

Determining Aspects of Vocational High School Students' Career Choice: A Phenomenological Study in Industrial Areas

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The high unemployment rate of vocational high school graduates (9.01%) contrasts with the availability of jobs in industrial areas, indicating a gap between competency and career choices. This study aims to examine the determinants of career choices of vocational high school students in industrial areas through a phenomenological approach. **Method:** This phenomenological study involved five 12th-grade vocational high school students in the Weleri-Kendal industrial area using semi-structured interviews. **Results:** The results show that career choices are determined by a dynamic interaction between personal factors (intrinsic interest), the view of success as an internal factor, entrepreneurial spirit as an adaptive strategy, and responses to economic and social realities. Field Work Practice (PKL) experiences play a central role in career validation. Entrepreneurial spirit functions as an adaptive strategy that helps students overcome uncertainty. These findings imply the need for transformation of career guidance services in vocational high schools from merely providing job vacancy information to facilitators that build students' self-efficacy, tolerance for uncertainty, and adaptive capacity through a holistic approach. **Novelty:** The novelty of this research lies in deepening the meaning of students' lived experiences amidst the pressures of the industrial ecosystem, which has so far been neglected in survey-based research to understand the dynamics of career choices of vocational high school students in developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

Vocational High Schools (SMK) are ideally designed to prepare graduates who are work-ready, productive, competitive, and optimally absorbed in the workforce. However, reality shows that the Open Unemployment Rate (TPT) for vocational high school graduates in 2026 will reach 8.63%, the highest compared to other levels of education (BPS, 2026). This phenomenon is caused by a mismatch between the education system and industry needs, a lack of curriculum updates, and a weak link-and-match ecosystem between schools and the business world (Budiani et al., 2025; Kamila et al., 2025; Safitri & Rezza, 2025; Waoma, 2026). This situation is further complicated when job opportunities are abundant in industrial areas, but are not immediately absorbed by local graduates due to a mismatch between students' competencies and career choices (Maulina & Yoenanto, 2022). This inequality reflects not only labor supply issues but also socio-economic dynamics that trigger intense competition and potential conflict between local and immigrant communities (Ramdhani & Zahida, 2025).

This macro-level gap is rooted in an individual-level problem: career confusion. Fadilla (2020) noted that up to 92% of vocational high school students experience confusion in determining their career direction. Vocational high school students' career choices are fundamentally influenced by a dynamic interaction between internal and

external factors. Interest, talent, and self-efficacy are dominant (68.1%), followed by family/parental influence (15.9%), and other external factors such as career information, teacher advice, and job location (Hariyanto et al., 2024; Retnowati & Ghofur, 2023). Kim and Doo (2022) report that student motivation related to interest in a particular field is the initial driver of student confidence in determining their career, which subsequently shapes their learning behavior. In the context of Indonesia's collectivist culture, the three dimensions of intrinsic (interest and self-efficacy), extrinsic (economic stability), and interpersonal (family expectations) often clash, creating a conflict between personal aspirations and economic pressures that are not optimally accommodated by the school system (Aisyawati & Akbar, 2024). Most students still struggle to formulate specific, realistic, and personal-aligned career goals (Prastiyo et al., 2025). Male and female students show different patterns of career decision-making difficulties despite receiving the same intervention (Zeng & Ma, 2025). Meanwhile, perceptions of entrepreneurship as a career path remain contradictory; on the one hand, it is viewed positively, while on the other, it is considered high-risk and requires significant capital (Wahyuningsih, 2025).

Students' ability to make career decisions depends heavily on their emotional maturity and access to adequate career guidance services (Gorahe & Kartiani, 2025). Ideally, Special Job Fairs (BKK) and Guidance and Counseling (BK) services serve as facilitators for career maturity (Bukhari & Iswatiningsih, 2025; Indika et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of these services remains suboptimal due to limited industry networks, manager competency, and a lack of specialized guidance for students choosing employment or entrepreneurship. When educational institutions do not provide structured guidance, students tend to rely on informal, unverified sources of information, potentially leading to unrealistic career decisions (Prastiyo et al., 2025, 2025). This situation is exacerbated by the finding that parental expectations can increase the difficulty of career decision-making (Ari & Eskisu, 2025). On the other hand, structured future planning actually has a positive impact on career decision maturity (Chang, 2024).

Improving career decision maturity can be achieved by providing learning experiences in the real world of work. Field Work Practice (PKL) activities are no longer simply curriculum fulfillment, but rather a space for competency transformation that builds self-efficacy and strengthens students' professional identity (Zhou et al., 2025). Through direct interaction with the real work environment, students test their interests, adjust their expectations, and establish themselves more deeply in their career paths. Furthermore, the entrepreneurial spirit among vocational high school students in industrial areas is not always interpreted as "immediately starting a business," but rather serves as an alternative career choice amidst job market uncertainty. This concept aligns with findings that entrepreneurship education influences career choices through opportunity recognition, moderated by individual agency (Adjei et al., 2024). In this context, entrepreneurship is defined as adaptive solutions, sensitivity to risk, and the ability to create value amidst local economic dynamics.

The majority of previous research on career choice among vocational high school students relies on quantitative approaches and large-scale surveys (Cahyonugrahanto et al., 2024; Hariyanto et al., 2024), thus tending to ignore the subjective processes and meanings of students' lived experiences in dealing with industrial environmental pressures, family expectations, and limited school services. However, career choices are dynamic, contextual, and formed through complex interactions between personal development and the realities of the work environment (Pfarrwaller et al., 2024).

Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological approach is needed to explore in depth how students interpret, negotiate, and determine their career choices. The urgency of this research lies in the contradiction between high unemployment among vocational high school graduates and the growth of industrial areas. Based on the explanation above, this study specifically focuses on examining the determinants of career choice among vocational high school students in industrial areas through a phenomenological approach. The novelty of this research lies in deepening the meaning of students' lived experiences amidst industrial environmental pressures, which has been neglected in survey-based research.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to understand the meaning of students' experiences in career decision-making. This study chose a phenomenological method because it aligns with Pfarrwaller et al. (2024), who assert that qualitative phenomenological methods are necessary to understand the complex process of how students shape their career narratives, as career choices are subjective and develop through a dynamic interaction between personal development and learning about future work environments. To examine changes in students' career decisions, methods that explore their personal experiences are necessary. Quantitative methods are useful for general data collection, but they risk not capturing the complex process of how students in industrial areas shape their career plans. The study population was vocational high school students in the industrial areas of Central Java, specifically in Kendal Regency. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, specifically employing a maximum variation strategy. Five 12th-grade students (AV, AA, RF, JM, MF) were selected. This specific sample size is methodologically appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, which prioritizes the depth of idiographic analysis over statistical generalization (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). The cohort of 12th-grade students was selected because they are at a critical developmental transition phase, where individuals begin to explore career options and determine future directions (Putri et al., 2025); they have completed field internships (PKL) and are facing pressing post-graduation pressures. Furthermore, selecting students from diverse vocational majors and diverse post-graduation plans (e.g., entering the industrial workforce, pursuing higher education, entrepreneurship, or seeking employment) allows this study to capture the full spectrum of lived experiences. This maximum variation approach ensures that the emerging career narratives are not biased toward a single pathway, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of how diverse vocational identities and contextual opportunities shape career decision-making within the industrial ecosystem.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation. The research instrument was an interview guide that focused on interests, views of success, practical experiences, and social support. Data analysis followed phenomenological stages: organizing data, exploring meaning, coding data, presenting findings, and validating findings. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and member checking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Personal Factors and Interests as Career Foundations

Research findings indicate that early personal interests form the foundation for career choice. This was evident in participants AV (DKV) and AA (TBSM), who developed their interest in design and automotive design through visual experiences and hobbies since junior high school. AV revealed the origins of her interest spontaneously:

"Sejak SMP itu saya memang sudah tertarik dengan desain bu, liat banner di pinggir jalan, trus saya penasaran dari desainnya, dari cara buatnya... Saya tertarik itu karna banner-banner itu tadi, ingin punya perusahaan percetakan." (AV)

In line with AV, AA chose a major based on personal hobbies without parental pressure:

"Awal-awalnya kan saya masuk sini karena juga sini termasuk sekolah favorit bu... semasa SMP saya juga mainan motor suka modif gitulah, terus saya milih jurusan ini... Kemauan sendiri... Suka, mainan motor juga." (AA)

In the context of vocational high school students, the case of MF, who initially chose the automotive major but then developed a passion through three years of in-depth study, confirms that self-efficacy can be built through intensive learning experiences. MF recounts the process of changing his interests:

"Dulu kelas 9 itu, awal mula kelas 9 itu saya mau ambilnya DKV pak, desain... tapi ono syarate mlebu jurusan TKR... ya sudahlah terus seiring berjalannya waktu saya mendalami jurusan itu, akhirnya saya yo juga tertarik padahal aku itu tidak ada keahlian satu persenpun." (MF)

Views on Success as an Internal Factor

The varying definitions of success among the five participants indicate that perceptions of success are multidimensional and tied to time perspective. These include financial orientation (RF, AA, JM), social impact (AV), and holistic self-development (MF). RF defines success in practical terms:

"Kalau milih kerjaan lihat dari gajinya saya mau ke LPK... Ya pengen kerja buat diri sendiri gitu." (RF)

While AV is oriented towards social benefits:

"Karier yang sukses? Mungkin menurutku karier yang sukses adalah dapat bermanfaat untuk orang lain." (AV)

AA and JM place more emphasis on physical assets and integrity:

"Dari segi ekonomi kayak punya rumah, mobil, gimana ya, kalau karakter nggak ini ya nggak kelihat." (AA)

"Saya tu... saya ingin mencari uang yang sebanyak-banyaknya, dan saya ingin membangun kayak kost-kostan, ruko gitu lho pak... Sebagai orang yang bertanggung jawab, sukses... Penting banget pak." (JM)

JM explains his long-term plans:

"Pengennya sampai S3... mumpung masih muda kalau misalnya ada keuangan lebih sekolah daripada ditunda-tunda... Ya namanya manusia kan tetap harus belajar kan setiap tahun kan mesti ada perubahan modern." (MF)

Entrepreneurial Spirit as an Adjustment Factor

The entrepreneurial spirit of vocational school students doesn't always mean "starting a business right away," but rather serves as an adaptive compass amidst the pressure to "get to work right away." AA explicitly rejects attachment to others:

"Tidak mau ikut orang... mau bikin usaha sendiri. Kalau usaha gypsum kan modalnya juga tidak terlalu besar. Kalau bengkel kan harus punya kunci-kunci juga ibu modalnya lebih banyak." (AA)

AV explains its adaptive strategy to capital constraints:

"Takut gagal gitu bu... mungkin kalau saya kan cuma ada modal beberapa ya, karena sudah kalau sudah gagal kan gak bisa coba lagi karena modalnya gede." (AV)

Response to Reality and Social Support

Students' responses to economic and family realities reflect an active adaptation process. MF responded to her family's declining economic situation by postponing college:

"Ya sebenarnya pengen kuliah, tapi ya itu tadi terhalang biaya itu akhirnya kulo pie carane ben mengko lulus sak durunge lulus nek iso pun angsal kerjaan." (MF)

In the context of vocational high school students, a father's guidance provides clarity, but economic pressures can foster irrational beliefs. JM responds to the confusion of choices with a spiritual approach:

"Aku gini aku curhat sama kaka-kakak farmasi... Kamu sholat istiqoroh aja jingga... habis itu aku mimpi... terus habis itu kok hati ku kayak mantab ke bekerja gitu." (JM)

The Role of Practical Experience and the Limited Guidance Services

The internship experience plays a central role in confirming career choices. For AV, MF, and JM, internship is not just a curriculum requirement, but a moment of competency transformation. AV stated:

"Dari PKL itu berpengaruh karena mungkin saya juga tahu cara mengoperasikan mesin... cara membedakan warna... jadi saya lebih tahu juga dari cara pembuatan kayak poster, banner." (AV)

MF felt a significant difference between the school simulation and the work reality:

"Beda pak, lebih mendalam di PKL... Kan rame gitu sih pak, jadi lebih sering memegang komponen-komponen mobil jadinya lebih lincah... Iya kerusakan-kerusakan nyata gitu, tidak dibikin-bikin." (MF)

However, family support was found to be more dominant than school services. All five participants reported minimal support from the BK/BKK. RF revealed:

"Belum, belum ada... Sekarang masih fokus BK membimbing kuliah... Kalau yang bekerja yang BKK? Dulu awal naik ke kelas duabelas ada dari BK assesmen... Sudah ada, tapi belum aku lihat." (RF)

AA added:

"Belum mengetahui itu... BK belum... Saya belum mengetahui tentang itu... Belum tahu saya." (AA)

Discussion

Research findings indicate that early personal interests form the foundation for career choice. This finding aligns with Chan and Yuen (2023) study of engineering graduates, which stated that career interest is motivated by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and the interest itself. Abdullah et al. (2024) identified that choosing a career that aligns with personality is essential in determining an individual's life style. This explains why AV and AA showed a strong interest in developing a printing and gypsum toy business. Career choices that align with personality and personal interests create sustained intrinsic motivation, even amidst limited resources.

The variation in definitions of success among the five participants suggests that perceptions of success are multidimensional and tied to time perspective. This finding aligns with Chang's (2024) study, which identified three personality profiles in career decision-making: past-negative-present perfectionists, future perfectionists, and present non-perfectionists. Participants like JM and MF reflect the future perfectionist profile, with long-term economic goals guiding their current career decisions. Chang (2024) reported that the future perfectionist group scored highest on all career decision-making subscales, indicating that a structured future orientation correlates with decision-making maturity. Conversely, students who tend to focus on current enjoyment without future planning are at risk of making less well-informed decisions.

The entrepreneurial spirit in vocational high school students serves as an adaptive solution amidst pressure to immediately enter the workforce. AA explicitly rejects attachment to others. This concept is reinforced by a study by Adjei et al. (2024), which reported that the positive relationship between entrepreneurship education and career choice is mediated by opportunity recognition. Participants like AA and AV actively identified market opportunities and utilized available resources to create their own career paths. AV explained his adaptive strategies to limited capital.

Adjei et al. (2024) also found that this effect was moderated by individual agency, indicating that the successful transition from interest to entrepreneurial action depends on an individual's capacity to take initiative. Entrepreneurial spirit acts as a filter for opportunities, strategies, and projections, enabling gradual future planning. The concept of entrepreneurial spirit as an adjustment factor found in this study aligns with the findings of Kurnia and Hakim (2023), who identified employability as the most significant factor in career decision-making. The study reported that employability is determined more by personal aspects such as proactive personality, personal preferences, performance expectations, and industry experience than by extrinsic factors alone. In the context of vocational high school students, participants like AA and AV who developed independent businesses reflect a similar mechanism: self-efficacy and individual agency enable them to navigate job market uncertainty. Stead et al. (2022) showed that students who are able to manage future expectations, take initiative, explore alternatives, and believe in their own abilities tend to be more mature in making career decisions. These findings underscore that strengthening employability in vocational high schools is not

sufficient through technical training alone, but rather requires the development of adaptive capacity, tolerance for uncertainty, and a structured future orientation.

Students' responses to economic and family realities reflect active adaptation. MF responded to the family's declining economic situation by postponing college. This finding aligns with a study by Ari and Eskisu (2025), which reported that parental expectations negatively influenced decision-making difficulties but were positively correlated with parental criticism and irrational career beliefs. Pisker's (2022) study also confirmed that family influence on career choice is a fundamental factor that interacts with other variables such as personal values, outcome expectations, and cultural context. In the context of vocational high school students, fatherly guidance provides clarity of direction, but economic pressure can foster irrational beliefs. JM responded to choice confusion with a spiritual approach. Onoshakpokaiye (2022) reported that parental attachment was significantly positively correlated with students' career exploration, where support based on parents' life experiences through advice, role modeling, and verbal persuasion served to strengthen students' career self-efficacy. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2025) explained that students with dominant family support, without being balanced by strengthening internal adaptive capacity, are at risk of making reactive decisions.

Ari and Eskisu (2025) found that intolerance of uncertainty is positively correlated with decision-making difficulties. This is relevant to AV's fear of business failure or AA's fear of setting prices too low. Suyitno et al. (2024) reported that social support from teachers, friends, and family has a significant positive effect on students' career choices. Furthermore, the study identified that career self-efficacy partially mediates the effect of social support on career choice, indicating that external support works by strengthening students' internal beliefs. The finding that vocational high school students' career choices are determined by a dynamic interaction between personal factors (intrinsic interest) and external factors (family support, economic reality) was reinforced in a systematic literature review by Kurnia and Hakim (2023). The study concluded that the determinants of career choice are divided into two dimensions: internal factors (intelligence level, interests, life values, knowledge) and external factors (family socioeconomic status, academic success, school education, and the impact of the work environment). Research by Aslan and Koçak (2025) reported that family influence on career choice and perceived social support were positive and significant predictors of vocational outcome expectations and life satisfaction.

The internship experience played a central role in confirming career choices. For AV, MF, and JM, internship was not simply a curriculum requirement but a moment of competency transformation. MF perceived a significant difference between school simulations and the reality of work. This finding aligns with Zhou et al. (2025) who stated that learning engagement has a significant positive impact on employability. Zhou et al. (2025) added that career decision-making self-efficacy mediates the relationship between learning engagement and employability. For participants like MF, intensive practical experience strengthened their confidence in their work abilities. Emotional responses to real-world work interactions served as an internal factor that triggered reflection, helped students overcome uncertainty, and strengthened their ability to formulate realistic and sustainable career decisions (Tol & Van Seggelen-Damen, 2025). Suyitno et al. (2024) identified that career self-efficacy built through learning experiences and career exploration serves as a key mediator between social support and career choice. The

finding that internships play a central role in career validation for vocational high school students is empirically supported in a systematic review by Nabi et al. (2025), which reported that structured work experiences, whether through internships, training, or mentoring programs, contribute significantly to the development of professional identity and transitional behaviors, such as readiness to enter the workforce. In the vocational high school context, this confirms that internships are not merely curriculum fulfillment but rather a space where students construct professional identities through authentic interactions with the work environment.

However, family support was found to be more dominant than school services. All five participants reported minimal guidance from the Guidance and Counseling Center (BK/BKK). This finding confirms Smyth's (2023) study in Ireland, which reported that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds rely more on school-based information sources, even though these resources are insufficient to improve their opportunities. This condition is highly relevant to the study's finding that when BK/BKK services are suboptimal, students increasingly rely on informal sources they obtain on their own. Students demonstrate a personal ability to "create their own guidance" through reflection on real-life experiences. Cheung (2024) showed that school career support through teacher mentoring, interest assessments, and structured programs significantly increased career self-efficacy, which in turn reduced career doubt in career decision-making. Pfarrwaller et al. (2024) recommend that educational institutions should align their curriculum with students' professional identity development, including providing structured career counseling programs that not only provide information but also facilitate students in identifying their values and priorities and matching them to professional contexts. The implication for vocational schools is the need to transform BKK services from mere employment administration to facilitators that build students' self-efficacy, tolerance for uncertainty, and adaptive capacity. This support must be holistic, involve the role of the family, and be sustainable throughout all stages of education. BKK must be able to facilitate the development of students' adaptive resilience while optimizing positive synergies between families and schools (Parola & Marcionetti, 2022). Strengthening students' adaptive capacity in facing job market dynamics aligns with empirical findings showing that proactive decision-making and learning agility play a crucial role in shaping future career perspectives (Frolova, 2025). Wang et al. (2024) emphasize that commitment to the profession and self-worth formed through successful experiences in learning and practice are key predictors of mature career choices. The close link between adaptability and future orientation emphasizes that career guidance should not simply provide job information but must be structured to build students' psychological resilience, tolerance for uncertainty, and emotional connection to their long-term career plans.

This research updates Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2019). This theory typically explains how people adapt to changes in the workplace. However, our findings show that vocational high school students in industrial areas are not only adapting but actively creating new job opportunities through entrepreneurship. For example, AA, who started a plaster toy business, and AV, who wanted to open a printing shop, did not wait for job openings to become available; they created them themselves. This means that in the context of vocational education, adaptability is no longer a passive response but a proactive action to build one's own career. This research also expands on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 2002). The traditional SCCT model explains that career

interests are influenced by self-efficacy and outcome expectations, which then determine career choice. However, this study found that among vocational high school students who chose the entrepreneurial path, there were two distinct pathways: (1) the conventional path where technical interests (such as design or automotive) lead to conventional jobs, and (2) the entrepreneurial path where self-efficacy in entrepreneurship is a key factor in transforming technical interests into entrepreneurial intentions. For example, AV's statement of "takut gagal karena modalnya besar" suggests that self-efficacy not only facilitates the transition from interest to action but also determines their resilience in the face of uncertainty. This suggests that the SCCT model for vocational entrepreneurship contexts needs to be supplemented with the constructs of "entrepreneurial self-efficacy" and "risk tolerance." The findings of this study provide a critical contextualization of Protean Career Theory (Briscoe et al., 2006). This theory postulates that modern individuals manage their careers independently (self-directed) and are driven by personal values (values-driven). In contrast, the findings of this study indicate that among vocational high school students in industrialized areas of developing countries, entrepreneurial spirit is driven by necessity. When institutional support (BK/BKK services) is suboptimal and the job market is uncertain, students like AA and AV engage in self-managed career management to create their own paths. Their choice to become entrepreneurs is not simply an economic ambition, but a manifestation of a values-driven orientation (such as the desire for independence, usefulness, and responsibility) that enables them to achieve psychological success amidst structural constraints. Thus, this study extends the scope of Protean Career Theory by demonstrating how self-directed careers serve as a vital adaptive mechanism for vocational populations in dynamic industrial ecosystems.

This research refutes the assumption in the career literature that entrepreneurship is an "alternative option" or "last resort." Instead, the findings demonstrate that entrepreneurship for vocational high school students is a legitimate form of career construction, equivalent to conventional pathways (employment in industry or college), with its own unique psychological and contextual mechanisms. This opens up new research opportunities to explore how guidance and counseling services not only support conventional career choices but also build entrepreneurial career readiness.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study concludes that career choice for vocational high school students in industrial areas is a complex process influenced by the interaction of personal factors, perceptions of success, an adaptive entrepreneurial spirit, and responses to socio-economic realities. Entrepreneurial spirit serves as an adaptive solution that helps students navigate uncertainty, not simply the desire to start a business. Internship experience (PKL) has proven to be very important as a space for competency transformation and validation of professional identity, while family support is more dominant than the still limited school guidance services. **Implication:** The main implication of this research is the need for transformation of career guidance services in vocational schools from merely providing job vacancy information to facilitators that build students' self-efficacy, tolerance for uncertainty, and adaptive capacity through a holistic approach and involving the role of the family. Operationally, the recommended facilitator strategies for BKK/BK services include: (1) reflective mentoring based on PKL experience to strengthen career self-efficacy through structured discussions about real

challenges in the world of work; (2) integration of entrepreneurship as a career path in the guidance curriculum, providing business mentoring, access to local entrepreneurial networks, and risk management simulations; (3) strengthening family-school synergy through career literacy programs for parents so that family expectations are aligned with students' aspirations and adaptive capacities; (4) utilization of informal information sources that students have accessed independently as reflection material in counseling sessions, so that guidance becomes relevant to the reality of their lives. This strategy must be implemented continuously throughout all levels of vocational education, not only in the final grade. **Limitation** : This study has limitations in the number of participants, which is limited to five grade XII students from one industrial area, so the findings are exploratory and cannot be generalized to the national vocational school population or industrial areas with different characteristics. **Future Research** : It is recommended that further research adopt a longitudinal design that tracks the career trajectories of vocational school alumni for 3-5 years after graduation, in order to test the consistency between initial choices and the reality of transitioning to the world of work or entrepreneurship. In addition, further research is also recommended to test the effectiveness of the BKK/BK facilitator strategy proposed in this study through an experimental research design, so that the theoretical and practical implications can be empirically validated.

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