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SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE IN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' EARLY PROFESSIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION THROUGH "CAREER ACADEMY"

Abstract. This research article delves into the multifaceted landscape of supporting and guiding middle school students in their early professional self-determination. It begins with an introduction highlighting the significance of this developmental phase and outlines various initiatives aimed at providing comprehensive support to middle school students as they navigate career exploration and decision-making. The literature review section synthesizes diverse perspectives on professional self-determination, offering insights from scholars such as Super, Bozhovich, and Kustov. The study identifies subjective and objective factors influencing career choices and discusses their impact on middle school students' professional self-determination. Furthermore, it explores the results of a diagnostic survey conducted among middle school students, revealing prevalent inclinations towards specific types of professions. The research findings underscore the need for targeted support to enhance middle school students' readiness for career decision-making. Lastly, the article concludes by emphasizing the importance of implementing psychological and pedagogical support systems within educational institutions to facilitate informed career choices among high school middle school students.

Keywords: support, assistance, early professional self-determination, middle school students, middle school, educational counseling, career counseling

Introduction

The process of early professional self-determination plays a pivotal role in shaping their trajectories, yet it can be overwhelming and fraught with uncertainties. In the journey towards adulthood, middle school students often find themselves at a crossroads, faced with the daunting task of contemplating their future career paths. Recognizing the significance of this developmental phase, educators and stakeholders have increasingly focused on providing support and assistance to middle school students as they navigate the complexities of career exploration and decision-making.

At the heart of early professional self-determination lies the need for middle school students to explore their interests, passions, strengths, and aspirations. However, many middle school students grapple with limited exposure to diverse career options, a lack of clarity about their own interests, and uncertainties about the pathways to their desired professions. In response, educators, counselors, and community partners have implemented a range of initiatives aimed at providing guidance, resources, and opportunities for middle school students to explore their interests and gain valuable insights into potential career paths.

Central to these efforts are career readiness programs, mentorship initiatives, experiential learning opportunities, and career exploration activities embedded within the high school curriculum. These interventions not only expose middle school students to various career fields but also equip them with essential skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving, that are indispensable for success in the workplace.

Additionally, educators have adopted individualized strategies to facilitate professional self-determination among middle school students, taking into account their diverse backgrounds and needs. To help middle school students find their ideal path, schools provide individualized counseling, career assessments and targeted interventions to meet their individual needs.

High and middle school students experience a transition and crisis point when they have to make choices related to their careers. Transitions and critical points are generally associated with the selection of universities, study programs, training to be followed and etc (Veronica et al, 2020.)

Through this article, we aim to explore the multifaceted landscape of supporting and assisting middle school students in their early professional self-determination. By highlighting successful strategies, innovative initiatives, and collaborative partnerships, we seek to inspire educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to invest in comprehensive support systems that nurture the aspirations and potential of every student. Ultimately, by fostering a culture of empowerment and self-discovery, we can pave the way for a future generation of confident, fulfilled, and successful professionals.

Research strategy and methods

In order to effectively address and guide the early professional self-determination process among middle school students, the establishment of the "Career Academy" within the Foundation Faculty of "Toraigyrov University" was initiated. This initiative served as the platform for conducting an experimental investigation into the psychological and pedagogical support mechanisms for middle school students' professional self-determination.

The diagnostic techniques used to investigate the issue of early professional self-determination serve multiple purposes:

- Helping students in middle school to make informed choices about their educational path by examining the reasons behind such decisions;
- Preserving and monitoring the key indicators of career readiness for both individual students and class;
- The effectiveness of initiatives aimed at encouraging professional self-determination is being evaluated.

Most diagnostic tasks are presented as self-assessment questions to enable middle school students to assess themselves, analyze obtained results, and draw conclusions on their own.

To evaluate the degree to which they have formed professional self-determination and identify determinants of informed career choices, a survey was conducted among 27 middle school students from Pavlodar city schools to determine their level of participation in sessions at the "Career Academy." The results emphasized the importance of providing specific assistance to middle school students in comprehending and fostering their professional self-determination. Psychological and pedagogical interventions should not solely focus on career decision-making, but also aim to promote self-awareness and self-worth. In order to achieve this, it is recommended that middle school students:

- Evaluate individual psychological traits, capabilities and tendencies;
- Seek advice from adults as to how expressed are the inclinations and skills of those who want them or have an interest in certain careers;
- Develop knowledge regarding future professions;
- To consider both objective and subjective factors when choosing a profession, it is important to take into account these factors.

Summary of Literature Review

Theoretical and practical dimensions of middle school students' early professional self-determination have garnered attention among scholars. Analysis of existing literature reveals diverse perspectives on this subject. Professional self-determination is approached from a personality angle by some scholars, who use it as a means of measuring and evaluating one's own performance in specific professions where individual personality traits relevant to the profession are essential. While some view personality-activity relationships, others perceive professional self-determination through developmental stages as an active process.

In addition, scholars such as Zentsiper, Safin, and Super view professional choice as a complex process with predictable patterns and long-lasting effects. The period of vocational decision-making, as defined by Super (n.g.), encompasses adolescence and young adulthood, during which individuals evaluate their professional abilities and goals.

Promptu: Bozhovich (1996) considers the beginning of employment as a moment in professional self-determination. Bozhovich notes that choosing a career becomes an increasingly important task for middle school students, who are then forced to shape their motivational patterns as they adapt to changing social conditions.

Kustov (2002) suggests viewing professional self-determination not as a momentary act, but as "a process stretched over time and space, which, in the first approximation, consists of the following stages: professional orientation towards a wide range of employment and professions; formation of professional intentions; career choice; consolidation of career choice; active and conscious mastery of the profession; productive creative work in the chosen profession; striving to expand one's professional range through additional education; aiming for professional mastery; career advancement; readiness to acquire a related profession; active acquisition of a new profession; adaptation to a new profession in the event of a forced change". According to his opinion, professional self-determination is one of the "personal qualities of a person, subject to formation and manifested in a complex and dynamically changing world of professions, accompanied by a critical and constructive attitude towards oneself as a subject of certain activities, maintaining one's physical and intellectual strength, interests and inclinations, value orientations and attitudes at the level of requirements of the dynamically changing labor market".

Professional self-determination, as described by Smirnova (2013), involves actively identifying and affirming one's internal perspective about a future profession, which is expressed through a particular attitude towards life, worldview, and consciousness of oneself and the world.

For our study (considering the age of the studied group, 13-14 years old), the most comprehensive definition of the basic concept of this research is presented by Zeer (2008): "professional self-determination is a conscious choice of profession taking into account one's characteristics and capabilities, the requirements of professional activity, and socio-economic conditions."

We will examine each characteristic associated with professional self-determination, highlighting the most crucial ones for our research:

- The process of a person's professional self-determination is ongoing throughout their entire career;

- Professional self-determination is based on a conscious decision to pursue a profession that aligns with the strengths, opportunities, and conditions of the individual engaged in the activity as well as the socio-economic environment within the country;

- Professional self-rule is a dynamic process that changes in response to events that occur with the individual, such as secondary education completion, vocational training completion (she leaves school), residence change, employment availability, professional growth, termination from work, etc.

The key to a conscious career choice, as stated by Khilko (n.g.), is:

- This is because "the qualities of a person and the character of business which will determine the success of this activity are already formed, and will remain the same;"
- Coordinated training of necessary abilities for the task. It is thought that each person can be equipped with the necessary traits;
- Commitment to the principle of unifying consciousness and activity, which suggests orienting oneself towards developing an individual style or approach.

Identify the elements of professional self-governance for our examination:

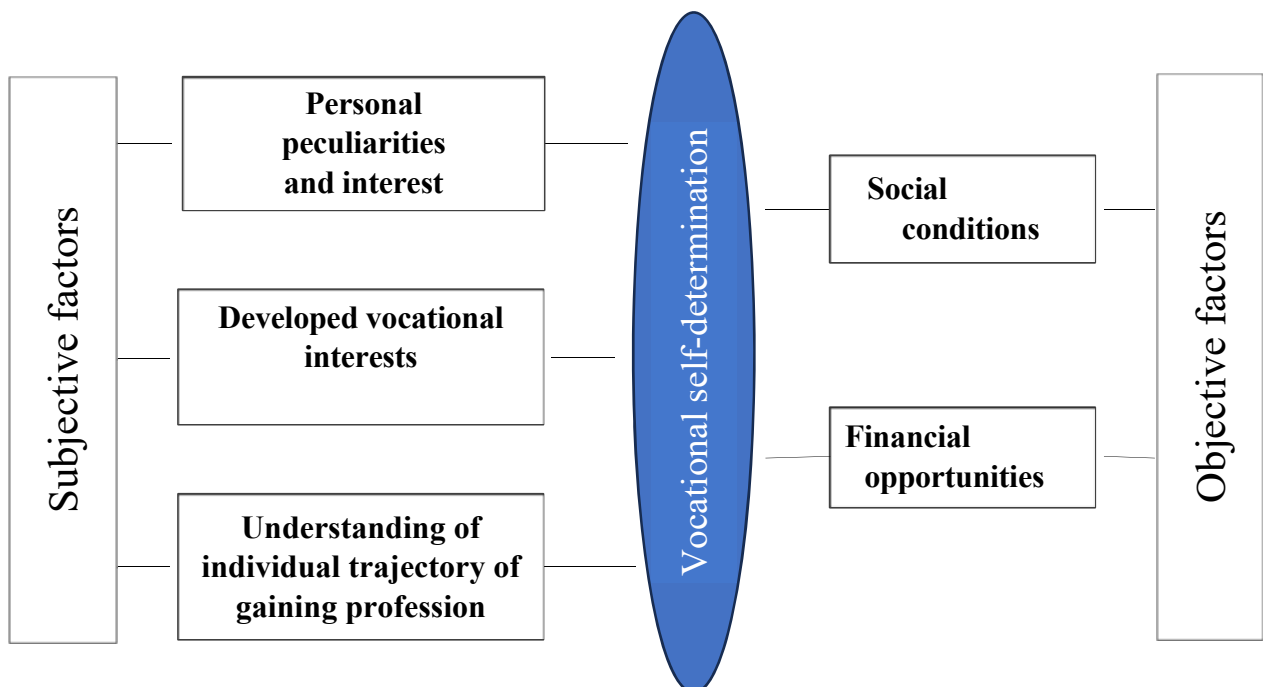
- behavioral traits (individual-psychological traits, interests, self-evaluation, level of self-confidence);
- The -motivational (objectives, morals/values/motivations/needs), knowledge of the labour market needs/obligations/empiricism, adequate assessment of social environment and family opportunities);
- Activity related (determination of course and desire to act in line with it).

Ultimately, the success of professional self-determination hinges on the harmonious combination of these elements. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the factors that influence middle school students' career choices in making the appropriate decision.

Let's identify the factors influencing career choice and analyze their impact on middle school students' professional self-determination (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The main factors influencing career choice of middle school students



Both the subjective nature of individual-personal qualities (subjective factors) and the social environment (objective factors) play a role in shaping middle school students' professional self-determination.

Our research indicates that middle school students' professional self-determination is influenced by subjective factors such as abilities, inclinations, self-evaluation, level of aspiration, awareness, and professional plans.

The choice of a career can be influenced by objective factors such as the demands of the labor market, family responsibilities, social support, and psychological and pedagogical support.

Successful career choices are influenced by the social environment, objective opportunities, and personal traits of middle school students. The list of individual-personal characteristics includes knowledge of personal abilities and preferences, the presence of predetermined professional interests, personal professional goals, and readiness for action. Professional interests are heavily influenced by personal ambitions, self-evaluation, and middle school students' knowledge of future professions. A person's lack of knowledge about the job market, job prospects in their chosen profession, and necessary professional and personal attributes is detrimental to the correct choice.

Identify criteria and indicators that describe the qualitative state of professional self-determination of middle school students by studying psychological and pedagogical literature related to various aspects of professional self-determination formation. By outlining these criteria, they establish the essential characteristics of the research object, guarantee the solution to the research task, and provide an understanding of the qualitative state of the components of middle school students' professional self-determination. Indicators aid in identifying dynamic shifts and provide a basis for making informed judgments.

The structure of our study outlines the criteria and indicators for professional self-determination:

- Achieving cognitive skills requires knowledge of personal interests, self-awareness, and a high level of aspiration.
- motivating through knowledge of the future profession, professional plan; social environment effect; labour market demand awareness).
- Activities related to activities, such as the choice of post-school education path and career options, as well as willingness to engage in meaningful work.

In essence, the process of middle school students' professional development is a dynamic endeavor that seeks to explore their professional preferences and develop them based on their personal characteristics, skills, and current labor market demands. Changes occur during one's professional life, with the profession being reconsidered in response to a range of life events, such as graduation, relocation. Various factors, such as age, personal development, interpersonal relationships, and socio-economic conditions, affect middle school students' professional self-determination. Accordingly, self-determination in the professional world involves a complex set of challenges that necessitate contemplating personal professional possibilities, conscious career choice, employing career strategies and taking action.

The analysis of existing approaches to psychological and pedagogical support reveals several key features of the concept being examined.

First, psychological and pedagogical support is intended to create conditions in which developmental subjects can make optimal decisions in different life decision situations.

Second, psychological and pedagogical support seeks the ability to search for optimal solutions independently from existing experience.

Second, psychological and pedagogical support is all-encompassing, including the sequential execution of the following procedures: identifying the essence of problem problems, finding ways to solve them, choosing the most effective solution, and providing early support for implementing the proposed solution plan.

Psychological and pedagogical support within an educational organization is designed to build the resilience of middle school students in terms of their self-concept, their personal growth as individuals, and the possibility of finding pathways for realizing future career aspirations. According to Lerner (2009), profile education should be centered around

individuals. A person-centered approach to providing support for students is directly linked to it.

The concept of psychological and pedagogical support in the literature of Chistyakova (2005) is similar to that of "assistance to middle school students" in their personal development. Mudrik (2006) defines support as assisting middle school students in developing their social skills through education, socialization, and engagement in the social-cultural and moral values that are crucial for decision-making, self-realization, and self-development. By presenting "creating optimal conditions for self-development" in his work, Kudryavtcev (1981) is making a case.

Leontyev (n.g.) highlights the primary psychological aspect in middle school students' decision to pursue a profiled education path, which involves diagnosing, shaping, and assisting them with their readiness for self-directed and responsible decision-making. It is important to complement this support with counseling work done with family members and school teachers, he adds.

A holistic approach to studying, forming and developing the professional development and correction of the individual is how psychological support is defined by Zeer (2008). "Early adolescence is when professional self-determination becomes one of the most important psychological phenomena, as he stated. Standing on the threshold of independent adult life, young people must become subjects of their future professional life: middle school students need to choose a professional educational institution, middle school students of the primary and secondary vocational education system need to define their attitude towards the profession they are acquiring."

Three indicators are identified as a result of Chistyakova's (2005) psychological support for middle school students' professional self-determination:

- Considered valuable (reasonable reasons for career choice, positive outlook on the decision-making process, active participation in student decisions and alternative options);
- Informational information includes knowledge of the world of professions, ability to use information sources to work independently, and a thorough understanding of the requirements of professions for individual traits.
- The following activities are based on practical standards: the ability to establish career objectives and implement action plans for each one, self-assessment of available career paths, self-monitoring and adjustment of professional plans, and self-actualization of potential capabilities to develop the necessary competencies.

Professional autonomy is the conscious, self-determining decision for a career path. The past generation of society required graduates who could perform tasks, but today it requires proactive, creative and active individuals with more freedom. When the 8th and 9th grades are over, a person can become a professional faster by successfully completing the stage of professional self-determination, which is crucial for the work of psychological and pedagogical support. All of the above highlights the need for graduates to have a clear career path, as recognized by society.

A review of the issue found that middle school students require psychological and pedagogical support to enable their professional self-determination due to ongoing changes in education and social life. This system needs to be based on the age and psychological characteristics of middle school students, while also being structured as part of an overall process that aims at facilitating middle school students' conscious decision about their future professional pursuits. In designing the system of psychological and pedagogical support for middle school students' professional self-determination, a phased approach is crucial. This necessitates a sequential approach in psychological and pedagogical work with middle school students, promoting methodically targeted organization of such support by revealing the essence of the process of professional self-determination: identifying what needs to be

achieved, how to organize the work, and what psychological and pedagogical means to use in the process.

As part of the grant-funded project at the Foundation Faculty of NAO "Toraigyrov University" in 2024, the "Career Academy" was established to provide early psychological and pedagogical support to school students in both offline and online formats. The main goal of the "Career Academy" is to assist middle school students in choosing their future career paths. Middle school students developed a system of psychological and pedagogical support for their professional self-determination through personality-oriented and activity-based approaches. Education was centered on the individual, their objectives, motivations, needs, intellect, and other psychological traits. They saw the learner as the subject of educational activities and professional self-determination as a process that occurs simultaneously with educational activity.

Thus, middle school students organized activities to enhance their professional self-determination and subsequently transformed them into subjects. Engaging middle school students in practical exercises to shape their professional self-determination is a valuable strategy for strengthening these choices. There were various forms, methods and techniques used in the process. This led to the development of a system of psychological and pedagogical support for middle school students to engage in professional self-determination by experiencing, experiencing (and trying) various behavioral options, problem-solving approaches, and different paths of professional self-realization. The system's development was based on the following fundamental principles: integrity, systematicity, consideration of age and psychological characteristics; competence; freedom of choice; and confidentiality. Psychological and pedagogical support for professional self-determination is divided into three stages: diagnostic, motivational, and activity-oriented. Certain types of psychological and pedagogical activities are associated with each stage. Forms and methods are picked out according to the specific tasks of each type. The focus on psychological and pedagogical support during the activity-oriented phase seeks to influence the eventual choice of future careers. Services like counseling, excursions, and attending open days are among the forms of work done. Professional counseling seeks to determine the corresponding characteristics of individual psychological and personal traits with respect to profession.

Research results and discussions

In the investigation of middle school students' professional inclinations using Klimov's DDO, participants were categorized into groups based on their preferences towards particular types of professions. Examination of the research data reveals a prevailing inclination towards humanitarian fields in the career choices of the entire student sample. The findings obtained are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

The results of the research on inclinations towards specific types of professions using E.A. Klimov's DDO methodology

Middle school students	Human-Nature	Human-Technology	Human-man	Human-Symbol	Human-Art
Number	2	2	9	5	9
%	7,4	7,4	33,3	18,5	33,3

In the eleventh-grade cohort, a predominant inclination towards professions aligned with the "Human-Human" type was observed, constituting 33.3% of the tested individuals. The

students in this type of middle school tend to be inclined towards careers that involve interpersonal communication and service, such as teachers, medical professionals, psychologists, among others. The survey findings indicated that 33.3% of participants identified with the "Human-Artistic Image" type, indicating a preference for careers in the visual arts and acting. Moreover, 18.5% of middle schoolers were classified under the "Human-Symbolic System" category, indicating a preference for professions that involve numerical and linguistic symbols, such as engineering, graphology, and economics, in addition to musical activities.

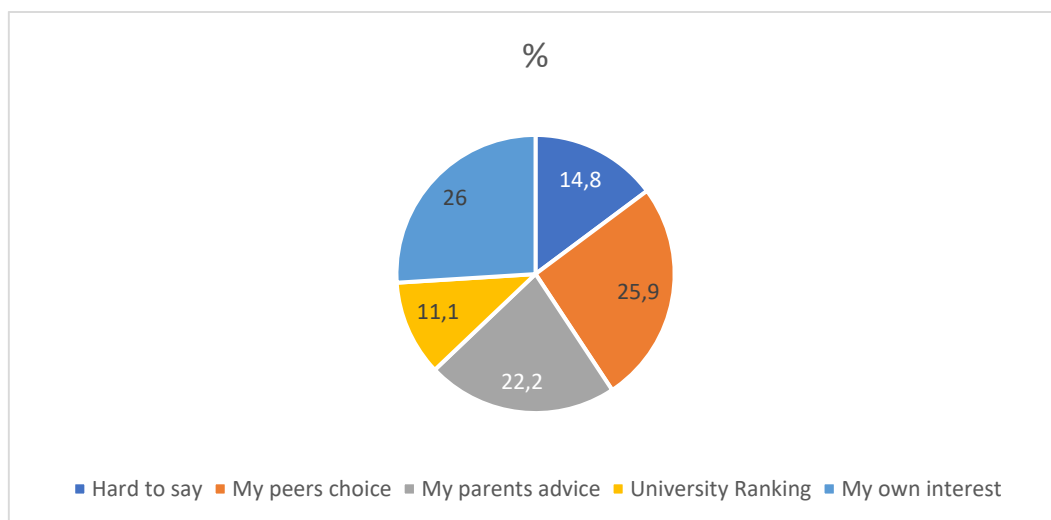
Besides that, 7.4% of middle school students identified themselves as part of the "Human-Technology" category and are suitable for various technical jobs such as automotive mechanics or machine repair technicians. In the same vein, 7.4% of those surveyed identified themselves as members of the "Human-Nature" category, with a preference for careers in agriculture, veterinary medicine, forestry, and ecological studies.

Given the multifaceted nature of career decision-making, middle school students are required to engage in extensive analytical deliberation to make informed choices. This involves introspective examination of their internal resources encompassing interests, aptitudes, personality traits, and values, juxtaposed with the demands of their desired profession. Moreover, middle school students were administered a survey titled "Interest Map: Determining Professional Direction of Personality," aimed at elucidating the presence of a structured career plan and the underlying motivations guiding career choices.

The survey solicited responses regarding the influential factors driving career decisions. An examination of the reasons for career choices among middle school students emphasized the importance of external guidance, with 25.9% citing peer influence, 22.2% relying on parental or family advice, and 11.1% weighing university prestige against their own decisions. Also in terms of decision-making, 14.8% struggled to explain their reasoning, while 25.9% cited personal professional interests as being compatible. The graphical representation of survey outcomes is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

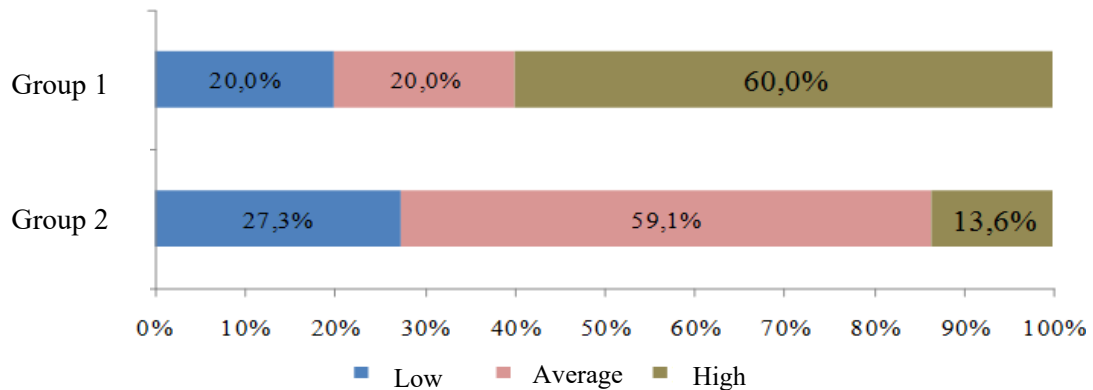
The main factors influencing career choice, % of the total number of research participants.



By completing a self-assessment map of readiness for self-determination, middle school students were able to determine their level of readiness. According to this map, middle school

students were instructed to indicate whether each criterion was fully formed, partially formed, or not formed at all. Among the middle school audience, the results showed that 29.6% of participants had low self-determination readiness (median level), 48.1% were averaged at levels of 5.5%, and 22.2% had a high degree of self-assessment. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of readiness for self-determination among the identified groups.

Figure 3
Level of students' readiness for self determination



As a result of the diagnostic assessment, it was found that 14.8% of students in the survey have a low level of professional self-determination, while 63.0% have an average readiness level and 22.2% have a high level. These findings also suggest that for most middle school students, the average level of professional self-determination readiness is not good enough for making career decisions. It is important to note that most students need to work on developing qualities such as determination and independence. A better understanding of the world of professions, regional requirements, and potential for further education is necessary before making successful career choices.

Conclusions

Middle school students' diagnostic outcomes demonstrate that most high school students have an average level of preparedness for professional self-determination, which is not sufficient to make informed career decisions. It is imperative to focus on enhancing attributes such as determination and autonomy. Middle school students require an increased understanding of various professions, regional demands, and potential avenues for further education to make successful career choices. Consequently, there is a growing emphasis on implementing a psychological and pedagogical support system for middle school students within educational institutions. This system should be tailored to the age and psychological traits of middle school students, structured as a comprehensive process aimed at facilitating informed career decisions among them.

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