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Making
**Ragwan Mohsen Alaydrus, Nik Suryani Nik Abd
Rahman**



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QUALITATIVE STUDY OF INDONESIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC MAJOR DECISION MAKING

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Abstract

Keywords:

academic major;
career counseling;
decision making

Educational decision making can be a challenging process for senior high school students. There are research reports investigated Indonesian high school students who perceived that they have taken wrong major decisions. This problem demands special attention from educators and school counselors to figure out the condition that gives rise to the phenomenon. This qualitative case study explored experiences of Indonesian high school students in academic major decision making. The purpose of this paper is to present an in-depth information about high school students' strategies in educational planning process. Five students from three public high schools in Indonesia participated in this study. Qualitative data were collected from individual interviews and analyzed using thematic approach. The study identified four strategies of major decision making: reflecting on experiences, engaging in information-seeking, considering alternative majors, and compromising aspirations. The findings highlight the need to provide a comprehensive support for systematic educational exploration and decision making.

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Kata kunci:
jurusan
akademik;
konseling karier;
pengambilan
keputusan.

Abstrak

Pengambilan keputusan akademik dapat menjadi proses yang menantang bagi siswa Sekolah Menengah Atas (SMA). Ada laporan penelitian yang menyatakan bahwa siswa sekolah menengah di Indonesia merasa telah mengambil keputusan besar yang salah. Masalah ini menuntut perhatian khusus dari pendidik dan konselor sekolah untuk mengetahui kondisi yang memunculkan fenomena tersebut. Studi kasus kualitatif ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman siswa sekolah menengah atas di Indonesia dalam pengambilan keputusan akademik. Tujuan dari artikel ini adalah untuk menyajikan informasi yang mendalam tentang strategi siswa SMA dalam proses perencanaan pendidikan. Lima siswa dari tiga sekolah menengah umum di Indonesia berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Data kualitatif dikumpulkan dari wawancara individu dan dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan tematik. Studi ini mengidentifikasi empat strategi pengambilan keputusan utama: merefleksikan pengalaman, terlibat dalam pencarian informasi, mempertimbangkan alternatif utama, dan mengkompromikan aspirasi. Temuan menyoroti kebutuhan untuk memberikan dukungan komprehensif dalam rangka eksplorasi pendidikan yang sistematis dan pengambilan keputusan.

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INTRODUCTION

Choosing a major is an important decision. A right major choice can facilitate the success of university life as well as future career preparation. However, students usually find difficulty in choosing a major with many majors available. In 2013, Lieam and Prast (Meirina, 2013) reported more than 50 percent of Indonesian 50

students admitted that they had taken wrong decision in choosing a major in the university. The students stated that they did not take into account their interests and talents in decision making. The fact that students considered the external factors more than internal tendencies was studied by Prabowo, Yusuf, and Setyowati (2019), who found that perception of parents' expectation has greater influence than the students' self-efficacy in choosing a university major. Soria and Stebleton (2013) compared students' motivation in choosing academic majors. They found that students who chose a major based on extrinsic motivation tend to feel less sense of belonging on campus and less satisfied with their own decision.

The tendency to account external opinions over personal choice is a result of career indecision. This indecisiveness further leads some students to changing their university majors. Fahima and Akmal (2018) reported that apart from academic major indecisiveness, getting accepted in the third major alternative or parents' major choice are factors that influence students to change their major choice in university.

This phenomenon is a result of lack of information students gain from their high schools regarding school majors and the relation to their personal interests. In fact, the youth's perception of working life is shaped by educational institutions and influenced by media, parents, and older peers rather than their own experiences (Lechner, Tomasik, & Silbereisen, 2016). Paa and McWhirter (2000) also pointed that some students had begun their process of self and career exploration; they also have known that their career expectations are mainly based on their interest, values, and personalities. However, the students cannot figure out how their attributes might have corresponded with specific occupations. With those constraints, it may be challenging for high school students to make a career planning and thus it becomes a concern of parents and educators. Study from Galotti (1999) noted that

major decision making can be challenging even for bright and highly motivated students. The study suggested educators and counselor to help the students learn and explicitly use various method of decision structuring to overcome cognitive processing limitations. Another study from Anderson, Creamer, and Cross (1989) suggested to give equal career or major information for decided and undecided students. They also proposed that undecided students represent problem regarding achievement. In fact, the study highlighted that anyone may change their majors due to enhanced information even for those who initially had decided.

Therefore, it is crucial that high school institutions assist students in making educational decisions. This study provides an exploration of students' major decision making process to inform educators about students' decision making strategies and challenges within the process.

Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise delineates the process of academic major decision making of adolescents. If in the circumscription stage individuals are focus on exploring the internal self, in the compromise stage adolescents adjust their aspirations to accommodate an external reality. At this point, adolescents may choose more accessible alternatives even though less compatible to their self-concept (Gottfredson, 2002; 2005). There are three principles that influence the accessibility of information: 1) *Selective attention*, in which people tend to seek information that they think most suitable to their characteristics and most compatible to the social space. 2) *Need for implementation as per action*, the time of decision implementation influences the choices. The closer the time, the more realistic the aspiration. 3) *Ease and proximity of search*, in which people tend to seek information primarily about their preferred major or occupation with known and trusted sources such as family and friends (Gottfredson, 2005).

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by Lent, Brown,

and Hackett (1994) emphasizes the role of individual as an active agent of his career development provides one of the theoretical explanations. SCCT, which is grounded by Bandura, emphasizes three social cognitive mechanisms which are related to academic and career decision making: self-efficacy, outcome expectation, and goal setting. Self-efficacy is defined as personal beliefs to perform particular behaviors or actions, or in this context, self-efficacy is shown by one's beliefs about the ability to complete particular academic requirements, cope with specific obstacles, and manage career preparation. Outcome expectation refers to beliefs about the consequences that are resulted from particular behavior or action. For example, one expects a good prospect when choosing a particular major in university. In addition, Lent and Brown (2013) stated that self-efficacy and outcome expectation directly influence adaptive career behaviors while clear and specific personal goals will indirectly facilitate the action.

Apart from that, contextual factors such as supports from important people (e.g., teachers and counselors) may strengthen self-efficacy and outcome expectations, whereby lack of resources is the barriers that may limit one's action. Career counselors may address exploration of students interests, needs, and values during counseling sessions. Encouragement to build skills and expand students' interest will be helpful when it comes to research about their academic major choices. This supportive environment, with counselors helping students to overcome challenges, will become a positive experience for students during the process of career planning, and at the same time they must receive support to improve their performance and engagement at school (Boan & Piquette-Tomei, 2007).

Some studies had addressed students career exploration strategies of Indonesian high school students as a part of career planning process. For instance, a descriptive study conducted by Falentini, Taufik, and Mudjiran (2013) mentioned the information search as a strategy used

by students to decide on their majors. However, studies specifically investigating the process of educational planning were limited and mostly conducted with quantitative approach. In this study, author used a qualitative approach to gather the data, particularly focused on students' strategies in academic major exploration and decision making. The information gained from this study is expected to present an in-depth understanding about the decision making process of Indonesian high school students when choosing their academic majors.

METHODS

This qualitative research used a case study method where the author explored experiences and gained the meaning from each participant. Author used interview method to explore students' experience in academic major decision making. This study used unstructured interviews guided by the research questions, where the research asked questions spontaneously.

The researcher of this current study is a master student in educational psychology and had experience as a guidance and counseling teacher. Participants in this study were five high school students (three girls, two boys) from a district in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The sampling technique in this study was purposive sampling. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 18 and they came from social and natural science majors in high school. The author determined criteria for identifying such participants, which are: 1) high school seniors and 2) had selected university major, proven by completing the career plan worksheet.

Case study, which was implemented in the present study, determines the type of data that is collected and how it is collected. With the qualitative type of data, interview was utilized for data collection. The interview questions focused on students' experiences in career exploration until they reach their major decision. The author

gave the students career plan worksheet to fill.

The students career plan worksheet have four aspects; reflecting on experiences, engaging in information search, considering major alternatives, and compromising the aspirations. The information gained from the career plan was an initial data set and guided the author to generate interview questions.

Before conducting the first interview, the author gathered five students who would be involved as participants in this study. The purpose of the meeting was to explain the objective of interview and how it would be conducted. It was also intended to build a good rapport between the author and the participants. After that initial meeting, the author conducted a face-to-face interview with each participant separately. The purpose of this interview, which was conducted two months before the national entrance examination, was to investigate the students' major choices and their story of career exploration.

In this study, the author used a thematic analysis as a guideline. Thematic analysis can be defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After conducting the interview, the author proceeded to transcribe the interview record, then re-read the transcription for many times to improve familiarity. All interesting features from the interviews were coded systematically. The coding is crucial in this step to help the author organize and comprehend the data (Basil, 2003). The author further made categorization based on generated codes. The categories were classified into themes to answer the research questions.

Finally, the author reviewed data from the first interviews to probe participants' statements that need clarification. This second-phase of interviews were done through phone conversations due to the distant the author and the participants. Both the author and participants avoided noise during interviews and chose the best time that allowed participants to talk with expected duration. Similar with

the face-to-face interviews, the author used an interview guide with main questions, probes, and prompts. To make the participant feel the author's presence, the author responded participants statement with "hmm", "yes", "right," which showed that the author was also engaged in the conversation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses findings from the research question, which is the strategies used by Indonesian high school students in deciding university major. Participants' descriptions of their experiences were categorized into four themes: reflecting on experiences, engaging in information search, considering major alternatives, and compromising the aspirations.

Reflecting On Experiences

All participants spoke about self-exploration which employed reflection on experiences and feedbacks they received in order to understand their strengths, interests, and values. This process, however, tends to be done independently. Only one participant, P4, shared her experience in learning to do self-reflection systematically with a guide from a counselor long ago in junior high school:

"I started self-exploration from junior high school. My counseling teacher was nice, she always came to our class on her schedule. The counseling room was always open, so whenever I felt confused about something, I immediately went there for consultation. We also had a personal diary at school, so everything was there, and from that diary our teacher could examine how we were."

Self-reflection was done by pondering over experiences that gave them information about themselves. In this case, participants shared experiences that have shaped their perspectives and interests

in a certain academic field. P3 admitted that she did not have any idea about her strengths until she was appreciated by her teacher for her performance in civics. She said in the interview:

"I only used to join the class discussion, and he saw me as a potential student. Maybe he thought that I was much better than my other classmates. So whenever there were some competitions, he always encouraged me to join. So after those experiences, I realized that maybe I can. That's it, his appreciation made me felt like I had an interest in law. So until now I preferred to choose law as an academic major. I think I have the ability in this major compared to others."

P1 indicated that reflection is important prior to information search to make an accurate decision of academic majors. He said:

"Firstly we need to do reflection, what is our inclination, what are activities we used to do. Then we start searching, whether by reading books or browsing on the Internet. Just utilize all the available media, written...or do consult with parents, the people that are truthful, those who really know us."

Engaging In Information-seeking Activity

Information-seeking is a stage in which the participants gathered information about majors and career alternatives. Some participants tended to engage in information search when people started asking them about their major choices. During the interview, P1, P2, and P3 spoke about their explorations which just started in the final year of senior high school. P3 said in the interview:

"Self-exploration occurred since junior high school, and my career exploration started since.. when there was a question about where to enroll, when people asked me, I was so confused, where should I go, I didn't know at all."

All participants shared about resources they used for information search. Online resources are commonly utilized by participants to

learn about various majors and occupations as well as the university requirements. As P2 said in the interview, he started information search using online resources before doing a more intensive exploration:

"In the beginning, I searched on Internet about what is medical doctor, the benefits, and the education system. Then in the third grade I started to explore deeper, looking for information about the medical study."

Even though they commonly used online resources, asking seniors or other people who are studying in related majors is also helpful to gain information, according to one participant. P1 perceived that those people must know better since they had been directly involved in the desired majors. P1 said:

"The resources that give us insight are definitely the ones when we could meet directly with the person, because automatically our questions are answered directly by them. So it did not come from the second or third person, but straight from the first person. we also can have a face-to-face conversation with the main source."

Similarly, P5 mostly depended on her father's assistance for information gathering since the father has a good career in accounting, which is one of her major choices.

"I had more discussion with my father, my father is also a bachelor in accounting, economics, he quite understands, so I ask him."

On the other hand, P2 shared how he received more information about medical study from a group of friends. It is gone like snowball information which came from one person to another. He said:

"The source that gave a lot of information is...friends. When my friends and I had a gathering, we asked each other. Usually they have experience.. like being informed by their cousins... who are studying in particular majors."

Knowledge from information search is important to be discussed since it is one of the factors that determine the success of decision

making of individual. Some participants confidently talked about the findings of their academic major exploration, especially from information-seeking. P1 and P2 showed their concern about their desired occupations as they also explored information about future opportunities. While the two participants, P4 and P5 shared the outcome information search which focus on information about majors and the university requirements. On the other hand, P3 only showed minimum knowledge about her chosen major. In fact, she only sought for information about financial requirement and adaptation strategy for university life, and she thought that she might learn about her major later. When asked about her major, P3 answered:

"I realize that I don't really know. I think everyone also experiences the same thing... so I don't know how the study is going to be.. the only important thing is how can I get accepted, that's it."

In mapping related occupations, students usually considered a few aspects that make the majors are connected to one another. So if they cannot pursue one particular major, they will proceed to another major option which has similar characteristics. Here, P4 spoke about her major choices and the possibilities to fulfil her interest by doing careers from those majors. She shared:

"So we need to find out, at least three majors that are similar, for example, we are not accepted in communication science, but we pass (the selection to enroll in) urban planning science. And they are also related to psychology, because they all require interaction with society, so we have to decide among those three options until we find our main choice. So if we fail to enroll in one major, for example if I fail in communication science, there are still two options that are still related with my interests."

Participant recognized that they have their own unique abilities, traits, interests, and values, yet they were still learning of how those attributes may correspond to specific majors. To make a decision, they

consider certain aspects or criteria to determine the most suitable ones. In this study, participants had decided their educational pathways and they had selected several alternative majors. The process academic decision making is discussed in the following themes:

Considering Major Alternatives

Participants employed strategies to select suitable major choices with unique considerations. All participants planned their choices based on availability of major options in two kind of national entrance examinations; which are SNMPTN (*Seleksi Nasional Masuk Perguruan Tinggi Negeri*) and SBMPTN (*Seleksi Bersama Masuk Perguruan Tinggi Negeri*). SNMPTN is a national exam conducted prior to other university examinations. It is a selection of candidate's academic achievement throughout high school conducted by each public university under the coordination of the central committee. SBMPTN is a selection based on the result of paper-based test or computer-based test, or a combined result of the paper-based and skill tests, carried out by all public universities under the coordination of the central committee.

Overall, future career preparation is the main consideration in selecting alternative majors. They would choose a major that aligned with their interests and had good career opportunities. As P1 shared that he selected law for its career and academic advantages:

"If you want to apply in a bank, you will be accepted, or if you want to apply in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs you will also be accepted. Even as what I knew.. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs usually calls for five law students from UGM to do intership. See, even the opportunity is not for international relations students, it is for law students."

P4 had several plans for her study after high school. She preferred to study in the manufacturing polytechnique (*Polman/Politeknik Manufaktur*) since it offered scholarship that could reduce financial

burden of her parents. However, despite this promising choice, P4 was aware of the consequences, which included a lower chance to do her passion. She had a plan to anticipate this:

"I chose to study in Polman since it offers scholarship and the work prospect is guaranteed. So if it is guaranteed, my parents will feel relieved, I can do my career on that even though it doesn't relate directly to my passion which is communication science, but at least I can keep practicing my communication skill by joining any community and competition."

On the other hand, P3 considered the most possible majors to apply. Apart from law, she previously had an interest in psychology. But due to her lack of knowledge about the major, he decided to choose another option with clearer work prospect. She gave the rationale:

"Why I didn't choose psychology, because I felt the work prospect isn't clear. Maybe other people like you think there must be many career opportunities... but I don't know, I think it's less... I am not sure... what is the work prospect of psychology?"

In SNMPTN, participants were required to choose a major that aligned with their specialization in high school. However, in SBMPTN participants were allowed to select any major from other specializations. P3 was one of the students who chose a major unrelated to her specialization. She studied natural science in high school, but she preferred a social science major in university. She said:

"I chose social science because I do not like my specialization (in high school), I do not want to get headache by solving problems which are not applicable in daily life. Such as... measuring the speed of light, whatever..."

For P5, apart from her interest and experience that influenced her to choose accounting, her father as a role model also gave her an insight about the work prospect in the major. She explained her consideration in choosing accounting:

"Skill of accounting can be applied to any field... so there are a lot of opportunities... my father also studied accounting, I look at my father... it's like he's needed everywhere, and I meant... his position is good and promising... my dad works in a public institution, and the position is branch manager... it feels good to become my dad."

Unlike other participants, for P2, medicine was his only major choice whereby he applied for the same major in three different universities. He was thinking about another major such as international relations, but did not take it as an option for his first try. When the author asked about his alternative plan, he said *"I am still thinking about it"*.

Compromising The Aspirations

Some students have compromised their aspirations and planned to adjust their major choices due to the external barriers and opportunities. For instance, even though P4 had an aspiration to study communication science, she chose to prioritize the opportunity to get a scholarship from Polman Technical Institution. Hence, since studying in Polman was contradictory to her career aspiration to become a public speaker, she planned to find a way that might accommodate her interest in public speaking. She started thinking to become a head of oil palm plantation as the job would require her to communicate and manage the worker. She perceived that the routine would foster her communication skills. She explained this plan during the interview:

"Indeed it looks different, but in Polman, at one particular semester, the major will be narrowed to a particular profession. I will find a profession related to my passion which is communication science. And I know that a head of oil palm plantation will lead the morning meeting, so it will still accommodate my interest and strength."

Compromising attitude was also shown by how P3 gave a suggestion to choose a suitable major. According to her, it is better

not to apply to a renowned university due to the competition among the prospective students. She suggested to choose a major with less applicants, especially if the career prospect is good. She said:

"I search for a good major with less applicants, usually there are more chances to get accepted. We know in many universities, the most popular major is medicine, then don't apply for it. Rather, you can choose another major with Accreditation A, with a good career prospect, and the passing possibility is higher because of less applicants. Here, the most important thing is to get enrolled."

The same case applied for P1. He had enrolled for law in three universities, however, there is an alternative plan since he got an invitation from another university for management study. He said:

"If can't be a lawyer or I fail in law, I will take management... I will build a business, recruit employees, work hard, so I'm not under the control of anyone, just like a lawyer, nobody controls him. He is free to accept or refuse clients, also to decide the salary, it's up to us... how to manage our business."

Discussion

This study sought to explore the academic major decision making strategies among high school students. Based on the interview conducted to five Indonesian students, it was found that all students had been involved in independent exploration and decision making of their own academic majors.

Regarding the information gathering, this study revealed that students had varying degree of selectivity. Some students were selective in the type of information they gathered, but others did not have specific information in mind. As a consequence of the latter, students had to deal with lack of knowledge about particular majors, especially about their unique core aspects. This might be a consequence of the selective attention given by the students during

the exploration. Some of them tended to seek information and guidance primarily from sources they already knew and trusted, such as family, teachers, and friends. The information might be limited to what is common and accessible in their surroundings. It caused the participants to narrow the alternatives and make them less likely to pursue the more suitable major that might be available (Gottfredson, 2005).

In deciding the main and alternative majors, there were several approaches performed by participants by considering career related aspects, which according to Gati and Asher (2001) are all related variables that can characterize both individuals and alternatives. In general, all students have chosen some majors by considering a good work prospect of the major apart from their abilities and interests. This is related to a study of Wiswall and Zafar (2014) which stated that earnings are a significant determinant of major choice, and tastes are the dominant factor in the choice of the field of study. However, some students have compromised their aspirations and planned to adjust their choices due to some barriers and opportunities. At the end when it comes to selecting the most possible choices, those students admitted that they favor the possibility to be accepted in a good major which has a clear career opportunity (even though they did not like it) than pursuing their initial interests. A report from Gushue et al. (2006) revealed that for some students from particular groups, economic necessity or denial of opportunity may play a greater role than self-efficacy or vocational identity in determining an initial occupational choice. Students used a unique evaluation to reach a decision of a major choice. As what stated by Gati and Saka (2001), no decision theory-based model can be adopted since a career decision has its own unique features, which is different from other types of decision making.

Lack of knowledge about proper information-seeking made

the participants involved in random exploration activities rather than purposely use the best medium to collect the information. For instance, there were participants who used online psychology test to understand her self strengths and interests, had discussion with his friends to research particular majors, and used mainly online resources (e.g. website) to find out his major alternatives and aspired careers (Taveira et al., 1998). Furthermore, a crystalization of vocational development of the participants was found to be accelerated by learning experiences at school and organization so they were able to describe their interests, strengths, and values in relation to their major choices (Brown & Bimrose, 2012).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

There are some important notes highlighted by the author regarding students' consideration in selecting majors. There was a misconception by a student regarding the real-life application of natural science subjects. For example, a participant showed a strong aversion to majors in natural science group was based on her thought that the subjects are less applicable compared to social subjects. This story was addressed by Kinsler and Pavan (2015) in their study where they argued that individuals may not pursue a science degree partially due to the lack of knowledge about the true returns.

There was a perception that secondary major option is not as important as the first one. In this study, a participant chose a major which she did not like only to fulfill the requirement of the national entrance examination. In fact, there is always a possibility that the student may get accepted for the second or third choice that she did not prepare for in which it may cause disappointment in the future.

There was a belief among students, which came from their

surroundings, that choosing to specialize in natural science during high school is better than other specializations since it allows them to apply to all majors in university. However, some majors offered in SNMPTN are actually not offered to students specializing in natural science during high school. Besides, for SBMPTN, even though the committee allows students from different specializations to join a test, the test preparation will be challenging since the students need to study some subjects which are not under their initial specialization. For this matter, it is important to identify students' interests earlier before choosing a specialization to prevent any problem regarding the test preparation for enrolling in university.

Suggestion

Overall, this study presented academic decision making strategies of Indonesian high school students. All participants mostly involved in self-directed exploration using available resources. When it comes to selecting alternative majors, they did the decision making process independently by considering opinions from their surroundings without any structured guidance from schools. This experience of students likely explains the challenges that they might find during the academic or career planning.

As what the author found in this study, the students tended to experience confusion, lack of information, and misconception about the major alternatives. Hence, the author considers the findings for promoting an awareness to provide support and sufficient guidance to high school students who are transitioning to university. In addition, schools can consider the findings as evaluation for specialization system at schools including guidance and counseling services. They can adjust and improve the career guidance to bridge the students' needs for current counseling programs.

A finding that showed students choosing majors unrelated to

their specializations in high school indicated the immature process of academic planning. In fact, a specialization in high school was aimed to prepare students to pursue a major in university according to their interests and abilities. To prevent this problem, schools need to implement and monitor career planning as early as the first year of high school, starting from career exploration with a structured program up to the evaluation of students' major choices.

School can give the students resources and step-by-step information about systematic exploration and education decision making. To give a proper guidance to the students, teachers and counselors should be trained on knowledge about higher education and the labor force. Teacher and counselors should provide rich amount of information about major alternatives and how they may be correspond with students' interests and abilities. This may prevent the students from choosing unrelated majors.

Not only that, schools and teachers need to clarify the concept of specialization in high school, explaining what are the purposes of specialization program and its outcomes. Schools should also conduct a proper assessment of students' inclination towards particular specializations, as well as guide them to narrow their interests to corresponding fields when it comes to major decision making. The study was limited to five high school students from one district in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Further research can expand the scope of the subject in several districts of Sulawesi or wider.

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