

Navigating Mismatched Paths: Lived Experiences of Graduate Students in Career Track Transitions from Junior High to Senior High School

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of senior high school graduates who encountered mismatches between their chosen and preferred academic tracks under the K to 12 curriculum in the Philippines. Using a qualitative, phenomenological design within an interpretivist paradigm, the research examined how students made decisions regarding track selection, the factors influencing these choices, and the consequences on their educational and career trajectories. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten participants, supported by field notes and reflective journaling to ensure authentic and nuanced interpretation. Findings revealed that mismatches stemmed primarily from systemic barriers such as limited school offerings, financial constraints, and geographic inaccessibility, compounded by inadequate career guidance at the junior high school level. Social and familial pressures further influenced decisions, often overriding students' personal interests and aspirations. Lacking

structured support, many students relied on informal advice or self-research, leading to uncertainty and reduced autonomy in decision-making. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability, underscoring the need for early, individualized, and comprehensive career counseling.

To address these gaps, the study proposes "CAREER READY: A Structured Career Guidance and Track Alignment Program for Junior High School Students." This program integrates interest and aptitude assessments, seminars, parental engagement, and immersion activities to guide students toward well-informed and goal-aligned track choices. The study concludes that strengthening career orientation programs and expanding access to diverse strands are critical for reducing mismatches, enhancing student self-efficacy, and ensuring alignment between educational pathways and future aspirations.

Keywords: *career track mismatch, K to 12 transition, career guidance program, academic decision-making, senior high school tracks*

INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, education systems have increasingly emphasized aligning secondary education with students' future career paths. Franco (2022) notes that countries such as Germany, Australia, and Singapore have adopted structured, career-oriented education models to guide learners through academic and technical pathways tailored to their interests and aptitudes. These systems aim to bridge the gap between schooling and employment, reduce youth unemployment, and ensure students develop skills relevant to the demands of the modern workforce. In the Philippines, similar reforms have been introduced through the K to 12 curriculum, which ushered in Senior High School (SHS) career tracks designed to shape students' educational and professional trajectories.

Under the K to 12 program, students transitioning from Junior High School (JHS) must choose among four SHS tracks: Academic, Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL), Sports, or Arts and Design. While this structure is intended to empower students with informed decision-making and relevant skill development, Klimova et al. (2023) observe that the process of selecting a track is often complex and misaligned with learners' actual interests and long-term aspirations. Students frequently face uncertainty, pressure, and inadequate guidance during this critical decision-making stage.

Nazareno et al. (2021) report that many students select tracks based on external factors such as parental expectations, peer influence, or the limited availability of tracks in their schools rather than on self-awareness or career exploration. These influences often result in mismatches between students' chosen tracks and their true competencies or aspirations, leading to dissatisfaction, disengagement from school activities, and even post-graduation shifts in career direction. Chang et al. (2022) further highlight that such mismatches are not only academic concerns but long-term issues that can reduce motivation, limit career prospects, and contribute to underemployment or retraining later in life.

A key contributor to these mismatches is the lack of effective career guidance at the JHS level. Panthee et al. (2023) emphasize that career counseling programs in many schools are either underdeveloped or inconsistently implemented, leaving students ill-prepared to make one of the most important academic decisions of their lives. Anecdotal reports from public school teachers and administrators confirm that some students select tracks simply because they are the only ones available in their schools, while others follow friends or parents' preferences without fully understanding the long-term consequences. Such experiences affect not only academic performance but also students' self-efficacy and ability to envision clear career paths.

In response to these challenges, this study explores the lived experiences of high school graduates who encountered career track mismatches during their transition from JHS to SHS. Using a qualitative research design, the study examines how students perceived their initial track choices, the factors influencing those decisions, and how these experiences shaped their educational and career trajectories. By documenting and analyzing student narratives, the research aims to identify gaps in the existing guidance system and recommend strategies to ensure that career planning processes are more student-centered, equitable, and aligned with learners' aspirations and full potential.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological design under an interpretivist paradigm to examine the lived experiences of students who encountered Senior High School (SHS) track mismatches under the K to 12 curriculum. This approach was selected because it prioritizes meaning-making over numerical data, allowing deeper insight into how students interpret and respond to their educational

situations. By exploring personal narratives, the study aimed to understand both the academic and developmental consequences of track misalignment.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol piloted for clarity and relevance. Interviews were conducted in settings chosen by participants to ensure comfort and openness, and all sessions were recorded with consent. The researcher also maintained field notes and a reflective journal to capture contextual details, reduce bias, and preserve authenticity throughout the data generation process.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Ten college students who had experienced a track mismatch during their transition from Junior High School (JHS) to SHS were recruited based on willingness, first-hand experience, and ability to articulate their reflections. Diversity in demographic and educational backgrounds was considered to provide broad perspectives, while strict inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured participants' relevance to the study's objectives.

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase method was applied to interpret the data. Through systematic coding, recurring patterns were identified and refined into meaningful themes supported by direct participant quotations. Findings were then compared with existing literature, confirming earlier studies that link mismatches to limited school track offerings, peer and parental influence, and insufficient career guidance. This research further contributed by highlighting student resilience and adaptability, enriching the understanding of track mismatches beyond academic outcomes to include personal identity and career development.

The study was framed by Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, which together explained how students cope with misaligned academic tracks and adjust their career trajectories over time. Schlossberg's model illuminated coping mechanisms during the immediate transition, while Super's theory emphasized the long-term developmental process of vocational identity formation. Together, these lenses provided a holistic perspective on how students navigate and overcome mismatches in the Philippine K to 12 contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study on the lived experiences of Senior High School (SHS) graduates who encountered a mismatch between their preferred and actual SHS tracks. The discussion highlights how systemic barriers, insufficient career guidance, and external pressures shaped their decision-making, and it connects these findings with relevant literature to provide deeper insights.

The first major finding revealed that the ten participants experienced varied yet interconnected challenges during their transition from Junior High School (JHS) to Senior High School. Many faced mismatches between their desired academic strands and those available in their locality, with school offerings, financial constraints, and geographic limitations serving as significant barriers. Inadequate career orientation programs left students uncertain about their options, causing them to rely primarily on family members or peers for advice rather than structured, informed guidance. Social expectations further influenced decision-making, often forcing students to prioritize convenience or flexibility over personal interests. These findings align with existing studies emphasizing the critical role of early and personalized career counseling to ensure that students make choices aligned with their long-term goals.



The second major finding indicated that structural limitations and external pressures outweighed personal interests in shaping students' track selection. Many participants reported confusion stemming from shallow or insufficient career orientation, which left them to depend on self-research or informal advice. Financial constraints and the unavailability of desired programs within their communities further limited their choices, while cultural expectations steered them toward "practical" strands rather than those reflecting their passions. This echoes previous research suggesting that when institutional support is weak, students' autonomy in career decision-making is greatly reduced, reinforcing the need for comprehensive guidance systems that empower learners to pursue paths consistent with their skills and aspirations.

The third major finding highlighted that mismatch were primarily caused by limited strand offerings, inadequate guidance counseling, and strong social or familial influence. Students were often compelled to choose among the few tracks available in their local schools rather than following their interests. The lack of systematic career orientation programs left them with only surface-level information about SHS options, while informal advice emphasized flexibility rather than a clear alignment with career goals. These factors collectively reduced students' decision-making power and created tension between their personal ambitions and external expectations. This is consistent with literature advocating for the expansion of track availability and improvement of counseling programs to enable informed academic choices.

In response to these findings, the study proposes the development of **"CAREER READY: A Structured Career Guidance and Track Alignment Program for Junior High School Students."** This program integrates aptitude and interest assessments, career awareness seminars, parental engagement, immersion activities, and resource materials to guide students in selecting SHS tracks that best fit their strengths, interests, and long-term objectives. By providing early, individualized, and comprehensive guidance, this initiative aims to reduce future mismatches and facilitate smoother academic transitions.

Overall, the discussion underscores that mismatches in SHS track selection are not simply individual misjudgments but are primarily rooted in systemic factors such as limited institutional support, structural barriers, and cultural pressures. Addressing these gaps through early, structured, and personalized career guidance—supported by schools, teachers, and families—can help students make better-informed decisions and build stronger foundations for their academic and professional futures.

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CAREER READY: A Structured Career Guidance and Track Alignment Program for Junior High School Students**Objectives:**

1. To develop a comprehensive career guidance program that helps Junior High School students make informed Senior High School career track decisions based on their interests, strengths, and long-term goals.
2. To engage parents and guardians in the career decision-making process through seminars and family-oriented career orientation activities.
3. To provide resources and tools (e.g., interest inventories, career maps, virtual orientations) that bridge the gap between preferred and available SHS tracks.
4. To reduce the incidence of mismatches between students' actual and preferred career tracks.
5. To collaborate with DepEd, school administrators, and guidance counselors in piloting and implementing the program in selected public schools.

Introduction:

The transition from Junior High School (JHS) to Senior High School (SHS) represents a critical juncture in the academic lives of Filipino students. Under the K-12 curriculum, learners are required to select a specific SHS track that aligns with their intended career paths. However, many students face difficulty in making informed decisions due to limited guidance, lack of awareness, parental pressure, peer influence, and constraints in school offerings. These issues often result in a mismatch between students' interests and their chosen SHS tracks, affecting their motivation, academic performance, and career trajectories.

Rationale:

Findings from the study "Navigating Mismatched Paths: Lived Experiences of Graduate Students in Career Track Transitions" reveal that students' decisions were often made based on external pressures or limited information. This mismatch has long-term effects, including reduced satisfaction in college, unnecessary shifts in academic programs, and a weakened sense of purpose.

The proposed project, "CAREER READY," seeks to address these gaps by implementing a proactive and student-centered career guidance framework. It will provide early exposure to career options, involve stakeholders such as parents and educators, and offer practical decision-making tools for learners. Through this output, the program aims to reduce career-track mismatches and empower students to take control of their academic and professional futures with confidence and clarity.

Table 1. Matrix of Activities

| Objectives | Activities | Persons Involved | Time Frame | Expected Output | Success Indicators |
|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. To help JHS students make informed | Administer Interest and Aptitude Tests | Guidance Counselor, Class Advisers | Week 1 | Individual student profiles | 100% of Grade 9 students tested |

| SHS track decisions | | | | | |
|---|---|---|----------|---------------------------------------|---|
| | Conduct Career Awareness Seminars | Career Coach, SHS Coordinators, Alumni Speakers | Week 2 | Conducted seminar sessions | At least 90% student participation |
| 2. To involve parents in the decision-making process | Parent Orientation on SHS Tracks | Guidance Counselor, Principal | Week 3 | Parent involvement reports | At least 75% parent attendance |
| 3. To provide decision-making tools and resources | Distribution of SHS Career Track Booklets and Infographics | Guidance Office | Week 4 | Printed/digital materials distributed | 100% of Grade 9 students receive materials |
| | Create Online Career Portal (optional) | ICT Coordinator, Career Team | Week 4-6 | Website or portal launched | At least 200 student users/month |
| 4. To reduce career track mismatches | Track Simulation/Immersion Activities (e.g., demo classes, SHS immersion day) | SHS Teachers, Guidance Counselor | Week 5 | Student's experience chosen tracks | 85% positive student feedback |
| 5. To implement and evaluate the career guidance program | Conduct Feedback Survey & Evaluation | Guidance Office, M&E Team | Week 6 | Post-program evaluation report | 80% satisfaction rate from students and parents |

The matrix outlines a structured sequence of activities designed to assist Junior High School students in making informed and meaningful decisions regarding their Senior High School career tracks. The program is strategically divided into interconnected phases to address key issues identified in the study, primarily the mismatch between students preferred and actual tracks.

The **first phase** begins with the administration of Interest and Aptitude Tests. These tools will help students identify their strengths, interests, and potential career inclinations. The results will serve as the foundation for personalized track recommendations.

Next, **Career Awareness Seminars** will be conducted, bringing in resource speakers such as SHS coordinators, professionals, and successful alumni to share real-world insights. These sessions aim to broaden students' perspectives about various career paths and available SHS tracks.

Recognizing the critical role of family in decision-making, the program includes a **Parent Orientation** to inform and engage parents about SHS tracks, the demands of each strand, and how they



align with students' career goals. This ensures that parental support is aligned with the student's personal interests and abilities.

To reinforce understanding, students will be provided with **Career Booklets, Infographics, and (optionally) access to an Online Career Portal** containing updated information on SHS tracks, college courses, and career pathways. These resources will enable students to explore options independently and at their own pace.

One of the key components of the program is **Track Simulation or Immersion Activities**, which allow students to participate in hands-on, experience-based sessions related to their chosen SHS tracks. This helps validate their interest and clarify expectations before formal enrollment.

Lastly, the program culminates with a **Post-Implementation Evaluation** using feedback surveys for students and parents. This ensures continuous improvement and measures the program's effectiveness in reducing career track mismatches.

By integrating counseling, simulation, and parental involvement, the matrix of activities promotes a holistic approach to career guidance, empowering students to choose their academic path with confidence, clarity, and alignment to their future goals.