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EXPLORING VOCATIONAL STUDENTS' ANXIETY DURING COMPETENCY SKILLS EXAMINATION PREPARATION AND THEIR READINESS FOR THE WORKFORCE AT BABURROHMAH VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL, MOJOSARI

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ABSTRACT

Vocational education requires students to possess not only technical competencies but also psychological readiness to face the Competency Skills Examination (UKK) and transition into the workforce. These demands may cause anxiety that affects students' academic performance and work readiness. This study aimed to explore vocational students' experiences of anxiety in preparing for the UKK and entering the workforce at SMK Baburrohmah Mojosari. A qualitative study using an *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) approach was conducted among ten twelfth-grade students selected through theoretical sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation and were analyzed using Colaizzi's method. Five themes emerged: anxiety during UKK preparation and work readiness, coping strategies, self-development, changes in self-confidence, and career planning. The findings indicated that coping strategies, social support, and internship experiences enhanced students' competence, self-confidence, work readiness, and future career orientation, thereby facilitating their transition into the workforce and supporting successful career preparation.

Keywords: Anxiety, Work Readiness, Vocational Students, Competency Skills Examination, Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education plays an important role in preparing students to develop not only technical competencies but also psychological readiness for employment. In Indonesian vocational high schools, twelfth-grade students are required to complete the Competency Skills Examination as a final assessment to evaluate their vocational competencies according to industry standards. Besides serving as a graduation requirement, the UKK reflects students' readiness to enter the workforce. The demand to demonstrate optimal practical performance often creates psychological pressure that may lead to anxiety, affecting students' concentration, self-confidence, and work readiness (Satria & Zulkarnain, 2021). Anxiety is an emotional response to perceived threats and may negatively influence academic performance as well as individuals' ability to cope with future challenges (Beilock & Ramirez, 2020).

Anxiety before the UKK is a common phenomenon among vocational students. In Indonesia, approximately 9.8% of students experience anxiety related to educational activities, and anxiety tends to increase when students face high-stakes practical assessments such as the UKK (Dhiemitra, 2025). Within vocational education, anxiety is associated not only with examination performance but also with students' perceptions of their readiness to enter the workforce (Caballero & Walker, 2021). Therefore, understanding students' experiences of anxiety is essential for supporting a successful transition from school to employment.

Previous studies have reported that vocational students experience emotional, cognitive, and physiological anxiety during preparation for the UKK due to academic demands and environmental pressures (Larasati, 2023). Other studies have shown that industrial internship experiences improve students' work readiness and self-confidence (Putri & Handayani, 2021). However, most previous studies have examined anxiety and work readiness separately or have employed quantitative approaches emphasizing statistical relationships between variables. Qualitative studies exploring students' lived experiences of anxiety during UKK preparation and their relationship with work readiness remain limited.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore vocational students' experiences of anxiety during preparation for the UKK and to understand how these experiences relate to their readiness to enter the workforce. This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of the meanings students assign to their experiences throughout this transition.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between anxiety experiences, coping strategies, industrial internship experiences, self-confidence development, and career planning in preparing vocational students for employment. The findings are expected to provide evidence for schools, teachers, and counselors in designing supportive programs that help students manage anxiety while improving their work readiness before graduation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore and interpret students' subjective experiences of anxiety during preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination and their readiness to enter the workforce. The IPA approach was selected because it emphasizes understanding the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences (Smith & Larkin, 2009). The study was conducted at SMK Baburrohmah Mojosari, Indonesia, and data collection took place from 13 to 15 April 2026 through face-to-face interviews conducted in the school's counseling room.

The participants consisted of 10 twelfth-grade vocational students, including five students from the Fashion Design program and five students from the Motorcycle Engineering program. Participants were selected using non-probability sampling with a homogeneous theoretical sampling approach because they shared similar characteristics and experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. The selection emphasized students who were willing and able to describe their experiences openly and comprehensively (Sugiyono, 2013). The number of participants was considered appropriate for phenomenological research, which aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences rather than statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher served as the primary research instrument (human instrument) throughout the study (Sugiyono, 2013). Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, supported by observations and documentation. Before each interview, participants received an explanation of the study objectives and signed informed consent forms. Each interview lasted approximately 25–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Observations focused on participants' facial expressions, gestures,

tone of voice, and other non-verbal responses during the interviews, while field notes and photographs were used to complement the interview data.

Data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Sugiyono, 2013). The interpretative process followed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework using Colaizzi (1978) analytical stages, including transcript preparation, repeated reading, coding, category development, theme formulation, cluster theme formulation, and comprehensive description of participants' lived experiences. The findings were subsequently refined through thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006) as cited in Polit and Beck (2018) To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied method triangulation, member checking, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability following (Chesnay, 2015).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION
RESEARCH RESULT

1.1 Participant Characteristics

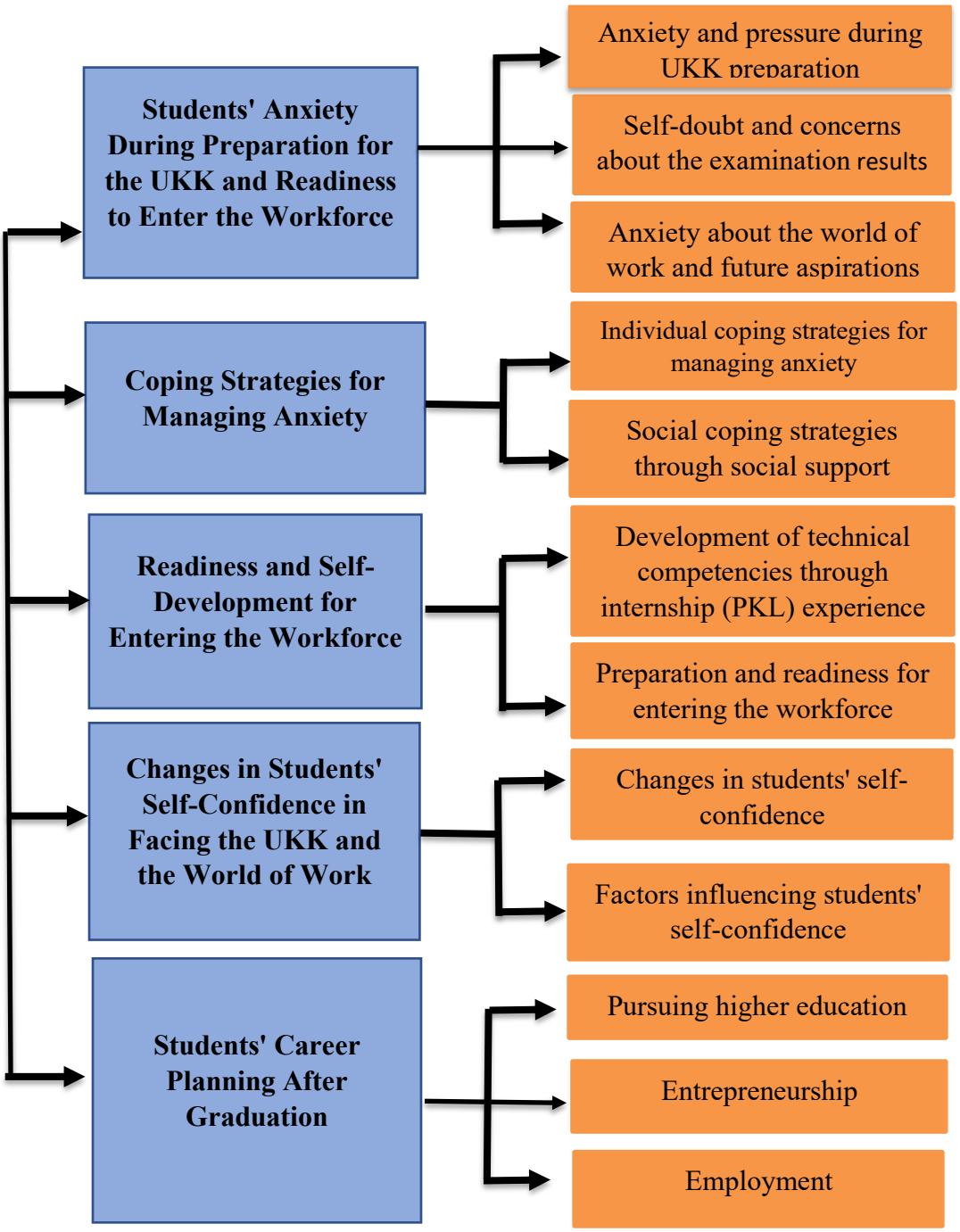
Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Living Arrangement	Parents'/ Guardians' Highest Educational Level	Parents'/Guardians' Occupation	Study Program	Previous UKK Experience	Plan After Graduation	Internship Experience (PKL)
P1	Female	18	Living with parents	Senior High School	Entrepreneur	Fashion Design	No	Work	Yes
P2	Female	18	Living with parents	Senior High School	Entrepreneur	Fashio Desig	No	Continue Higher Education	Yes
P3	Female	17	Living with parents	Diploma	Entrepreneur	Fashion Design	No	Continue Higher Education	Yes
P4	Female	18	Living with parents	Senior High School	Entrepreneur	Fashion Design	No	Work	Yes
P5	Female	>18	Living with parents	Senior High School	Private Sector Employee	Fashio Desig	No	Work	Yes

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Living Arrangement	Parents'/ Guardians' Highest Educational Level	Parents'/Guardians' Occupation	Study Program	Previous UKK Experience	Plan After Graduation	Internship Experience (PKL)
P6	Male	18	Living with parents	Junior High School	Laborer	Motorcycle Engineering	No	Work	Yes
P7	Male	18	Living with parents	Elementary School	Private Sector Employee	Motorcycle Engineering	No	Work	Yes
P8	Male	18	Living with parents	Junior High School	Private Sector Employee	Motorcle Engineng	No	Work	Yes
P9	Male	17	Dormitory	Senior High School	Private Sector Employee	Motorcycle Engineering	No	Work	Yes
P10	Male	18	Living with parents	Junior High School	Private Sector Employee	Motorcycle Engineering	No	Work	Yes

Table 1, this study involved 10 participants who were Grade XII students at SMK Baburrohmah Mojosari, equally representing the Fashion Design and Motorcycle Engineering study programs. Most participants were 18 years old and lived with their parents. All participants had completed an industrial internship (PKL) but had not yet undertaken the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK). Most participants planned to enter the workforce after graduation, while a few intended to pursue higher education.

The analysis identified five major themes reflecting students' experiences of anxiety during their preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK) and their readiness to enter the workforce



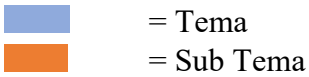


Figure 1. Main Themes of Students' Experiences of Anxiety During Preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK) and Readiness to Enter the Workforce

The analysis identified five major themes: **(1)** students' anxiety during preparation for the UKK and readiness to enter the workforce, **(2)** coping strategies for managing anxiety**, (3)** readiness and self-development for entering the workforce, **(4)** changes in students' self-confidence in facing the UKK and the workforce, and **(5)** students' career planning after graduation. Each theme comprises several subthemes that represent the participants' experiences during their preparation for the UKK and their transition from education to the workforce.

Theme 1. Students' Anxiety During Preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK) and Readiness to Enter the Workforce

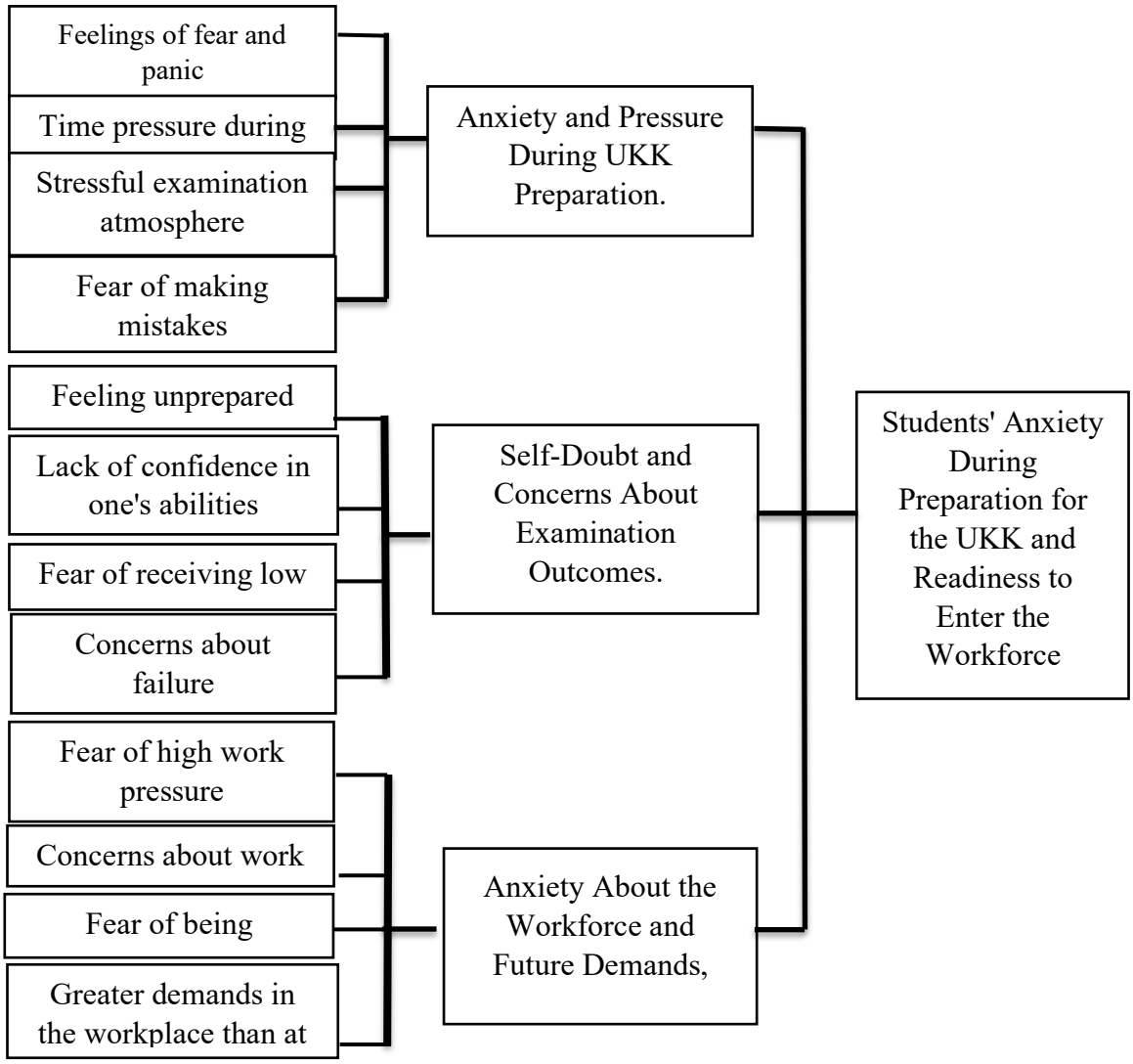


Figure 2. Theme 1. Students' Anxiety During Preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK) and Readiness to Enter the Workforce

Figure 2 illustrates that students' anxiety during the preparation for the Competency Skills Examination (UKK) and readiness to enter the workforce consists of three main subthemes: anxiety and pressure during UKK preparation, lack of self-confidence and concerns about examination outcomes, and anxiety regarding the workplace and future job demands. This anxiety is reflected in feelings of fear, pressure throughout the preparation and examination process, limited confidence in personal abilities, and concerns about the demands and responsibilities they expect to face upon entering the workforce. Together, these subthemes describe students' anxiety experiences during UKK preparation and their transition into the workforce.

Theme 2. Coping Strategies for Managing Anxiety

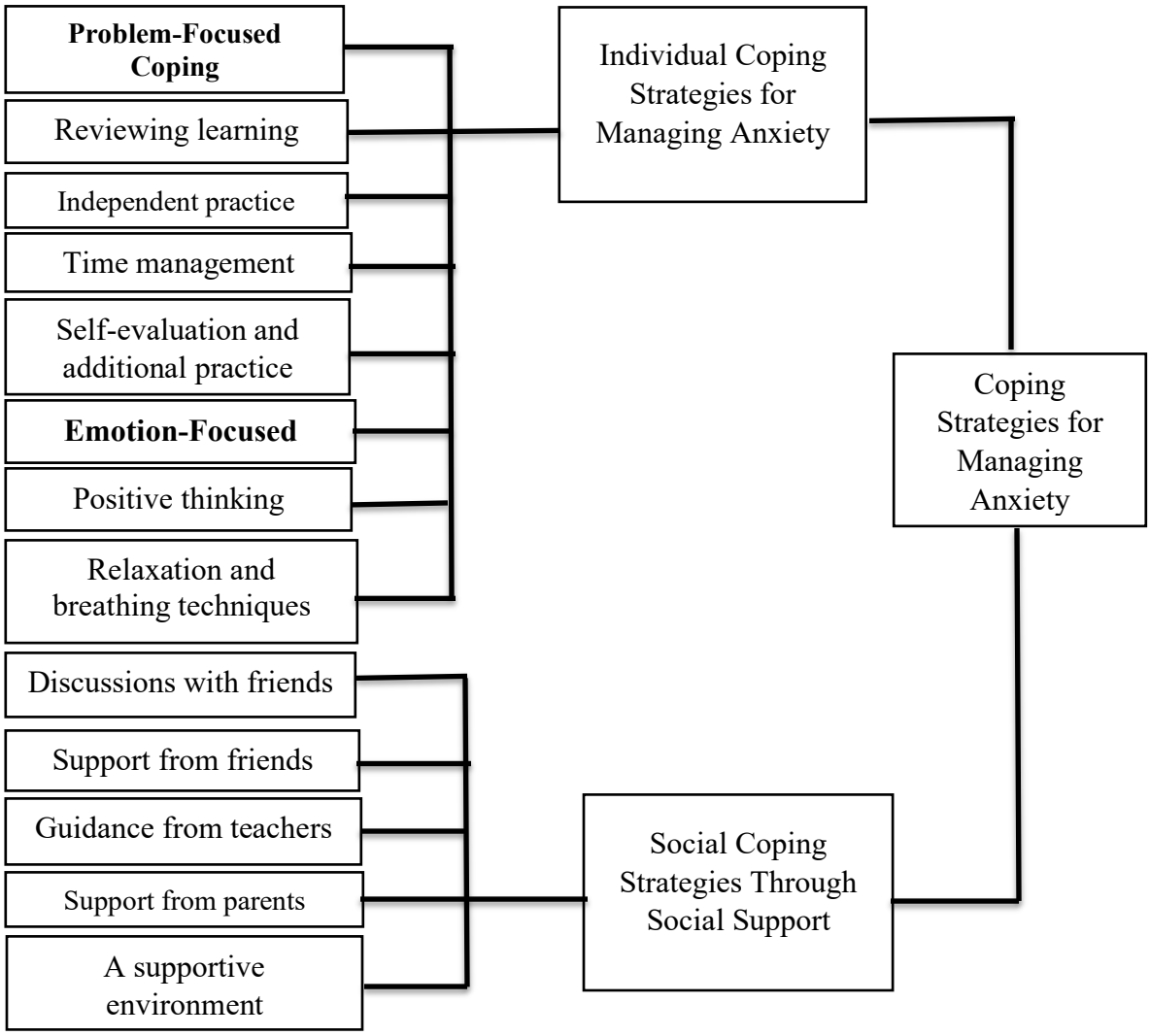


Figure 3. Theme 2. Coping Strategies for Managing Anxiety

Figure 3 shows that Theme 2 consists of two subthemes: individual coping strategies for managing anxiety and social coping strategies through environmental support. Individual coping strategies include reviewing learning materials, independent practice, time management, positive thinking, and relaxation techniques. Social coping strategies include support from teachers, peers, and family during preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK) and the transition into the workforce.

Theme 3. Work Readiness and Self-Development

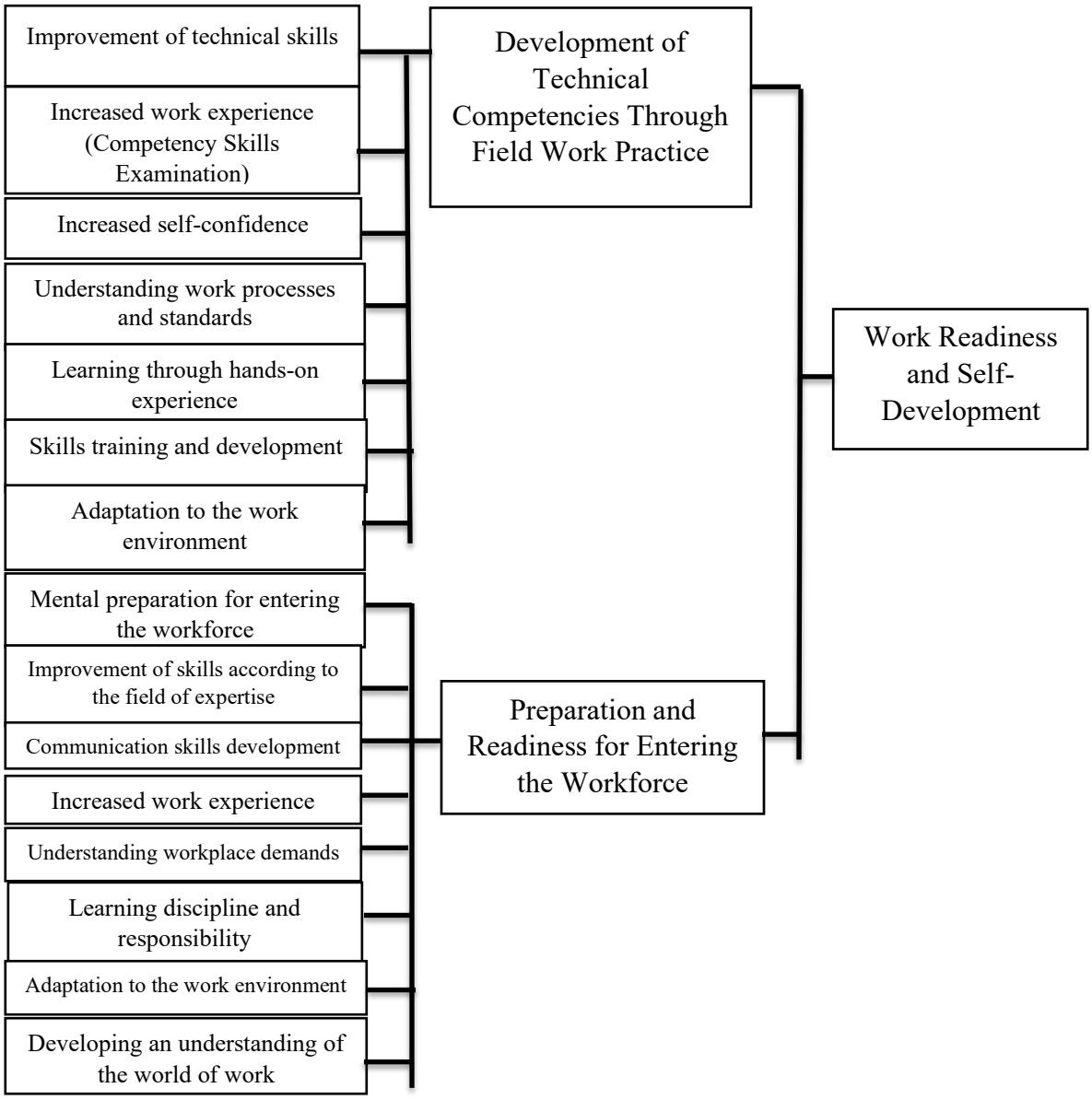


Figure 4. Theme 3. Work Readiness and Self-Development

Figure 4 shows that Theme 3 consists of two subthemes: the development of technical competencies through Field Work Practice (PKL) and preparation and readiness for entering the workforce. The first subtheme includes students' experiences in developing technical competencies during PKL, whereas the second subtheme includes students' preparation and readiness for entering the workforce.

Theme 4. Changes in Students' Self-Confidence During Preparation for the Competency Skills Examination and Entering the Workforce

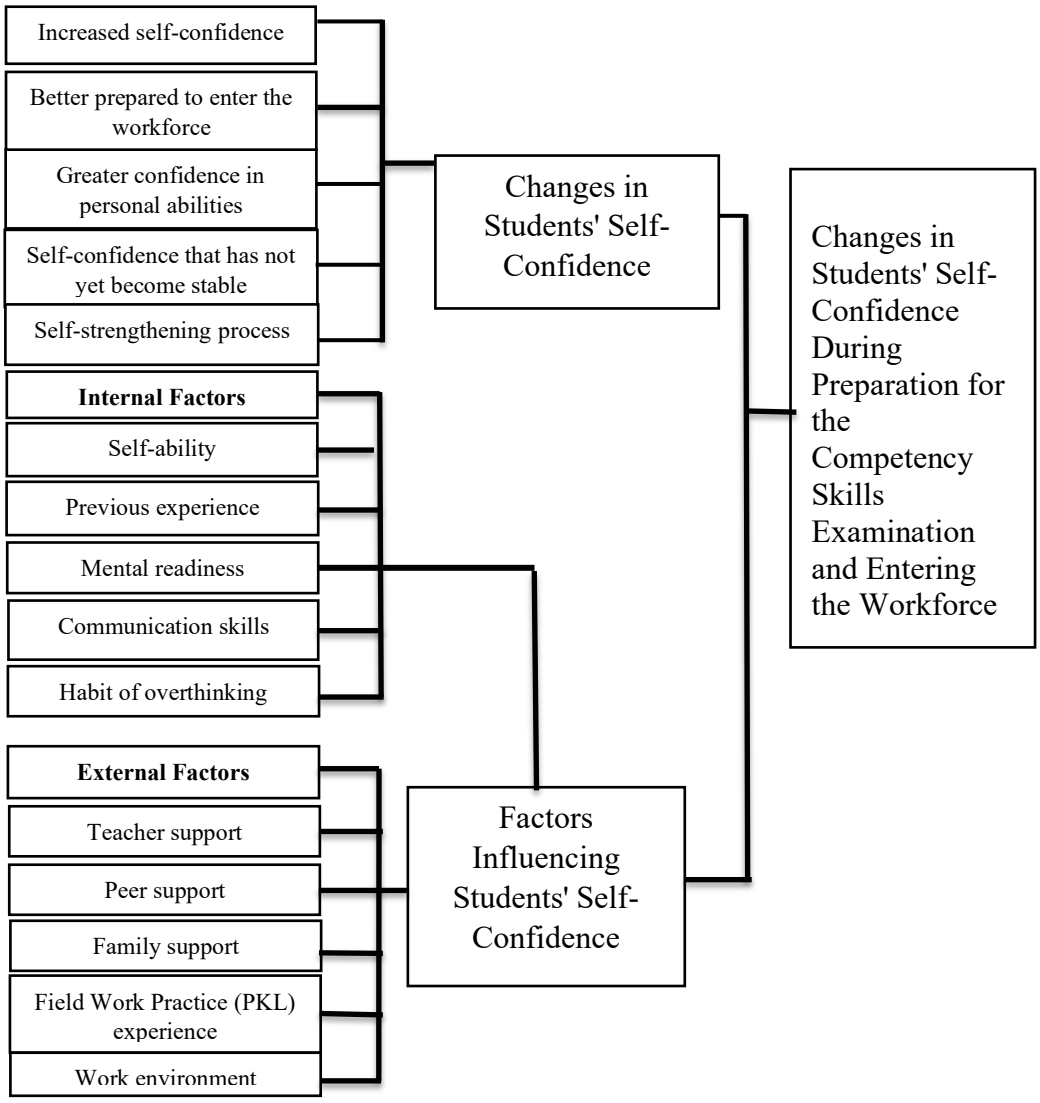


Figure 5. Theme 4. Changes in Students' Self-Confidence During Preparation for the Competency Skills Examination and Entering the Workforce

Figure 5 shows that Theme 4 consists of two subthemes: changes in students' self-confidence and factors influencing students' self-confidence during preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK) and entry into the workforce. The first subtheme includes changes in students' confidence in their abilities, whereas the second subtheme includes internal and external factors influencing students' self-confidence.

Theme 5. Students' Career and Future Planning After Graduation

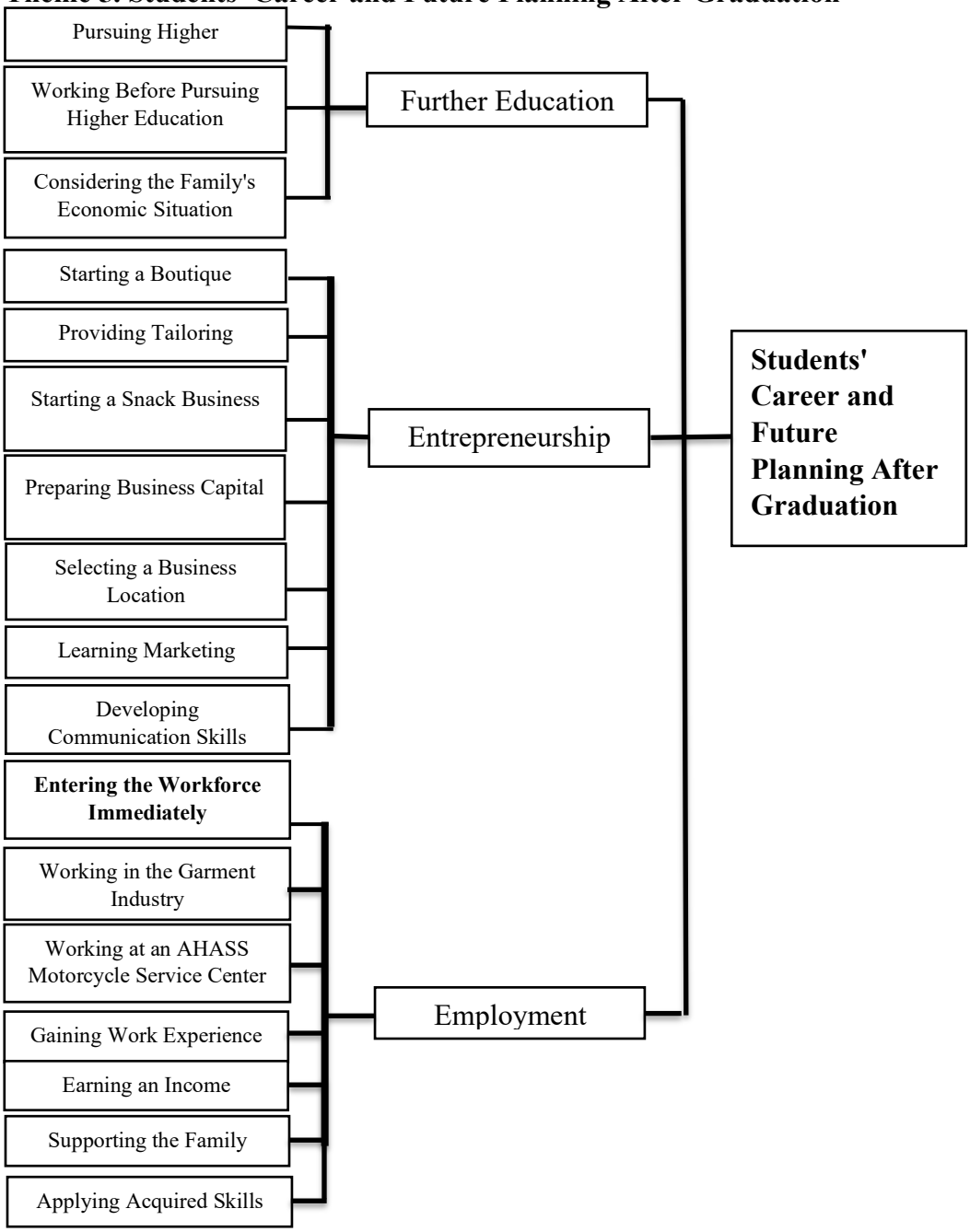


Figure 6. Theme 5. Students' Career and Future Planning After Graduation

Figure 6 illustrates that students' career planning and future aspirations after graduation consist of three main subthemes: pursuing higher education, entrepreneurship, and employment. These subthemes reflect the different career pathways considered by students based on their interests, abilities, experiences, and personal circumstances. Some students plan to continue their education at a higher level, while others intend to establish their own businesses or enter the workforce immediately after graduation. Together, these

subthemes describe students' career planning and future aspirations following the completion of their vocational education.

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Students' Anxiety in Preparing for the Competency Examination (UKK) and Entering the Workforce

The findings indicated that students experienced anxiety throughout the preparation for the Competency Examination (UKK), beginning when the examination was announced and continuing until its implementation. This anxiety was reflected in feelings of nervousness, tension, fear of making mistakes, concerns about limited examination time, and uncertainty regarding the examination outcomes. These findings suggest that students' anxiety was not limited to the examination itself but also reflected their psychological response to the transition from vocational education to the workplace. Excessive anxiety may reduce students' self-confidence and affect their readiness to perform during competency assessments and adapt to future workplace demands.

These findings are consistent with Rahman and Sari (2021), who reported that vocational students experienced anxiety due to time pressure, performance standards, and fear of making mistakes during practical examinations. Similarly Siti Hajar (2025) found that academic anxiety was influenced by examination pressure and fear of evaluation. However, unlike these previous studies, the present study revealed that students' anxiety emerged before the examination and continued as they anticipated entering the workforce. The findings also support Lestari and Wibowo (2023). who reported that low self-confidence and fear of failure contributed to students' academic anxiety. Similar experiences were identified by Larasati (2023), however the present study highlights negative self-evaluation rather than physical symptoms as the primary source of anxiety. Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Ayu Permatasari (2025). who emphasized students' concerns about professional demands and the gap between vocational competencies and workplace expectations.

Theme 2: Coping Strategies for Managing Anxiety

The findings showed that students managed anxiety through both individual and social coping strategies. Individual coping strategies included repeated practice of vocational skills, reviewing learning materials, effective time management, positive thinking, and emotional regulation. Social coping strategies were reflected in the emotional and informational support provided by teachers, peers, and family members. These findings suggest that students' ability to manage anxiety depended not only on their personal efforts but also on supportive interpersonal relationships, highlighting the importance of psychological and social resources throughout vocational education.

These findings are consistent with Nurhayati (2021) who reported that repeated practice, effective time management, and positive thinking helped reduce anxiety during vocational competency examinations. Likewise, Sari (2020) emphasized that support from teachers, peers, and family members contributed to students' emotional stability when facing academic pressure. However, unlike previous studies that primarily focused on coping during examinations, the present study found that students applied these coping strategies throughout their vocational education, including during industrial internships (PKL) and

while preparing to enter the workforce. This finding suggests that coping strategies represent an ongoing adaptive process rather than a temporary response to examination-related stress.

Theme 3: Self-Development and Work Readiness

The findings revealed that industrial internships (PKL) played an important role in students' self-development and work readiness by providing direct experiences in real workplace environments. Through PKL experiences, students developed technical competencies, improved practical skills, understood workplace procedures, and gained awareness of professional responsibilities. The findings also indicated that work readiness was not limited to technical abilities but involved psychological preparedness, adaptability, and continuous efforts to improve personal competencies. These findings highlight the important role of vocational education in preparing students to transition from school-based learning to workplace demands.

These findings are consistent with Putri and Handayani (2021) who reported that industrial internships improved vocational competencies, work readiness, and students' understanding of workplace expectations. Similarly, Suryani (2021) found that practice-based learning enhanced technical abilities and supported students' preparation for employment. However, unlike previous studies that emphasized the overall improvement of competencies through internship experiences, the present study found that PKL experiences primarily strengthened students' technical skills, while the development of soft skills and psychological readiness varied among participants. Furthermore, the findings are in line with Ayu Permatasari (2025) who emphasized that practical experience increased students' awareness of professional who emphasized that practical experiences increased students' awareness of professional responsibilities and workplace demands. These findings suggest that internship experiences should not only focus on technical skill development but also encourage the improvement of communication skills, adaptability, and psychological readiness as important aspects of work readiness.

Theme 4: Changes in Students' Self-Confidence in Facing UKK and Employment

The findings demonstrated that students' self-confidence developed gradually through learning experiences, industrial internships (PKL), and preparation for the Competency Examination (UKK). Most participants reported increased confidence after gaining practical experience, understanding workplace processes, and improving their vocational skills. However, some students continued to experience doubts regarding their abilities, indicating that confidence development did not occur equally among all participants. The findings also showed that self-confidence was influenced by internal factors, including self-perception, communication skills, and psychological readiness, as well as external factors such as social support and workplace experiences. These findings highlight that students' confidence is a dynamic process shaped by continuous interaction between personal development and environmental support during vocational education.

These findings are consistent with Putri and Handayani (2021) who reported that industrial internships contributed to increased students' confidence and work readiness. Similarly, Ayu Permatasari (2025) ound that practical experiences enhanced students' self-efficacy and professional preparedness. However, unlike previous studies that mainly emphasized the positive impact of practical experiences on confidence development, the present study showed that confidence changes varied among students depending on how they

perceived and responded to their learning and workplace experiences. Furthermore, the findings support Sari (2020) who emphasized the role of social support in improving students' emotional stability and confidence. These findings suggest that strengthening students' self-confidence requires not only practical experiences but also continuous psychological support and opportunities for personal development.

Theme 5: Career Planning and Future Aspirations After Graduation

The findings indicated that students had diverse career aspirations after graduation, including pursuing higher education, establishing their own businesses, and entering the workforce directly. These career decisions were influenced by various factors, including vocational competencies, industrial internship experiences, personal interests, family economic conditions, and future goals. The findings suggest that career planning among vocational students is a complex process involving educational, psychological, social, and economic considerations. These findings highlight that preparing students for the future requires not only improving vocational competencies but also supporting students in developing realistic career goals based on their individual circumstances.

These findings are consistent with Putri and Handayani (2021) who reported that industrial internship experiences helped students develop career orientations and understand workplace expectations more realistically. Similarly, Ayu Permatasari (2025) found that practical experiences contributed to students' work readiness and professional awareness. However, unlike previous studies that primarily emphasized the role of competencies and practical experiences in career preparation, the present study identified family economic responsibilities as an important factor influencing students' decisions after graduation. Furthermore, the findings support Frensa Hasdian (2025) who highlighted the importance of technical and practical competencies as preparation for future employment. These findings suggest that students' career planning is shaped not only by educational experiences and vocational abilities but also by personal and social circumstances that influence their future choices.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in only one vocational high school, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. In addition, the findings were based on students' subjective experiences obtained through interviews and did not include perspectives from teachers, parents, or industry partners. Therefore, participants' perceptions and personal experiences may influence the interpretation of the findings. Future studies involving broader participants and multiple vocational institutions are recommended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences during the transition from vocational education to the workplace.

The findings of this study provide implications for vocational education practice. Vocational schools are encouraged to strengthen psychological support, career guidance, and competency preparation to help students manage anxiety, develop coping strategies, and build confidence before facing competency examinations and entering employment. Meaningful industrial internship experiences should also be provided to improve not only technical competencies but also communication skills, adaptability, and psychological readiness. Furthermore, career counseling services should consider students' competencies,

aspirations, and socioeconomic backgrounds to support realistic career planning after graduation.

CONCLUSION

1. This study found that vocational high school students experienced various forms of anxiety during their preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK), including nervousness, fear, tension, worry, and low self-confidence. These experiences were influenced by time pressure, fear of making mistakes during practical examinations, concerns about examination outcomes, doubts about their own abilities, and expectations regarding future workplace demands. To manage these challenges, students employed both individual coping strategies, such as repeated practice, reviewing learning materials, effective time management, positive thinking, and emotional regulation, and social coping strategies through support from teachers, peers, and family members.
2. This study also found that students' work readiness developed through school learning, Field Work Practice (PKL), and preparation for the Vocational Competency Examination (UKK). These experiences enabled students to strengthen their technical competencies, develop essential soft skills, improve their self-confidence, and formulate future career plans, including entering the workforce, pursuing higher education, or becoming entrepreneurs. The findings indicate that work readiness is determined not only by technical competence but also by psychological preparedness, practical experience, self-confidence, adaptability, social support, and career planning. Future research is recommended to involve participants from a wider range of vocational schools and to explore additional factors influencing students' anxiety and work readiness.

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