

Risk Situations in Adolescents' Career Choice Process

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Introduction

Educational pathways are determined by decisions made during school transitions. In many Swiss cantons, 6th grade students are selected, according to achievement and parents' recommendation, to enter a middle school with basic or higher demands. The next school transition is at the end of compulsory education in the 9th grade. Students choose between going to high school (*Gymnasium* or other) or a specific apprenticeship (dual system). They must pass an entrance examination or other procedure to be accepted by the high school, or find an apprenticeship in a firm. Compared to Great Britain and Germany, Swiss students have to choose an apprenticeship early in life (Beinke 2000).

Taking the students' perspective we focus on their career choice in the transition process after 9th grade. This process of career choice can be conceptualized as a normative developmental task that adolescents have to cope with (adaptation). Accordingly, previous research has discussed stressful factors during transition (Eccles 2004, Berndt & Mekos 1995). An interactive approach suggests that students' future plans and environmental resources regulate transitional processes. But little is known about how the career choice process can be structured. This provides our two research questions:

1. What stages does the process of vocational choice go through?
2. How can risk situations in vocational choice processes be predicted?

Method

Both questions were examined using a repeated measurement design with three waves. 532 adolescents (females 44%, non-Swiss nationality 17%) were tested at the beginning and at the end of their last year of compulsory education (9th grade level, mean age=15.1 years). They were contacted a third time, by mail, six months after the transition (response rate 74.4%). The questionnaire was standardized and contained both published, reliable scales and new items/scales. The item structure and scale reliabilities were examined using factor analysis.

Question 1: Stages of vocational choice

Herzog, Neuenschwander & Wannack (2006, in press) describe the regular process of career choice using a stage model developed from an existing one by Heinz (1984): (1) diffuse orientation, (2) concrete professional orientation, (3) looking for an apprenticeship, (4) consolidation of career choice, (5) vocational training, (6) entry to job market. Each stage ends with a decision. The process of career choice includes a professional choice and the transition between educational contexts.

Results

The results strongly supported the stage model. Before the transition (waves 1 to 2), most students changed stage in the expected direction. Only four out of 512 students did not. After the transition (from wave 2 to 3), most students continued on to stage 5. Only four did not

follow the hypothesized stage sequence between waves 1 and 2. Only four immediately entered the workplace as untrained workers (stage 6), and one repeated the 9th grade (stage 1). The six stages were confirmed empirically.

Question 2: Risk situations in the career choice process

We hypothesized that adolescents enter risk situations when resources and strategies are dysfunctional. We focus on risk situation 1 in stage 3, which is characterized by missing training opportunities and professional perspectives 2–3 months before the transition in the 9th grade. Risk situation 2 is characterized as direct entry to the job market after compulsory education; dropping out of apprenticeship within six months of the transition; or entry to an intermediate year after 9th grade. Focusing on the situation instead of on the group fits the proposed contextual pattern-centred approach. A risk situation occurs in a defined period of an adolescent's career.

Results

Longitudinal data analyses show that students whose career choice process is retarded at the beginning of their 9th grade are much more likely to enter a risk situation. The best predictor was the timing of the career process.

Using logistic regression analysis of data on strategies and resources from wave 1, the risk situation was predicted in comparison with the normal situation in stage 3 (wave 2). Strategies explain 17% (20%) of the variance of risk situations, and resources explain 52% (20%) of the variance.

Conclusions

Taking a *pattern-centred approach* (Magnusson 2003), we successfully defined stages of vocational choice and risk situations before and after transition. Vocational training institutions define a strong normative timetable for this transition process. Adolescents without sufficient resources and strategies cannot fulfil these demands. They successfully pass through the stages if they (1) have sufficient personal and social resources to cope with the task, and (2) are able to use convenient strategies to make an appropriate decision.

Early determinants of risk situations have allowed us to develop an instrument (checklist) to diagnose students at risk (Herzog et al. 2006). This instrument includes the timing of the career choice process, family resources, student achievement, student coping behaviour, and strategies of vocational choice. Based on this diagnosis, students at risk can receive appropriate intervention by a teacher, a vocational counsellor or other professional.

Compared with other European countries, Swiss adolescents have to make vocational choices early in life. Irrespective of the speed of the individual career choice process, students must leave compulsory education and immediately take up apprenticeships. Some flexibility is required so that institutional obligations match students' needs. Intermediate educational opportunities between compulsory education and vocational training are needed for students with a delayed career choice process. In our ongoing research study FAMILY - SCHOOL - JOB (FASE B, www.jacobscenter.unizh.ch/faseb) we examine vocational and school transition processes in depth.

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