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Vocational Program-Student Mismatch: Students' Experiences of Choice, Learning, and Career Uncertainty

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Abstract

Vocational program-student mismatch is an important issue in secondary vocational education because students may enter programs that do not correspond with their initial preferences, shaping their subsequent learning experiences and career considerations. This study explored students' experiences of vocational choice, learning, and career development in the context of program–student mismatch. A qualitative case study design was employed. An initial questionnaire was administered to approximately 300 Grade 10 students, followed by interviews with students identified as experiencing mismatch, supplemented by observation and school documentation. Data were analyzed through qualitative data reduction, organization, and interpretation. The screening identified 65 students (21.67%) whose current vocational program was not their first choice. Students' accounts indicated that mismatch was shaped by parental and peer influence, limited information about vocational programs and career pathways, and limited understanding of their vocational interests and abilities. Students also described reduced motivation, difficulties engaging with vocational learning, and challenges in understanding vocational subject matter. The findings suggest that program–student mismatch is shaped by social, informational, and developmental conditions and may extend into students' learning and emerging career considerations. The study highlights the importance of proactive career guidance, comprehensive vocational information, and continued counseling support.

Keywords: vocational program-mismatch; career choice; vocational learning; career uncertainty; career pathways.

1. Introduction

Most indonesian societies select the vocational high-school (SMK) as their senior high-school. It led by the high-school focused to shape students to be work-ready graduate by learning experiences of skills, practice, and competence of industrial needs. In vocational high-school in Indonesia, students choose and enter the relatively specialized fields of study. They intended to develop relevant competencies to practicular occupational areas. Ideally, progra selection should be informed by student;s interests, ablities and vocational emerging aspirations. Vocational choices are not made solely on basis individual preferences. This decisions may shaped by significant others, both parents or peers, also as well as the availability and quality of the information about the vocational programs and career pathways association.

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Some condition occur when students enter a vocational program that does not correspond with their initial preferences. This vocational program-student mismatch can be understood as a discrepancy between the program students currently attend and the program they initially preferred. Such discrepancies may be an important and crucial aspect as this alignment of students interest and educational environment might influences the learning experience and vocational identities. Previous research suggest that students with this incongruent and mistmatch ecperience may have lower learning motivation, more frequent absenteeism, and poorer academic performances (Pratama and Wahyuni, 2021). This findings suggest that program-student mistmatch should be addressed as important issues of potential challenge to students' subsequent learning experiences.

An initial identification at a vocational high-school in East Java, Indonesia, shown an indication of mismatch is not an isolated experience. Among approximately 300 students in the tenth grade, there are 65 students (21.67%) experiencing the mismatch vocational program. Most of them said that their current program was not their first choice during the admission process. Thus, approximately one per five students can be illustrated this experience of discrepancies between initial preferences and current vocational program. This initial findings raises questions about how students arrive at their vocational programs and how they subsequently experience their educational pathways. It also questioning as had the program selection should be for the considerations within broader social and informational context of the prospect students decisions.

Some factors might hipotetically contribute to this mismatch. One important factor is the influence of parents as they roled as significant others incuding for the students decision making. Their perspective of prioritizing perceived employment opportunities, economic prospect, or other considerations might affect as recommendations of particular vocational pathways (Winkel & Hastuti, 2006). Peer influence also be another factor for students decision shaping. When their social relationships become close enough, it increasingly the affect in their decision-making (Mulyadi et al., 2022). Peer influence and parental pressure were among the dominant factors affecting vocational program selection among prospective students in junior high-school. In addition to these social influences, limited information and resource about vocational program may constrain students perspective to make informed and critical choices. Even with this AI and mass media information, the limited guidelines might led less critical concusions in the students decision making. Students may enter a program without sufficient understanding of its learning content, competency requirements, or potential career pathways. At the same time, they are still making through to understanding their own interest, abilities, and vocational preferences. From the perspective of vocational development, the importance of developing a realistic vocational self-concept during the exploration stage in which their identity and self-understanding continue to develop (Super, 1980). It make young people potentially responsive to any influence from their social environments (Santrock, 2012).

The initial mismatch decision may make the students experiencing a reduced motivation, engaging vocational learning difficulties, and understanding vocational subject matter challenges. The mismatch also become relevant to students' perceptions of their academic compeence and their plans for future education and employment. Any mismatch of vocational program represents an experiencce situated at the intersection of vocational choice, learning, and career development. Understanding this experience is particulary important in vocational education, including career guidance and counseling services. This issue is closely

connected to the deveopment of occupational competencies and future career pathways of the vocational high-school students.

Although previous studies have identified parental and peer influences, information constraints aand academic effect associated with vocational choice, there is still less attention on how students themselves experience any discrepancies between their preferred and current vocational programs across interconnected domains. Specifically, understanding students' experiences within the indonesian vocational education may provide important and critical insight of how vocational choice are negotiated and how program-mismatch dynamically experienced after enrollment. Therefore, this study aims to explore vocational program-mismatch among students by examining their experiences of vocational choice, learning and career development. This study focuses particularly on the factors associated with mismatch and the ways in which students describe their experiences after entering a vocational program that was not their initial preference.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore vocational program-student mismatch and students' experiences of vocational choice, learning, and career development. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because the study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and perceptions within their natural educational context. The case was bounded by the phenomenon of students being enrolled in a vocational program that was not their first-choice program during the admission process. The study was conducted at a public vocational high school in East Java, Indonesia. To protect the confidentiality of the institution and participants, the school is referred to as *the study school* throughout this article.

For the purposes of this study, vocational program-student mismatch was operationally defined as a discrepancy between the vocational program in which a student was currently enrolled and the program identified as the student's first choice during the enrollment process. This definition was used to avoid characterizing students' choices as objectively "wrong" and instead focused on the discrepancy between students' initial preferences and their current educational placement.

2.1.1. Participants and Initial Screening

The initial identification involved approximately 300 Grade 10 students at the study school. An initial questionnaire was administered to obtain information about students' vocational program choices and their experiences with their current programs. Based on their responses, 65 students (21.67%) reported that their current vocational program was not their first choice during the admission process.

Students who demonstrated an indication of program-student mismatch were subsequently considered for the qualitative inquiry. Purposive selection was used to identify students who met criteria relevant to the research objectives. These criteria included students

who reported that their current program was not their first choice, expressed uncertainty or dissatisfaction regarding their current vocational program, or experienced difficulties adjusting to vocational subjects. The qualitative participants were therefore selected based on their relevance to the phenomenon under investigation rather than through random sampling.

2.1.1.1. Data Sources and Data Collection

Data were collected through an initial questionnaire, interviews, observation, and school documentation. The questionnaire consisted of open- and closed-ended questions designed to identify students' program-choice status and provide an initial understanding of their experiences with their current vocational programs. The questionnaire addressed several areas, including the reasons for program selection, the order of program preferences during enrollment, students' interest in their current vocational field, satisfaction with the current program, parental support and influence in educational decision-making, peer influence, and educational and career plans after graduation.

The questionnaire served primarily as an initial screening and identification instrument. Students' responses were classified according to the correspondence between their current program and their initial program preference. This process enabled the researchers to identify students who reported experiencing program-student mismatch and to select relevant participants for further qualitative inquiry.

Interviews were subsequently conducted with students identified as relevant to the phenomenon. The interviews were intended to explore students' experiences and perceptions in greater depth, particularly their reasons for entering their current program, the influence of parents and peers, their understanding of their own interests and abilities, their experiences of learning in the current program, and their educational and career considerations. Observation and school documentation were used as additional sources of information to provide contextual support for the students' accounts.

Data collection was conducted during the academic year in which the study was undertaken. Before completing the questionnaire, students were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their responses. Questionnaire completion was conducted independently by students to allow them to report their experiences and perceptions as freely as possible.

2.1.1.2. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed qualitatively through a process of data reduction, data organization, and interpretation. First, questionnaire responses were reviewed to identify students whose current vocational program differed from their first-choice program. These responses provided the descriptive basis for identifying the prevalence of program-student mismatch within the initial group of approximately 300 Grade 10 students.

Second, qualitative information obtained from interviews, together with relevant questionnaire responses, observations, and documentation, was organized according to recurring issues and patterns. Information that was directly relevant to the research questions was retained and grouped into emerging categories. Particular attention was given to

recurring accounts concerning the processes through which students entered their current vocational programs and their subsequent experiences in learning and career planning.

The emerging categories were subsequently interpreted in relation to three interconnected domains reflected in the research focus: vocational choice, learning, and career development. Within the vocational-choice domain, particular attention was given to parental influence, peer influence, information about vocational programs, and students' understanding of their own interests and abilities. The learning domain included students' experiences of motivation, engagement, difficulties with vocational subject matter, and perceived academic performance. The career-development domain included students' educational and career plans and their perceptions of future pathways.

The interpretation followed the general qualitative procedures described in the original study, involving reduction of relevant information, organization and presentation of emerging themes, and drawing conclusions from patterns across the available data. Rather than treating students' enrollment in a non-preferred program as evidence of an objectively incorrect choice, the analysis focused on how students experienced the discrepancy between their initial preference and their current vocational program.

2.1.1.3 Trustworthiness and Data Credibility

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the study used triangulation across multiple data sources. Students' questionnaire responses were considered alongside information obtained through interviews, observations, and relevant school documentation. Comparing information across these sources allowed the researchers to examine the consistency of emerging findings and to develop a more contextualized understanding of students' experiences.

The researchers also reviewed the collected information to maintain consistency between the identified patterns and the original responses. The use of multiple sources was intended to reduce reliance on a single form of evidence and strengthen the credibility of interpretations concerning vocational program-student mismatch, students' learning experiences, and their career-related considerations.

2.1.1.4 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was preceded by an explanation of the study's purpose and the confidentiality of participants' responses. Students completed the questionnaire independently, and identifying information was treated confidentially. In reporting the findings, individual students and the school are not identified in order to protect participants' privacy**.**

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Extent of Vocational Program–Student Mismatch

The initial identification conducted among approximately 300 Grade 10 students indicated that 65 students (21.67%) reported that their current vocational program was not their first choice during the admission process. Thus, approximately one in five students

experienced a discrepancy between their initial program preference and their current vocational enrollment. This finding provides an important indication that vocational program–student mismatch is a relevant experience within the study setting rather than an isolated case.

The mismatch was reported across the vocational programs offered by the study school, although its proportion varied between programs. The distribution of mismatch across multiple programs suggests that the phenomenon cannot be attributed exclusively to the characteristics of a particular vocational field. Instead, it raises broader questions concerning how students make vocational choices, how these choices are influenced by their social and informational environments, and how students subsequently adjust to programs that may not correspond with their initial preferences.

Rather than characterizing these students as having selected the "wrong" major, the finding is better understood as a discrepancy between students' initial vocational preferences and their current educational placement. This distinction is important because students' preferences may change over time, and enrollment in a non-preferred program does not necessarily indicate that the program is objectively inappropriate for a student. The present study therefore focuses on students' experiences of this discrepancy and the ways in which it is associated with their subsequent learning and career considerations.

3.2 Students' Experiences of Vocational Choice

Interviews with students identified several factors associated with their enrollment in programs that were not their first choice. These factors can be understood across two interconnected dimensions: social and informational influences surrounding vocational choice and students' developing vocational self-understanding.

3.2.1 Parental Influence

Parental influence emerged as one of the most prominent factors in students' accounts. Some students reported that their vocational program selection was substantially influenced or determined by their parents. In these cases, parental considerations included perceived employment opportunities, income potential, and the perceived usefulness of particular vocational fields. Such decisions may reflect parents' attempts to secure favorable future outcomes for their children, although they may not always correspond with the students' own interests and preferences.

This finding highlights that vocational choice is not necessarily an exclusively individual decision. For adolescents, educational decisions are embedded within family relationships and expectations. Winkel and Hastuti (2006) emphasize the importance of considering the broader developmental and social context of students when supporting educational and career decisions. In the present study, parental involvement appeared to become problematic when students perceived that their own preferences received insufficient consideration.

The finding therefore suggests that parental involvement in vocational choice should not simply be reduced or eliminated. Rather, parents may need to be supported in adopting a

more collaborative role in which their knowledge of employment opportunities is combined with attention to their children's interests, abilities, and developing vocational aspirations.

3.2.3. Limited Information about Vocational Programs

Students also described limited information about the programs available to them. Some students did not appear to have sufficient understanding of the characteristics of particular vocational programs, the competencies developed through those programs, or their potential career pathways before making their enrollment decisions.

This finding suggests that program–student mismatch may arise not only because students or families make inappropriate decisions, but also because the information available during the decision-making process may be insufficient. A student cannot make a fully informed vocational choice if the student does not understand what will actually be learned, what competencies are required, and what educational or occupational pathways may follow from a particular program.

Consequently, information provision should be regarded as an integral component of vocational choice rather than as an additional service provided after enrollment. Comprehensive information about vocational programs may help students compare available options with their own interests, abilities, expectations, and future plans.

3.2.4. Developing Vocational Self-Understanding

An internal factor that emerged from the students' accounts was limited understanding of their own vocational interests and abilities. Some students reported difficulty identifying which areas genuinely matched their interests or capabilities before entering vocational education. Consequently, their choices could be influenced more strongly by parents, peers, or incomplete perceptions of available programs.

This finding can be interpreted through Super's (1980) perspective on vocational development. Adolescents are still developing their vocational self-concept and require opportunities to explore interests, abilities, and possible occupational identities. From this perspective, uncertainty about vocational preferences is not necessarily an individual deficiency; it is part of a developmental process that requires appropriate opportunities for exploration and guidance.

Santrock (2012) similarly describes adolescence as a period of continuing identity development, during which young people may remain responsive to social influences while developing greater understanding of themselves. The present findings therefore suggest that vocational program selection should be preceded by opportunities for structured self-exploration rather than relying exclusively on students' immediate preferences or external recommendations.

Taken together, these findings indicate that vocational program–student mismatch emerges from an interaction between social influence, information availability, and developing self-understanding. The issue is therefore more complex than students simply making an

incorrect choice. It reflects the conditions under which adolescents make educational decisions at a developmental stage when their vocational identities are still developing.

3.3. Students' Learning Experiences within a Mismatched Program

The students' accounts also indicated that the discrepancy between their initial preferences and their current vocational programs was associated with difficulties in their subsequent learning experiences. The most consistently reported experience was reduced learning motivation, particularly when students perceived little personal interest in the vocational subjects they were studying.

Students who felt less connected to the content of their vocational programs described lower enthusiasm for learning and reduced involvement in classroom activities. Some accounts suggested that students could remain physically present in class while demonstrating limited cognitive and emotional engagement with the learning process. This pattern can be understood through the concept of academic disengagement, which encompasses reduced involvement in learning and has been associated with poorer academic outcomes and increased educational risk (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

The present findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating that program–student mismatch directly causes academic disengagement. Rather, students' accounts suggest that a perceived lack of fit between their preferences and their current vocational environment may form part of the context in which disengagement develops. This distinction is important because disengagement may also be influenced by teaching practices, learning difficulties, peer relationships, prior achievement, and other educational factors that were not directly examined in this study.

Students also described difficulties in understanding vocational subject matter, particularly when they felt little interest in the field being studied. Vocational education requires students to develop both conceptual knowledge and practical competencies, and difficulties in engaging with the content may therefore have consequences for students' experiences of both classroom learning and practical training.

The original findings further indicate that some students experiencing program–student mismatch had lower academic performance, particularly in productive vocational subjects. Where such differences are supported by school records, they provide an additional indication that the mismatch may have educational relevance. However, the present qualitative evidence does not establish a causal relationship between program mismatch and academic achievement. The finding is therefore interpreted as an observed or reported academic experience rather than as evidence that mismatch independently determines students' achievement.

Some students also reported academic worry and feelings of inadequacy in relation to their difficulties in the current program. These experiences suggest that the issue may extend beyond academic performance to students' perceptions of their own competence. Nevertheless, because the present study did not employ a standardized measure of anxiety or psychological distress, these accounts are interpreted as students' reported emotional experiences rather than as evidence of a clinical psychological condition.

These findings can be interpreted using Holland's (1997) concept of person–environment congruence. Holland's framework proposes that the degree of correspondence between individuals and their environments is relevant to satisfaction and adjustment. From this perspective, a vocational program that is perceived as poorly aligned with students' interests may make educational adjustment more challenging. The present findings extend this perspective by illustrating how perceived incongruence may be experienced in everyday learning through reduced motivation, disengagement, and difficulties with vocational subject matter.

3.4. Implications for Career Development

Although the most immediate experiences described by students concerned vocational choice and learning, program–student mismatch also has implications for students' developing educational and career trajectories. Entering a vocational program establishes an educational pathway that is closely connected to the development of occupational competencies. Consequently, students who initially preferred another program may need to reconsider how their current field relates to their future plans.

This issue is particularly relevant during adolescence, when students are still developing their vocational self-concepts and exploring possible future roles (Super, 1980). If students have limited understanding of the relationship between their current program and potential career pathways, entering a non-preferred program may contribute to uncertainty about the relevance of their current studies to their future aspirations.

The findings therefore suggest that vocational program–student mismatch should not be treated exclusively as a problem occurring at the moment of admission. It can also become part of an ongoing process of career development in which students reconsider their interests, abilities, educational plans, and possible occupational futures. From a developmental perspective, the appropriate response is not necessarily to assume that students must transfer programs. Instead, students need opportunities to reassess their interests and abilities and to understand the possible pathways available within and beyond their current field.

Holland's (1997) person–environment congruence perspective and Super's (1980) developmental perspective provide complementary interpretations of this process. Holland highlights the importance of correspondence between individuals and their environments, whereas Super emphasizes that vocational self-concept develops progressively through exploration. Together, these perspectives suggest that students experiencing mismatch may benefit from continued vocational exploration rather than being defined by the program they initially entered.

3.5. Implications for Career Guidance and Vocational Education

The findings have several implications for career guidance and vocational education. First, career guidance should be proactive rather than exclusively remedial. Support should begin before students enter vocational education, with structured opportunities to explore interests, abilities, vocational values, and possible career pathways. Such preparation may help students make more informed decisions about available vocational programs.

Second, schools should provide accessible and comprehensive information about vocational programs. Information should go beyond program names and general descriptions and include the competencies students will develop, the nature of classroom and practical learning, possible further-education pathways, and potential occupational opportunities. This information should be accessible to both students and parents because vocational choices are influenced by the wider decision-making environment.

Third, students who are already enrolled in programs that were not their initial preference require continued monitoring and support. Career guidance should help them understand their current learning environment, develop adaptive learning strategies, explore possible career opportunities, and reconsider how their existing competencies may contribute to future pathways. Individual counseling may provide an appropriate setting for students to express concerns and explore their interests without being judged. In this respect, the person-centered approach of Rogers (1951) is relevant because it emphasizes an accepting and nonjudgmental environment in which individuals can explore their experiences and potential more authentically.

Fourth, parental involvement should be reframed as collaborative career support. Parents possess important knowledge and expectations concerning their children's future, but students' own interests and abilities should also be incorporated into educational decision-making. Career guidance can therefore involve consultation with parents to help them understand the developmental nature of vocational choice and support their children without determining the decision unilaterally.

These implications are consistent with broader approaches to school-based career guidance that emphasize coordinated support, accessible career information, and collaboration among students, families, educators, and counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). The involvement of parents is also important because family participation can contribute to students' educational adjustment and well-being when it supports rather than replaces students' own decision-making processes (ASCA, 2019).

Overall, the findings indicate that vocational program–student mismatch should be understood as a developmental and educational experience rather than simply an incorrect choice. The approximately 21.67% of students who reported that their current program was not their first choice provide an important indication of the scale of this experience within the study setting. Their accounts suggest that mismatch is shaped by social influences, information constraints, and developing vocational self-understanding, and may subsequently be reflected in students' motivation, engagement, learning experiences, and consideration of future pathways. Accordingly, career guidance should address the phenomenon across the educational trajectory—from informed vocational choice before enrollment to adjustment, learning support, and continuing career development after students enter vocational education.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study employed a qualitative case study design within a single public vocational high school in East Java, Indonesia; therefore, the findings reflect the experiences and context of the study setting and should not be generalized directly to other vocational schools or

educational systems. Second, the identification of program–student mismatch was based on students' reports that their current vocational program was not their first choice, which does not necessarily indicate that the current program was objectively unsuitable for them. Third, although the study drew on questionnaire responses, interviews, observation, and documentation, the available data do not establish causal relationships between program–student mismatch and students' academic or psychological outcomes. Finally, the study provides a snapshot of students' experiences during the study period and does not follow students longitudinally to determine whether the reported mismatch persists or influences subsequent educational and career trajectories.

The findings have implications for career guidance and vocational education at both the preventive and responsive levels. Before vocational enrollment, students should receive structured opportunities to explore their interests, abilities, and emerging vocational preferences, alongside accessible information about the content, competency requirements, and potential career pathways associated with different vocational programs. Parents should also be involved as collaborative partners in decision-making so that family expectations can be considered without overriding students' developing preferences. For students already enrolled in a non-preferred program, school counselors can provide continued career guidance and individual counseling to help students understand their current learning environment, develop adaptive learning strategies, explore their vocational interests, and identify meaningful educational and career pathways. These efforts are consistent with the broader role of school-based career guidance in supporting informed decision-making and students' educational development (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; ASCA, 2019), while the person-centered perspective of Rogers (1951) may provide a supportive framework for students to explore their experiences without judgment.

4. Conclusion

This study indicates that vocational program–student mismatch is a relevant experience among students in the study setting, with 65 of approximately 300 Grade 10 students (21.67%) reporting that their current vocational program was not their first choice during enrollment. Students' accounts indicate that mismatch was associated with several dimensions of vocational choice, including parental and peer influence, limited information about vocational programs, and limited understanding of their own vocational interests and abilities. Students also described learning-related experiences such as reduced motivation, difficulties engaging with vocational learning, and challenges in understanding vocational subject matter. Taken together, the findings suggest that vocational program–student mismatch should not be viewed simply as an incorrect individual choice, but as an experience shaped by social, informational, and developmental conditions that may continue to influence students' learning and emerging career considerations.

Future research should examine vocational program–student mismatch across multiple schools and educational contexts to determine whether similar patterns emerge and how institutional and contextual factors shape students' experiences. Comparative and longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for examining changes in students' adjustment, academic

engagement, and career development after entering a non-preferred vocational program. Future studies could also employ quantitative or mixed-methods designs to examine the relationships between program–student mismatch and outcomes such as motivation, academic achievement, engagement, and career uncertainty. From an applied perspective, research should further develop and empirically evaluate career-guidance interventions that strengthen students' self-understanding, improve access to vocational and career information, facilitate constructive parental involvement, and support students who experience a discrepancy between their initial vocational preferences and their current educational placement..

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