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Career Information Needs of Vocational High School Students in Individual Planning for Entering the Workforce: A Phenomenological Study

Winardi*
Magister Pendidikan Bimbingan dan Konseling, Universitas PGRI Madiun, Indonesia
Rischa Pramudia Trisnani
Magister Pendidikan Bimbingan dan Konseling, Universitas PGRI Madiun, Indonesia
Tyas Martika Anggriana
Magister Pendidikan Bimbingan dan Konseling, Universitas PGRI Madiun, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: kasepwinara55@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the career information needs of Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Gebang in supporting individual planning for entering the workforce. Employing Moustakas's phenomenological approach, the research explores the lived experiences of 277 students from ten classes. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire encompassing three core aspects: lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information, adapted from Gati, Krausz, and Osipow's taxonomy. Analysis reveals that 72.6% of students fall in the moderate category, 14.1% in the high category, and 13.4% in the low category of career information need. The lack-of-information aspect exhibited the highest proportion of low-category responses (19.5%), indicating a critical gap in self-understanding, awareness of career options, and decision-making strategies. These findings underscore the necessity of developing systematic and contextual career guidance services in vocational schools, particularly needs-based individual planning services. Practical implications for school counselors include designing more intensive career information programs integrated into vocational counseling curricula.

Keywords: career guidance; career information needs; individual planning; phenomenology; vocational high school.

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INTRODUCTION

Vocational High Schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan/SMK) are designed to produce graduates ready to enter the workforce with relevant vocational skills. However, data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2024) reveal a troubling paradox: the open unemployment rate (TPT) among SMK graduates reaches 9.01%, exceeding all other educational levels, including senior high school graduates (7.05%) and university graduates (5.25%). This condition indicates a gap between vocational education output and labor market needs, one of the root causes of which lies in students' weak career planning.

Career planning challenges in vocational schools are not merely about technical skills; they are closely tied to the availability and quality of career information that students receive. Supriatna (2021) asserts that many SMK students experience confusion in choosing a career due to limited information about the world of work, a mismatch between interests and abilities, and minimal understanding of the career decision-making process. This is consistent with an initial study conducted by the researcher via Google Form involving 213 students of SMK Negeri 1 Gebang, in which 73 students (34.3%) chose their school based on parental pressure, 28 students (13.1%) followed their peers' choice, and only 26.3% made their decision independently.

The Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) theory developed by Peterson, Sampson, Lenz, and Reardon (2002, in Zunker, 2022) asserts that the quality of career decisions depends on an individual's ability to systematically process information about themselves and the world of work. Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996) identified three primary sources of difficulty in career decision making: lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information. These three aspects form the theoretical foundation of this study's instrument.

Within the context of Guidance and Counseling (BK) services, Permendikbud No. 111 of 2014 mandates individual planning services as a core BK component aimed at helping students formulate and implement systematic activities related to future planning. However, implementation in practice still faces various obstacles, including insufficient empirically based career needs assessments (Puspitasari dkk , 2025).

This study aims to: (1) identify the career information need profiles of Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Gebang, and (2) analyze the critical dimensions of career information needs requiring attention in individual guidance services. By employing Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach extended through descriptive quantitative data, this study seeks to provide an in-depth and contextual picture of the lived reality of SMK students as they navigate their career information needs.

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THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Career Information Needs and Gati's Taxonomy

Career information needs refer to the condition in which individuals require adequate data, knowledge, or understanding about themselves and the world of work as a basis for effective career decision making (Gati et al., 1996). Chandra Shekar, N et al, (2023) define career guidance systems are developed to assist individuals in understanding available career options, selecting suitable occupations, and accessing information related to employment opportunities, educational skills, and future career pathways.

Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996) developed a taxonomy of difficulties in career decision making that serves as the primary framework of this study. The taxonomy divides difficulties into three main categories. First, lack of readiness, which includes insufficient motivation to engage in the career planning process, general indecisiveness, and dysfunctional beliefs about the career selection process. Second, lack of information, which encompasses insufficient knowledge of decision-making steps, limited self-knowledge, limited knowledge of available career options, and insufficient knowledge of how to obtain the needed information. Third, inconsistent information, which consists of unreliable information, internal conflict within the individual, and external conflict with significant others.

The Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) approach of Peterson et al. (in Zunker, 2022) describes the career decision-making process through a three-domain pyramid: the knowledge domain (self-knowledge and occupational knowledge), the decision-making skills domain (CASVE cycle: Communication, Analysis, Synthesis, Valuing, Execution), and the executive processing domain (metacognition). The integration of all three domains determines the quality of career decisions produced by students.

Individual Planning in Guidance and Counseling

Individual planning in the context of guidance and counseling is a systematic process that helps students formulate and implement educational and career plans based on an understanding of themselves and their environment (Permendikbud No. 111/2014). The Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program (MCGP) as discussed in Kusumanegara, D. A (2024) emphasizes that individual planning must begin early and be continuous, with focus on: (a) exploration of personal interests and abilities, (b) understanding of the world of work, (c) establishment of short-, medium-, and long-term goals, and (d) development of a career portfolio.

Marciniak, J,.et all, 2022, One concept closely related to career preparedness is career

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maturity, which encompasses adolescents' readiness in career planning, career exploration, career decision making, and acquiring information about the world of work.. For Grade XII SMK students who are in the late exploration stage transitioning toward crystallization, having adequate career information is an essential prerequisite for career maturity.

Zola, N. dkk (2022) through Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is a career development model that describes how individual inputs, contextual affordances, and sociocognitive variables influence the establishment of occupational interests, career objectives, and behaviors. Students with high career self-efficacy tend to be more proactive in seeking career information and setting realistic career goals. Social support from parents, school counselors, and peers has also been shown to moderate the relationship between self-efficacy and students' career exploration.

Phenomenological Approach in Guidance and Counseling Research

Moustakas's (1994) phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology aims to identify the essence of human experience through horizontalization procedures and the development of textural-structural descriptions. In guidance and counseling research, the phenomenological approach allows researchers to understand the subjective meaning of students' experiences related to their career information needs, going beyond surface-level statistical data (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The integration of descriptive quantitative data as triangulation strengthens the validity of phenomenological findings by providing a comprehensive distributional picture.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological design, strengthened by descriptive quantitative data as triangulation. The phenomenological approach was chosen for its capacity to uncover the subjective experiential structure of students in understanding and utilizing career information, including the meanings they assign to difficulties in career planning (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Descriptive quantitative data serve as confirmation of phenomenological findings, making this study fundamentally mixed-methods in nature, with a dominant emphasis on the qualitative dimension.

The research participants comprised all Grade XII students of SMK Negeri 1 Gebang for the academic year 2025–2026, totaling 277 students from 10 classes with the following program composition: Accounting and Financial Institutions (AKL) 3 classes, Electronic Engineering (TE) 2

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classes, Computer and Network Engineering (TKJ) 2 classes, and Automotive Engineering (TO) 3 classes. Total sampling was employed because the entire population served as research subjects, given the accessibility and relevance of all Grade XII students as prospective graduates about to enter the workforce (Sugiyono, 2022). For the purposes of phenomenological in-depth interviews, 12 participants were selected purposively based on variation in career information need categories (high, moderate, low) and area of study.

The primary research instrument was a career information needs questionnaire developed based on the taxonomy of Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996) with contextual modifications for Indonesian SMK students. The questionnaire consists of 54 statement items measuring three aspects: (1) Lack of Readiness Aspect (16 items, covering indicators of motivation, indecisiveness, and dysfunctional beliefs), (2) Lack of Information Aspect (21 items, covering indicators of knowledge of the decision-making process, self-information, occupational information, and how to obtain information), and (3) Inconsistent Information Aspect (17 items, covering indicators of information reliability, internal conflict, and external conflict). The rating scale uses a 5-level Likert model: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Somewhat Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1) for favorable items, with score reversal applied to unfavorable items. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 selected participants to explore the essence of their phenomenological experiences. The interview guide included open-ended questions on: experiences seeking career information, obstacles encountered, information sources utilized, and the personal meaning of career planning. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participatory observation in BK classes and document analysis of the school's BK program complemented the data triangulation.

Descriptive quantitative data analysis was performed by calculating the total score for each respondent and classifying it into three categories based on established norms: High ($X > 159$), Moderate ($122 \leq X \leq 159$), and Low ($X < 122$) for total scores, with equivalent interval norms applied per aspect. Percentage distributions of categories were calculated for the overall sample and per aspect. Qualitative phenomenological data analysis followed the procedures of Moustakas (1994) as adapted by Creswell and Poth (2024): (a) Epoche — the researcher sets aside preconceptions and initial assumptions; (b) Horizontalization — all significant statements from interview transcripts are listed without hierarchy; (c) Reduction and Elimination — meaningful statements are grouped and repetitive or irrelevant ones are removed; (d) Clustering into Themes — meaning units are grouped into themes; (e) Textural Description — describing what the participants experienced; (f) Structural Description — describing how the experience occurred

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(context and conditions); and (g) Essence of Experience — synthesizing textural and structural descriptions into a description of the shared essence of the experience.

RESEARCH RESULTS

General Profile of Career Information Needs

Based on the analysis of questionnaires administered to 277 Grade XII students of SMK Negeri 1 Gebang, the distribution of career information need categories is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Career Information Need Categories Among Grade XII Students of SMK Negeri 1 Gebang

Category	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
High	X > 159	39	14.1
Moderate	122 ≤ X ≤ 159	201	72.6
Low	X < 122	37	13.4
Total	**-**	**277**	**100.0**

Table 1 shows that the majority of students (72.6%) fall in the moderate category, indicating that their career information needs have not been optimally met. A total of 14.1% of students are in the high category, meaning they experience significant difficulties in career decision making due to severe information deficits. Meanwhile, the 13.4% of students in the low category indicate that their career information needs are relatively well met.

Career Information Need Profile by Aspect

Per-aspect analysis was conducted to identify the most critical dimensions of career information needs. The results are presented in Table 2.

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Table 2. Distribution of Career Information Needs by Aspect

Aspect	High Norm	High n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Low n (%)	Total
Aspect 1: Lack of Readiness	X > 46	43 (15.5%)	196 (70.8%)	38 (13.7%)	277
Aspect 2: Lack of Information	X > 71	39 (14.1%)	184 (66.4%)	54 (19.5%)	277
Aspect 3: Inconsistent Information	X > 45	47 (17.0%)	196 (70.8%)	34 (12.3%)	277

Table 2 shows that Aspect 2 (Lack of Information) has the highest proportion of low-category responses (19.5%), indicating that nearly one in five students experiences a fairly severe information deficit in this dimension. Aspect 3 (Inconsistent Information) has the highest proportion of high-category responses (17.0%), signifying that many students experience conflicts among the various sources of career information they receive.

Phenomenological Findings: The Essence of Students' Experiences

Phenomenological analysis of 12 in-depth interview transcripts yielded four major themes representing the essence of students' experiences in meeting their career information needs:

Theme 1: Confusion and Uncertainty about Career Direction. Nearly all participants experienced profound confusion about their post-graduation career choices. A participant from the AKL (Accounting) program expressed: "I am confused about what job to pursue after graduation. People say accounting is a good major, but I don't know what work actually suits me." This experience represents a lack of connection between program competencies and concrete career opportunities.

Theme 2: Reliance on Informal and Unstructured Information Sources. The majority of students obtained career information from informal sources — parents, friends, and social media — rather than from structured BK programs. A participant from the Automotive Engineering program stated: "I learn more about jobs from YouTube and conversations with senior students. At school, BK mostly deals with disciplinary matters." This finding indicates that school counselors have yet to play an optimal role in fulfilling students' career information needs.

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Theme 3: Conflict Between Parental Expectations and Personal Aspirations. Most participants experienced tension between their personal desires and their parents' expectations, particularly regarding the choice between entering the workforce directly or continuing their education. This dynamic reflects the external conflict dimension within the inconsistent information category of Gati et al.'s (1996) taxonomy.

Theme 4: Awareness of the Importance of Career Planning but Uncertainty about How to Proceed. An intriguing paradox was that all participants understood the importance of career planning yet did not know the concrete steps required. This phenomenon reflects a lack of procedural guidance within individual planning services at school.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm and extend understanding of career information needs among SMK students in the Indonesian context. The proportion of students in the moderate category (72.6%) indicates that the majority are in a state of moderate career uncertainty — not severe enough to require crisis intervention, yet not sufficiently equipped to navigate the career planning process independently. This condition aligns with Greenhaus and Callanan's (2023) concept of career indecision as a continuum of uncertainty, rather than a simple binary state of presence or absence.

A critical finding of this study is the high proportion of low-category responses in the Lack of Information Aspect (19.5%). This means that nearly one in five students experiences a significant information deficit encompassing: unfamiliarity with the steps of career decision making, limited self-knowledge (interests, talents, personality), minimal awareness of available career options, and ignorance of how to obtain relevant career information. This finding is consistent with the study by Fitria dkk. (2024), which found that the results of their research that has been conducted state that work interest, self-potential and industrial work experience have a positive and significant effect on work readiness both simultaneously and partially.

From the CIP perspective (Peterson et al., in Zunker, 2022), the deficit in the knowledge domain (self-knowledge and occupational knowledge) reflected in the Lack of Information Aspect will impede students' ability to complete the CASVE cycle effectively. Students who lack adequate information about themselves and the world of work will be unable to conduct accurate analysis (Analysis), generate realistic options (Synthesis), or evaluate career choices based on their personal values (Valuing). As a result, many students become stuck at the Communication stage (recognizing the problem) without being able to advance through the decision-making process.

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The high level of information conflict (Aspect 3 high category = 17.0%) identified in this study reflects the complexity of the career information ecosystem faced by SMK students. The digital era provides abundant information access, yet not always filtered or of high quality (Hafizah dan Neviyarni 2024). Exposure to contradictory career information from multiple sources — parents pushing for quick employment, teachers encouraging further study, social media exposing alternative career paths, and peers — creates information inconsistencies that exacerbate students' confusion. This aligns with the findings of Zulfa, M. et al (2024) Strong family support, adequate literacy, and positive school experiences are essential factors that help adolescents critically manage the abundance of career information in the digital era and make more effective career decisions.

The phenomenological finding regarding reliance on informal information sources confirms the existence of a BK service gap that must be urgently addressed. School counselors who are primarily focused on administrative and disciplinary functions rather than structured career information services represent a systemic problem in many SMK (Puspitasari dkk, 2025). Permendikbud No. 111 of 2014 mandates individual planning services as a core BK component; however, its implementation requires accurate, data-based needs assessments — which is precisely what this study aims to provide.

This study also extends the theoretical understanding of the phenomenology of career information needs by integrating an emic perspective (from within students' experiences) with distributional quantitative data. This approach responds to Patton's (2014) critique regarding the need for guidance and counselling research capable of bridging the depth of qualitative understanding with the generalizability of quantitative data in the context of evidence-based practice.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the career information needs of Grade XII students at SMK Negeri 1 Gebang fall predominantly in the moderate category (72.6%), with the Lack of Information Aspect as the most critical dimension requiring attention from BK services. Phenomenological findings identified four essences of student experience: confusion about career direction, reliance on informal information sources, conflict between parental expectations and personal aspirations, and the paradox of recognizing the importance of career planning without knowing how to proceed.

Practical implications for school counselors include: (1) designing a systematic CIP-based

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career assessment program for Grade XII students; (2) developing career information service modules encompassing self-assessment, occupational exploration, and decision-making skills; (3) strengthening the role of parents as partners in the student career planning process; (4) utilizing digital technology to present selected and relevant career information; and (5) collaborating with the business and industrial sector to provide contextual and up-to-date career information.

For the development of the BK discipline, this study contributes to understanding the career information need profiles of SMK students in Indonesia, and affirms the relevance of Gati et al.'s (1996) taxonomy as a valid assessment framework within the Indonesian vocational education context. Further research is recommended to develop BK intervention programs based on these findings and to measure their effectiveness through quasi-experimental designs.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Developing systematic and contextual career guidance services in vocational schools, particularly needs-based individual planning services, is essential. Practical implications for school counselors include designing more intensive career information programs integrated into the vocational counseling curriculum.

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