

Mladá veda

Young Science

Špeciálne vydanie

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EMPOWERMENT AND THE FORMATION OF STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH A COACHING APPROACH IN HIGHER AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

POSILŇOVANIE KOMPETENCIÍ A FORMOVANIE PROFESIONÁLNEJ IDENTITY
ŠTUDENTOV PROSTREDNÍCTVOM KOUČOVACIEHO PRÍSTUPU
VO VYSOKOŠKOLSKOM A ODBORNOM VZDELÁVANÍ

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Abstract

This article is a theoretical study based on a narrative review of the scholarly literature. It examines how a coaching approach may support student empowerment and the formation of professional identity in higher and professional education. It brings together perspectives from self-determination theory, psychological empowerment, reflective practice, experiential learning, and professional socialisation. The reviewed publications most commonly associate coaching with autonomy, self-regulation, self-efficacy, reflection, and responsibility for

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learning. Its relationship with professional identity appears to be predominantly indirect: coaching creates conditions that enable students to make independent decisions, take action, assume responsibility for their own development, interpret practice-based experience, clarify professional values, receive trustworthy feedback, and participate in professional communities. The available literature is heterogeneous in terms of definitions, intervention designs, and outcome measures, and frequently relies on self-report data. The findings are therefore interpreted as a conceptual synthesis rather than as the results of a completed systematic review. Practical implications include integrating coaching into reflective seminars, placements, portfolios, and longitudinal support relationships, while maintaining psychological safety and clear boundaries between coaching, assessment, mentoring, and therapy.

Key words: empowerment, coaching approach, professional identity, self-reflection, autonomy, self-efficacy, higher education

Abstrakt

Článok má charakter vedeckej teoretickej štúdie založenej na naratívnom prehľade odbornej literatúry a prináša poznatky o tom, ako môže koučovací prístup podporovať empowerment študentov a formovanie ich profesijnej identity vo vysokoškolskom a profesijnom vzdelávaní. Prepája východiská teórie sebadeterminácie, psychologického empowermentu, reflektívnej praxe, skúsenostného učenia a profesijnej socializácie. Analyzované publikácie najčastejšie spájajú koučing s autonómiou, sebareguláciou, sebaúčinnosťou, reflexiou a zodpovednosťou za učenie. Jeho vzťah k profesijnej identite je prevažne nepriamy: koučing vytvára podmienky na rozvoj schopnosti študenta samostatne rozhodovať, konať a prevziať zodpovednosť za vlastný rozvoj, interpretáciu skúseností z praxe, objasňovanie profesijných hodnôt, dôveryhodnú spätnú väzbu a participáciu v profesijných komunitách. Dostupná literatúra je heterogénna z hľadiska definícií, dizajnov intervencií a meraných ukazovateľov a často využíva sebahodnotiace údaje. Zistenia sú preto interpretované ako konceptuálna syntéza, nie ako výsledok ukončeného systematického prehľadu. Pre prax sa odporúča začleňovať koučing do reflektívnych seminárov, odborných praxí, portfólií a dlhodobých podporných vzťahov pri zachovaní psychologického bezpečia a jasných hraníc voči hodnoteniu, mentoringu a terapii. Kľúčové slová: empowerment, koučovací prístup, profesijná identita, sebareflexia, autonómia, sebaúčinnosť, vysokoškolské vzdelávanie

Introduction

In preparing students for their future professional roles, empowerment refers to a process through which students acquire greater autonomy, competence, self-confidence, responsibility, and the capacity to actively direct their own learning and professional development (Llorente-Alonso et al., 2023; Zewiel et al., 2025). In educational settings, this shift is significant because students whose motivation is supported by autonomy and competence demonstrate greater persistence, better well-being, higher-quality learning, and stronger engagement (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Guay, 2021).

From the perspective of motivational theory, empowerment is closely associated with the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Sargeant, 2019). Meta-analytical evidence and large-scale studies in

higher education indicate that teachers' autonomy support predicts the satisfaction of these needs, autonomous motivation, and, in many contexts, higher perceived competence (Bureau et al., 2021; Jeno et al., 2021). Competence appears to be the strongest positive predictor of self-determined motivation, followed by autonomy (Bureau et al., 2021).

The significance of empowerment extends beyond performance indicators and is also associated with psychological ownership of learning, a sense of meaningfulness, and students' active participation in the educational process (Shukla and Arora, 2023). Evidence from higher education suggests that thoughtfully involving students in decision-making and in activities both within and beyond formal teaching supports empowerment and, indirectly, improves satisfaction and perceived learning (Shukla and Arora, 2023).

Professional identity represents a dynamically developing understanding of who a student is becoming within a particular profession, which values, norms, and modes of action they adopt, and how they integrate their personal and professional selves (Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2021; Cruess et al., 2015). Within professional socialisation, it functions as a bridge between higher education and future employment, influencing students' sense of affiliation, confidence, and trust in relation to their intended professional field (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019).

The aim of the study is to provide a theoretical explanation of the mechanisms through which a coaching approach may support student empowerment and the formation of professional identity, to compare findings across several professionally oriented disciplines, and to formulate implications for pedagogical practice in higher education.

Methodological framework of the study

The study takes the form of a theoretical academic study based on a narrative review of the scholarly literature. It draws on an interdisciplinary body of empirical, review, and theoretical-conceptual publications included in the reference list. In organising the sources thematically, particular attention was paid to their direct relevance to three core areas: the coaching approach in higher or professional education, student empowerment, and professional identity formation. The findings were organised around the mechanisms of autonomy, self-regulation, self-reflection, feedback, professional socialisation, and experiential learning.

The present article is neither a systematic review nor a scoping review conducted in accordance with PRISMA-ScR. It does not provide an exhaustive database search strategy, a documented screening process, or a quality appraisal of all relevant studies. Its conclusions therefore cannot be interpreted as a complete account of the evidence base or as an estimate of the effectiveness of a particular intervention. Its contribution lies in conceptually connecting different strands of research and identifying practical and research-related questions.

Theoretical foundations

Key constructs

The core concepts used in this article overlap in meaning but are not synonymous. Empowerment refers to an expansion of students' opportunities to act autonomously and competently; autonomous motivation explains the quality of their internal endorsement of learning; professional identity describes how students integrate personal and professional

values, norms, and roles; and the coaching approach represents a way of supporting awareness, reflection, and responsibility.

Construct	Core elements	Relevance to the topic
Empowerment	autonomy, competence, meaning, impact	strengthens student agency (Cayaban et al., 2022)
Autonomous motivation	volition, internalisation, interest	supports persistence and well-being (Bureau et al., 2021)
Professional identity	values, norms, role, self-concept	connects study with the future profession (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019)
Coaching approach	dialogue, reflection, questions, goals	supports self-direction and growth (Myskiv et al., 2023)

Table 1 – Key constructs and their relevance to the topic
Source: authors' own compilation based on the cited sources

Coaching approach in education

In the context of higher and professional education, the coaching approach may be understood as a collaborative, facilitative, and predominantly non-directive form of support that helps students articulate goals, reflect on experience, recognise resources, and assume responsibility for their own learning (Myskiv et al., 2023). Its core purpose is not the transmission of ready-made solutions, but the development of awareness, responsibility, and reflection through dialogue (Volkova and Oliinyk, 2025; Atkinson et al., 2021).

Research in medical and higher education describes coaching as an approach based on a psychologically safe relationship, individual consultations, small peer groups, humble inquiry, narrative feedback, and the gradual transfer of ownership to students (Van Ede et al., 2023). The coach should make the content accessible in ways that are personally relevant to the student and aligned with their individual development (Van Ede et al., 2023).

The principles of a coaching conversation include active listening, open questions, facilitation of reflection, co-construction of goals and action plans, and supportive feedback (Ivleva et al., 2024; Sargeant, 2019). In the context of programmatic assessment, a key capability is the coach's ability to ask thought-provoking questions, allow the student to lead the meeting, and add an interpretation of the feedback only where necessary (Liu et al., 2025).

Distinguishing coaching from mentoring, tutoring, supervision, and traditional teaching is theoretically important because these are related but not identical forms of support (Huang, 2022; Hilali et al., 2020). Mentoring relies more strongly on the transfer of experience, modelling of professional roles, and long-term support from a more experienced person, whereas coaching emphasises reflective empowerment, autonomous thinking, and the development of one's own solutions (Volkova and Oliinyk, 2025; Demena et al., 2025). Traditional teaching is more oriented towards content transmission and performance requirements, whereas the coaching approach shifts attention towards the learning process, personal meaning, and self-direction (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Myskiv et al., 2023).

Approach	Primary function	Type of relationship	Typical activity
Coaching	development of awareness and autonomy	collaborative, more non-directive	questions, reflection, goals (Liu et al., 2025)
Mentoring	transfer of experience and modelling	asymmetrical, more experienced–less experienced	advice, sharing experience (Demena et al., 2025)
Tutoring	academic support for a specific course of study	supportive, often course-based	assistance with learning and orientation (Rajasinghe and Fadipe, 2026)
Supervision	reflection on practice and standards	professional, supervisory	analysis of practice situations (Seth et al., 2025)
Traditional teaching	transmission of knowledge and direction of teaching	teacher–student	instruction, assignments, assessment (Templeton et al., 2021)

Table 2 – Distinguishing coaching from related forms of support

Source: authors' own compilation based on the cited sources

Empowerment in education

In relation to students, empowerment may be understood at individual, psychological, and educational levels. The individual level concerns personal agency and the capacity to act in one's own interests in learning and development (Marginson, 2023). Psychological empowerment is most commonly operationalised through the dimensions of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Cayaban et al., 2022; Alismail, 2024). Educational empowerment is reflected in the extent to which the learning environment creates opportunities, support, information, and resources that enable students to act autonomously and responsibly (Cayaban et al., 2022; Shukla and Arora, 2023).

The dimension of autonomy means that students perceive their actions as chosen and meaningful rather than merely imposed by external requirements (Ayllón et al., 2019; Sargeant, 2019). Within a socio-philosophical framework, such autonomy is also linked to an understanding of the person as a moral subject who should act on the basis of rationally accepted principles and take responsibility for their decisions (Stachoň, 2017). The dimension of competence denotes a sense of effectiveness and the ability to manage demanding tasks and professional challenges (Sargeant, 2019; Ghbari et al., 2024). The meaningfulness of learning concerns the alignment of tasks with personal values and a future professional trajectory (Zewiel et al., 2025; Horvath et al., 2024). Self-efficacy refers to students' belief that they can organise and carry out the actions required for success (Ayllón et al., 2019; Alismail, 2024).

Responsibility and participation add a behavioural dimension to empowerment. Students who are given opportunities to choose, co-create a programme, and make decisions about their own learning are more likely to assume ownership of their development (Van Ede et al., 2023; Prasetya et al., 2026). Empirical studies indicate that participation in student organisations and broader educational activities is associated with greater meaning, competence, and perceived impact (Cayaban et al., 2022; Prasetya et al., 2026).

Dimension	Brief description	Illustrative support
Autonomy	choice, initiative, ownership of learning	(Jeno et al., 2021)
Competence	sense of effectiveness and ability to manage tasks	(Bureau et al., 2021)
Meaningfulness	alignment of learning with values and goals	(Zewiel et al., 2025)
Self-efficacy	belief in one's own ability to succeed	(Xu et al., 2024)
Responsibility	assuming control of one's own development	(Van Ede et al., 2023)

Table 3 – Main dimensions of student empowerment
Source: authors' own compilation based on the cited sources

Students' professional identity

Professional identity is a dynamic, developmental, and socially mediated construct through which students gradually adopt professional values, norms, and ways of thinking and acting until they begin to 'think, act, and feel' as members of a professional community (Cruess et al., 2015; Chandran et al., 2019). It involves not only the acquisition of competences, but also the integration of personal and professional self-concepts (Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2021).

Professional identity formation takes place throughout a course of study, both inside and outside the classroom, through practice, placements, projects, and interactions with professionals (Pach et al., 2025). In medical education, socialisation into a community of practice and the longitudinal monitoring and support of identity development play a key role (Sarraf-Yazdi et al., 2021). In the social sciences and humanities, identity is supported through three main pathways: developing images of the profession, experiential learning in professional contexts, and self-reflection on one's professional positioning (Pach et al., 2025).

For students in professional preparation, particularly future social workers, teachers, health professionals, and members of other helping professions, professional identity is important because it is associated with a sense of professional affiliation, confidence, resilience, and readiness to enter practice (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019; Chandran et al., 2019). Reflective capacity, contact with role models, and exposure to authentic professional situations are repeatedly identified among its prerequisites (Chandran et al., 2019; Cruess et al., 2015).

Relationship between empowerment, coaching, and professional identity

The available literature supports the assumption that a coaching approach can strengthen student empowerment primarily by supporting autonomy, reflection, psychological safety, and ownership of learning (Liu et al., 2025; Van Ede et al., 2023). Studies in higher education and professionally oriented programmes indicate that students participating in coaching programmes gradually place greater value on self-reflection, become more aware of their own learning processes, and take greater responsibility for their professional learning (Van Ede et al., 2023).

Autonomy appears to be a central mechanism. Autonomy support in coaching is associated with the development of employability competences and experimentation through trial-and-error learning (Van Der Baan et al., 2024). At the same time, the opportunity to

exercise choice in higher education increases attendance, invested effort, and mastery of course content, thereby strengthening the theoretical rationale for coaching as an autonomy-supportive approach (Cullen and Oppenheimer, 2024).

Reflection represents another key mechanism. Open questions, narrative feedback, and dialogical reflection support self-awareness, critical reflection, and self-regulation (Sargeant, 2019; Myllykoski-Laine et al., 2024). Autonomy support may also operate through self-efficacy and critical reflection as mediating mechanisms of further educational outcomes (Xu et al., 2024).

Empowerment subsequently creates favourable conditions for professional identity by increasing agency, the meaningfulness of learning, professional self-confidence, and the capacity to position oneself consciously in relation to a future profession (Steyn and Barnard, 2024; Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019). A scoping review of postgraduate medical education reports that coaching supports professional development, the evolution of professional identity, career planning, resilience, and well-being within psychologically safe conditions for self-reflection (Seth et al., 2025). Among higher-education students outside medicine, coaching is likewise associated with systematic self-exploration, discovery of the ‘real self’, and the strengthening of career identity (Nam, 2021).

Important limitations must nevertheless be recognised. The effectiveness of coaching is weakened when it is too closely linked to summative assessment or when external requirements outweigh authentic self-regulation (Liu et al., 2025; Van Ede et al., 2023). The literature also suggests that the effects of autonomy support are not uniform across all students and may depend on their motivation, prior skills, or self-efficacy (Cohen et al., 2024; Duchatelet and Donche, 2019).

Thematic synthesis of findings

Characteristics of the analysed literature

The available literature on the coaching approach, student empowerment, and professional identity is methodologically heterogeneous and includes qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, intervention, review, and theoretical-conceptual studies. The analysed body of literature repeatedly includes systematic reviews of academic coaching in higher education, scoping reviews focused on professional identity in health and humanities education, and primary studies from teacher education, social work, medicine, nursing, and the broader higher-education context (Campbell and Mogashana, 2024; Fazel et al., 2025).

The empirical evidence base comprises both larger questionnaire studies and studies employing structural equation modelling with higher-education students, as well as smaller qualitative studies based on interviews, reflective diaries, learning logs, and analyses of coaching records. Large quantitative designs are particularly common in research on empowerment, autonomy support, and employability competences, whereas research on professional identity and reflective practice more often uses longitudinal or developmentally oriented qualitative strategies (Shukla and Arora, 2023; Van Der Baan et al., 2024).

Within the analysed body of literature, intervention studies are more prominent in teacher coaching and academic coaching. Randomised and quasi-experimental studies suggest that coaching may influence skills, beliefs, and selected educational outcomes; however,

comparability is constrained by differences in interventions, populations, and outcome indicators (Cohen et al., 2020; Alzen et al., 2021).

Empowerment and coaching

Research predominantly conceptualises student empowerment as the development of autonomy, competence, responsibility for learning, and the capacity to act in one's own professional development. In psychologically oriented studies, empowerment is linked to students' active engagement and psychological ownership of learning, which mediates satisfaction and perceived learning (Shukla and Arora, 2023).

Autonomy appears to be a central dimension. In career coaching within higher education, autonomy support was positively associated with the development of employability competences, and coaches reported that they supported learning most effectively when they encouraged students to engage in trial-and-error learning, self-reflection, and explicit articulation of their own thinking (Van Der Baan et al., 2024). This pattern is also supported by broader studies of student-centred environments, in which autonomy support increases self-efficacy particularly among students with autonomous motivation (Duchatelet and Donche, 2019).

The coaching approach strengthens empowerment primarily through questions, active listening, goals, and action plans. In systematic reviews, academic coaching is defined as a relational, longitudinal, student-centred process that uses active listening and powerful questioning to support self-regulated learning and reflective practice (Donaldson et al., 2025; Atkinson et al., 2021). Effective programmes repeatedly include reflective questions, self-assessment, strategy sharing, and the co-creation of plans (Campbell and Mogashana, 2024; Elek and Page, 2019).

There is considerable diversity in forms of coaching. The literature documents individual, group, peer, online, and academic coaching, yet their descriptions are often inconsistent and standards of coach preparation vary, limiting the comparability of studies (Campbell and Mogashana, 2024; Fazel et al., 2025). Peer coaching supports personal and leadership development, but students experience particular difficulty with deep listening and asking challenging questions without slipping into advice-giving (Eriksen et al., 2020).

Form of coaching	Typical mechanism	Most common outcomes
Individual coaching	trust, goals, personalisation	self-regulation, goal clarification, individualised support
Peer coaching	mutual questioning, accountability	self-awareness, accountability, coaching skills
Group coaching	social learning, feedback	identity, sense of belonging, reflection
Online coaching	transfer into practice, flexibility	goal pursuit, self-regulation
Academic coaching	student-centred guidance	student retention, grade point average (GPA), self-efficacy

Table 4 – Forms of coaching and their typical mechanisms
Source: authors' own compilation based on the cited sources

Among the more persuasive intervention findings outside health care are results from teacher coaching. A meta-analysis of causal studies reported an average effect of 0.49 standard deviations on instructional practice and 0.18 standard deviations on pupil outcomes, although effects were weaker in large-scale effectiveness trials (Kraft et al., 2018). In teacher education, a randomised study showed that coaching between simulation exercises led to greater improvement in skills than reflection without a coach (Cohen et al., 2020).

Self-reflection and reflective practice

The relationship between empowerment and self-reflection recurs throughout the analysed literature: empowerment does not operate merely as a sense of competence, but also as the capacity to think about one's own learning, identify barriers, and change one's actions. The theoretical perspective of self-formation understands learning in higher education as reflective agency through which students consciously monitor and develop themselves (Marginson, 2023).

Empirically, reflection occurs at varying levels of depth. In pre-service teacher education, reflection shifts during practice from practical and more superficial concerns towards deeper ethical, relational, and pedagogical questions, suggesting a development from descriptive towards more critical reflection (Diseth, 2025). Similarly, in the reflective practice of pre-service teachers, a combination of peer observation, student feedback, and reflective diaries supported self-confidence, adaptability, and proactive professional growth (Li, 2025). Reflective writing and learning logs are particularly important in social work. An analysis of 95 reflective records showed that reflective writing helps connect knowledge and skills training with an image of the future profession, increases metacognition, and supports a shift from the image of a 'helper' towards a more complex professional identity (Björktomta and Tham, 2024).

Not all reflection is automatically emancipatory, however. A critical analysis of reflective practice in coaching warns that reflection can also operate as a normalising and disciplinary mechanism when it is understood as an individual 'correct' confession without sensitivity to power, discourse, and context (Cushion, 2018). Deep reflective practice therefore appears to require facilitation, psychological safety, and time, rather than merely the use of a diary or portfolio technique.

Reflection tool	Type of reflection supported	Main effect
Reflective diary	progressively deeper individual reflection	metacognition, self-awareness
Portfolio/learning log	monitoring learning over time	professional self-awareness
Coaching conversation	facilitated reflection and planning	accountability, change
Peer/supervision meeting	dialogical reflection	new perspectives, feedback

Table 5 – Reflection tools and their typical outcomes
Source: authors' own compilation based on the cited sources

Professional identity across disciplines

The evidence suggests that empowerment supports professional identity primarily through agency, reflection on experience, and the internalisation of professional values. In nursing, professional identity was a partial mediator between psychological empowerment and moral courage, indicating that empowerment alone is insufficient; it must be translated into a professional self-concept (Huang et al., 2025).

In medical education, the relationship between coaching and professional identity is articulated most explicitly. Longitudinal coaching relationships based on trust help students reflect on their progress towards ‘thinking, acting, and feeling like a physician’, connect feedback with an emerging identity, and develop habits of self-regulated learning (Parsons et al., 2020). At the same time, the coach should ideally not serve as the primary assessor, because the perception of being assessed reduces students’ willingness to show vulnerability (Parsons et al., 2020).

In social work, identity formation is strongly linked to practice, agency, and validation. Longitudinal data from international students showed that professional identity is supported by authentic experience in applying social work skills, positive outcomes achieved through one’s own agency, envisioning oneself as a social worker, and supportive networks (Yao and Flynn, 2025). Conversely, poor-quality placements, inconsistent ethical role-modelling by educators, and the low prestige of the profession weaken professional identity (Fan and Fan, 2025). In psychology and counselling professions, professional identity develops as a cycle of learning, practice, and feedback in which dependence and autonomy alternate. Among doctoral students in counsellor education, the process involved primarily the integration of multiple identities, a growing sense of legitimacy, and the assumption of responsibility for knowledge of the profession (Dollarhide et al., 2013).

Discipline	Main identity-forming mechanism	Typical barriers
Medicine	longitudinal coaching, feedback, trust	conflict with assessment
Nursing	empowerment, reflection, professional norms	vulnerability, structural conditions
Social work	practice, agency, validation, reflective writing	poor-quality placements, low prestige
Teacher education	reflection, simulation, peer feedback	variable implementation
Allied health disciplines	curriculum, professional placement, dialogue	uneven research base

Table 6 – Mechanisms of professional identity formation across disciplines

Source: authors’ own compilation based on the cited sources

Scope and limitations of the evidence base

Within the analysed body of literature, health professions education and teacher education are the most strongly represented areas. In medicine and nursing, the literature contains a richer body of reviews and conceptual models of professional identity, whereas research in allied health disciplines and the social sciences is growing but remains less integrated (Lewis et al., 2023; Pach et al., 2025). In the social sciences and humanities, professional identity develops

through coursework, real-world projects, and placements; important elements include images of the profession, experiential learning, and reflection on one's own professional positioning (Pach et al., 2025).

The methodological quality of the analysed studies varies. Stronger studies use randomisation, quasi-experimental designs, longitudinal follow-up, or data from multiple sources, including simulated teacher coaching, a longitudinal field study of peer coaching, and three-wave tracking of identity during a placement (Cohen et al., 2020; Hui and Sue-Chan, 2024). Many studies, however, rely on self-report data, small samples, and single-time-point data collection, which limits causal inference and the assessment of the durability of effects (Van Der Baan et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2025).

The measurement of key constructs is particularly inconsistent. Empowerment is often operationalised through meaning, competence, autonomy, and impact, whereas coaching studies frequently measure proxy variables such as self-regulation, well-being, grade point average (GPA), student retention, or employability (Huang et al., 2025; Fazel et al., 2025). Professional identity continues to be affected by varying definitions and a lack of stable measures, a problem explicitly noted in both review studies and more recent intervention research (Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024; Rosato et al., 2025).

Relatively persuasive findings concern the association of the coaching approach with autonomy, self-regulation, goal pursuit, and selected forms of professional growth. A systematic review of coaching in higher education reports benefits for academic performance, student retention, executive functioning, self-regulation, and well-being, although intervention modalities and theoretical frameworks are diverse (Fazel et al., 2025). A quasi-experimental study in general higher education reported improvements in GPA, retention, and credit accumulation, particularly among students with a lower prior GPA (Alzen et al., 2021).

The evidence is less unequivocal regarding a direct effect of coaching on students' professional identity outside medicine and teacher education. In social work and allied health disciplines, persuasive process-oriented accounts are available, but there are fewer robust intervention studies with control groups (Triggs, 2023; Lewis et al., 2023). In nursing, reviews of identity-forming interventions are now available, although their effect on long-term retention remains under-researched (Vanuytrecht et al., 2025).

Four research gaps can be identified. First, longitudinal studies following the transition from education into practice and the stability of identity after programme completion are lacking (Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024; Van Der Baan et al., 2024). Second, experimental or quasi-experimental studies focusing directly on empowerment and professional identity as primary outcomes, rather than solely on performance indicators, remain scarce (Van Der Baan et al., 2024; Vanuytrecht et al., 2025). Third, there is no consistent definition of coaching or standardised description of coach preparation (Elek and Page, 2019; Fazel et al., 2025). Finally, more context-sensitive analyses of cultural and disciplinary settings are needed, particularly outside Anglo-American and health-professions contexts (Pach et al., 2025; Lewis et al., 2023).

Area	Current state of evidence	Main problem
Autonomy and self-regulation	relatively strong	heterogeneous measures
Academic outcomes	moderately strong	transfer to identity is not direct
Professional identity in medicine	moderately strong	few causal designs
Social work and psychology	mixed	few interventions
Long-term effects	weak	lack of longitudinal evidence

Table 7 – Strengths and weaknesses of the evidence base
Source: authors' own compilation based on the cited sources

Discussion

The available research suggests that a coaching approach supports student empowerment primarily through autonomy, self-regulation, goal setting, self-efficacy, and the assumption of responsibility for learning (Fazel et al., 2025; Van Der Baan et al., 2024). Systematic reviews of coaching in higher education repeatedly report benefits for academic performance, retention, executive functioning, self-regulation, and well-being, indicating that coaching is associated not only with motivational outcomes but also with performance-related outcomes (Fazel et al., 2025; Alzen et al., 2021). At the same time, this support is context-dependent, because the effect of autonomy support also depends on the student's type of motivation and on whether the environment is genuinely student-centred (Duchatelet and Donche, 2019).

The relationship with professional identity is described most prominently in medicine, nursing, teacher education, and social work. Longitudinal coaching relationships based on trust help students integrate feedback, emerging competence, and their understanding of 'who they are becoming' within the profession (Parsons et al., 2020). In nursing and social work, professional identity appears to arise not only from curriculum content but also from reflection on practice, validation of the professional role, and the connection between personal values and professional expectations (Huang et al., 2025; Yao and Flynn, 2025).

The synthesis therefore suggests that coaching supports neither empowerment nor professional identity in isolation, but rather their interrelationship. Empowerment creates conditions for identity work by increasing agency, self-confidence, and willingness to reflect on one's professional direction, while professional identity in turn gives empowerment direction, meaning, and an ethical framework (Huang et al., 2025; Dollarhide et al., 2013). This relationship is consistent with self-determination theory because coaching supports autonomy and competence; with reflective practice because it employs dialogue and feedback; with experiential learning because it connects experience, reflection, and new action; and with professional socialisation because identities are formed in communities of practice, relationships, and liminal transitions between education and work (Alamri et al., 2020; Farnese et al., 2025).

Integrative model of mechanisms

Mechanism	Link to empowerment	Link to professional identity	Example intervention
Autonomy and choice	strengthens agency, self-direction, and ownership of learning (Van Der Baan et al., 2024)	supports active ‘becoming’ as a professional (Yao and Flynn, 2025)	individual career coaching with an action plan
Self-reflection	increases metacognition and self-regulation (Van Der Baan et al., 2024; Björktomta and Tham, 2024)	helps students process professional dilemmas and professional positioning (Pach et al., 2025)	reflective portfolio with a coaching conversation
Articulation of professional values	gives learning meaning and direction (Shukla and Arora, 2023)	supports the internalisation of professional roles and ethics (Toh et al., 2022)	post-placement seminar with values-based reflection
Feedback	increases perceived competence (Atkinson et al., 2021)	helps connect emerging competence with identity (Parsons et al., 2020)	feedback coaching after a simulation or placement
Support for self-confidence	strengthens self-efficacy and resilience (Van Der Baan et al., 2024; Letchworth et al., 2023)	strengthens the legitimacy of feeling like a member of the profession (Dollarhide et al., 2013)	strengths-based coaching
Safe coaching relationship	enables open learning and experimentation (Van Der Baan et al., 2024; Atkinson et al., 2021)	facilitates identity exploration without fear of judgement (Parsons et al., 2020)	longitudinal meetings with a non-assessing coach

Table 8 – Mechanisms linking coaching, empowerment, and professional identity

Source: authors’ own compilation based on the cited sources

The proposed model understands these mechanisms as mutually complementary. Autonomy without reflection may lead to unfocused learning, whereas reflection without psychological safety may remain superficial or defensive (Cushion, 2018; Soerensen et al., 2025). The theoretically most appropriate configuration therefore appears to combine a trusting relationship, reflective dialogue, credible feedback, and goals grounded in authentic professional experience (Elek and Page, 2019).

Implications for practice

For higher-education educators, the findings imply a need to move from a purely transmissive style towards dialogical guidance of learning, in which questions, choice, and feedback are explicit components of teaching (Kutru et al., 2025; Lopez, 2025). For mentors, tutors, and supervisors, it is essential to connect reflection on practice-based experience with the articulation of professional roles and anticipatory socialisation into the profession (Farnese et al., 2025).

For coaches, the findings point to the need for clear boundaries between coaching, mentoring, therapy, and assessment, together with an emphasis on active listening, empathy, and powerful questioning rather than directive advice-giving (Kutru et al., 2025; Westover, 2024). For curriculum designers, the most promising approach appears to be the integration of coaching into reflective seminars, practice placements, simulations, and portfolios, not as a parallel service but as a pedagogical logic underpinning the programme (Cohen et al., 2020; Vanuytrecht et al., 2025).

For students in professional preparation, it is important that coaching offers the greatest benefit when they actively participate in setting goals, assume responsibility for learning, and use feedback for identity work rather than solely for performance correction (Parsons et al., 2020; Bühner et al., 2024).

Study limitations and recommendations for further research

The main limitation of this narrative synthesis is the absence of an exhaustive and reproducible database search strategy. The selection of publications may have been influenced by source availability and the authors' thematic focus. Further limitations arise from heterogeneous definitions of coaching, empowerment, and professional identity, differing research designs, and the frequent use of self-report instruments (Campbell and Mogashana, 2024; Elek and Page, 2019; Pach et al., 2025). The findings therefore cannot be generalised as the results of a systematic review, nor can unequivocal causal conclusions be drawn from them.

The recommendations for practice are relatively clear. Coaching questions should be incorporated into reflective seminars, reflective portfolios should be linked to feedback, and coaching should be connected with professional practice and placements (Diseth, 2025; Björktomta and Tham, 2024). Educators and clinical teachers should be prepared to use a coaching style of communication and to distinguish formative support from summative assessment (Atkinson et al., 2021). Programmes should combine individual, group, and peer coaching according to the student's stage of development and the type of professional task (Fazel et al., 2025; Eriksen et al., 2020).

Recommendations for further research are even more pressing. Longitudinal studies are needed across the transition from education into practice, alongside experimental and quasi-experimental designs in which identity and empowerment are primary outcomes, and validation of measurement instruments for both constructs (Donaldson et al., 2025; Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024). Research is likewise lacking in less-studied disciplines and cultural contexts, particularly outside medicine and teacher education (Pach et al., 2025; Lewis et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Within the analysed literature, the coaching approach appears to be a promising means of supporting student empowerment and a mechanism linking learning, reflection, and professional identity formation. Its contribution lies not only in supporting performance, but particularly in developing agency, professional self-awareness, and the capacity to interpret experience as part of one's own professional development. The current evidence base is nevertheless constrained by terminological inconsistency, variation in the methodological quality of studies, and a lack of longitudinal research. Coaching should therefore not be understood as a universal technique, but as a relationally and contextually contingent approach that requires skilled facilitation, psychological safety, clear boundaries from assessment, and connection with authentic professional practice. Further research should test the proposed mechanisms using longitudinal and intervention designs across professional disciplines and cultural contexts.

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