Research says "wrongheaded" belief that schools should stress career development

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A study from the Netherlands has criticized the widespread belief that schools should be instrumental in shaping "career attitudes". Calling the approach "wrongheaded", the researcher said current findings in neuroscience and psychology suggested adolescence was too early to develop fixed identities and be confident of choosing the right direction in life. There was a danger of "identity foreclosure", which is when individuals get stuck with a restricted sense of identity. Instead, the author recommended providing young adults with more time to reflect. They also benefited from career counselling and a wide variety of work experience, he said.

"Easy does it: an innovative view on developing career identity and self-direction" was written by Tom Luken, from Luken Loopbaan Consult, in Amsterdam. Luken said his work was written from an "original" perspective to challenge the strong consensus in education and politics career attitudes should be fostered early.

Schools are expected to be at the centre of career education. In the Netherlands, for example, secondary school students take exams containing questions about career competencies. By reflecting on their motivations, the students are expected to construct a definite self-image and career identity. But Luken says this assumption does not stand up to scientific scrutiny. His paper examines the latest empirical research that sheds light on these issues. And he also looks at a cybernetics' theory that offers a more promising direction.

Luken begins his analysis with the question, "When in life do people normally develop self-direction and a (career) identity?" According to research, the average adult is conformist and strongly influenced by their social environment. Only a quarter to a third actually become self-directed, usually later in life. Meanwhile, the influential psychologist Erik Erikson considered adolescence to be a period of "identity crisis", when there is a lot of confusion and uncertainty about the self. From Erikson's view comes the view that identity issues have to be resolved at this early stage in life. But Luken is skeptical about whether it's possible to accelerate the process.

Luken turns to the sophisticated insights of recent experiments in neuroscience for more answers. The main finding, he says, is that brain matures later than we used to believe. For a long time, the brain was thought to be fully developed at aged 12. But now, scientists consider that it matures between the ages of 20 and 30, and in some respects even later. The maturation of the prefrontal cortex (PFC), continues until aged 25. Luken recounts the famous story of Phineas Gage, a railwayman who in 1848 had his PFC pierced by an iron bar, but was still able to function normally. His language and memory were flawless. However, he became incapable of looking into the future and giving

direction to his life. What he lacked was "affective forecasting", Luken explains. The absence of a mature PFC explains why young people have difficulty integrating thinking and feeling, and taking long-term decisions.

Another important question concerns whether it's a good idea to accelerate the development of self direction. Many developmental scientists have their doubts. For example, the famous psychologist Jean Piaget suggesting pushing children beyond their natural levels was "like training animals to do circus tricks". Other researchers have found that an early maturation of the PFC can lead to depression later in life. And one study suggests that children who have intense contact with music before the age of seven find it hard to develop "absolute hearing". Starting too soon can disrupt development. Luken argues that the plastic brain develops the habit of using inappropriate areas to conduct tasks. Unlearning these bad habits – rather like a flawed golf swing – is very difficult. For these reasons, the author believes that early adulthood would be a better time to develop self-direction than adolescence.

One danger of uncritically adopting a fixed identity at an early age is "foreclosure". Rather than explore different possibilities, an individual draws on other people's opinions, or social pressures, to formulate an identity. These types of "foreclosed" identities are likely to be supported socially, for example by parental or teacher approval. The idea of changing one's choice becomes scary. Therefore, establishing too fixed an identity at an early age can restrict the possibilities for self-exploration later in life, Luken says.

Also very relevant to the debate are the theories of the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman. He spoke about two systems of the mind. System 1 works automatically based on experience. It is non-verbal, emotional, quick and effortless. System 2 involves conscious, verbal reasoning. It is analytical, slow and controlled. Traditionally, researchers have believed that System 2 should override System 1 when it comes to making sound choices, such as choosing the right career path. But Kahneman disagrees. He denounces System 2 for being over-confident and having the illusion of understanding. He calls it the "tyranny of the retrospective self". But he praises the fast and effortless judgment of System 1.

Kahneman's argument is that conscious thinking about choices may impair outcomes whereas unconscious thinking leads to better decisions, especially in highly complex, or ambiguous situations. Verbalizing causes people to lose touch with their feelings. Luken's own belief is that the best decisions are made when the brain uses both System 1 and 2 in harmony. This is much harder for adolescents because their PFC neural

hardware is not fully developed. As a result, when parents, politicians and teachers push them into making rational choices, they are likely to be making unwise ones.

Luken finds an alternative approach more promising. He explains that many psychologists still see self-regulation as an act achieved by the self. This theory is based on the idea that there is a "homunculus", or a little person living inside each of us, who directs thoughts. But this belief is illogical. A way out of the contradictions is found, he says, in modern systems approaches, especially cybernetic theories.

Of all the theories available, he believes that Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) is the most relevant to career progression. The revolutionary aspect of PCT is that "behaviour is viewed as the control of perception". Luken gives the example of a driver who is not controlling the movements of her hands and feet, but rather her position on the road and distance to other cars. He deduces from this that career problems may originate from conflicting signals coming from the higher levels of the control hierarchy. He argues that: "According to the PCT, thinking is only important at one specific level in the hierarchy, the programme level, where actions are programmed to reach goals. Thinking is not suited for choosing goals." Making the correct decisions is thwarted by thinking too much and being led by "rigid goals and plans".

From the PCT, it becomes clear that two conditions are required for self-direction. First, a person needs sufficiently varied experiences. For career education, it means providing enough opportunities in varied contexts. For example, a girl wishing to be a nurse may discover while doing work experience that a job in a laboratory would suit her better. Second, career counselling should be provided whenever necessary. As learning and taking decisions are largely unconscious, the counsellor's role should not be to produce plans but instead to "facilitate natural growth processes by stimulating experiences and directing awareness".

It's also important to relieve the pressure that is placed on young people to make career decisions by politicians, teachers and parents. But the pressure also ends up coming from within the individual person. It's necessary, Luken says, to "give more time, room, stimulation and guidance for exploration and reconsideration". This applies not just to adolescents, but also young adults and later on in life. As a result, more people would develop good self-directing attitudes and abilities. In conclusion, he advises schools not to try to help young people to "discover who they are" in any absolute sense as there is a high risk of coming to misleading conclusions.