professional activity and certain professions. Another form of smuggling career guidance content is school readings in which children can learn about different professions (www6), all accessible to girls and boys. They meet poets, scientists, doctors, veterinarians, travellers, and soldiers in them. Between the lines, they also learn about the value of education, work, cooperation, interests, passions and talents, perseverance, patience and planning. A valuable and very engaging form of work is the so-called theme days, of which there are many in early childhood education. In the case of counselling, these can be Talent Days, Occupation Days, Healthy Eating Days, Clean Up the World Day, Music Day or World Book Day, during which there will be space to indicate the skills and knowledge needed for work in the areas of health, environment or music. Among the methods and forms of working with the youngest, especially those who cannot yet write or read, various types of puzzles will be helpful, where one will feature a representative of a particular profession, another a working tool, and a third a place where he or she can work. Magnetic jigsaw puzzles can be an exciting tool. When completing the task, pupils can attach to the figure representing a particular profession, the tools of the trade, essential items of clothing (helmet, coat, brush, scissors, etc.), types of schools and levels of schooling which must be completed to practise that profession.

Platforms where you can create quizzes, tasks, and escape rooms, e.g. Genial.ly, are also an inspiring tool for counselling work. This highly interactive tool allows you to create unique presentations, infographics, posters, animations and many other multimedia materials.

Discussions, debates, exhibitions, e.g. “professions of the future”, mini-lectures, and demonstrations make the message more enjoyable and allow children to see their point of view. Self-designed and self-made worksheets are often used or inspired by those already known, e.g. “Professional 5 seconds”. In a game, you must name 3 or 2



concepts or things in 5 seconds (e.g. name three items that fit in your pocket). The teacher can change the questions so that they relate to education and work, obviously at a level adapted to the developmental stage in question. The variety of forms, methods and tools available means that career guidance can be an exciting learning adventure for pupils, early childhood education teachers and parents.

## SUMMARY

More than one counsellor may have heard a phrase: “My child should focus on learning now; thinking about work will come later”. However, does learning, education, training, and self-education not determine career choices? Do not children’s educational successes encourage them to build up their educational capital, while failures discourage them? Early childhood education is a significant, valuable time that cannot be caught up with later. Children acquire the essential skills that are the foundation for further learning at this stage. According to American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2024), school counselors deliver school counseling programs that enhance student growth in three domain areas: academic, career and social/emotional development. School counselors recognize that each pupil/student, regardless of background, possesses unique interests, abilities and goals. At this age, children are particularly receptive and absorb knowledge exceptionally quickly, so it is essential to use this time appropriately. The literature indicates that this is also the time when children learn how to work independently, cooperate with others and how to evaluate themselves and their peers. Such fundamental and necessary competencies in life and today’s labour market

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