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The Relationship between Career Understanding and Career Decision-Making among Ninth-Grade Students in Samarinda

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Abstract

Career understanding is an individual's ability to comprehend and process information related to career development. This study aims to investigate the relationship between career understanding and career decision-making among ninth-grade students of Junior High School 7 Samarinda. The research employed a quantitative associative correlational approach. The study population consisted of 270 students, and the sample was determined to be 159 students. Data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire distributed to the participants. The data analysis was conducted using the Spearman rank correlation test with the assistance of SPSS version 25. The results revealed a significance value of 0.000, which is smaller than a = 0.05. This indicates that the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted. The findings demonstrate that there is a statistically significant relationship between career understanding and career decision-making. Therefore, it can be concluded that students' ability to understand careers plays an important role in shaping their career decisions, highlighting the need for effective career guidance from schools and educators.

Keywords: Career Understanding, Career Decision Making, Students

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, marked by the rapid advancement of information and communication technology, the labor market has become increasingly competitive and complex. To survive and remain competitive, individuals are required to possess adaptability, relevant skills, and emotional stability. Within this context, career decision-making becomes an essential aspect, particularly for Junior High School students who are in the transitional phase from primary to secondary education (Erlisa, 2021).

In practice, however, many students face difficulties in recognizing their personal potential, such as interests, talents, and values. Ideally, the career planning process should guide them in determining their educational pathway while laying the

foundation for their future. Yet, limited access to information and a lack of guidance often lead students astray. The role of teachers, parents, and the surrounding environment is therefore crucial in providing accurate information and appropriate guidance (Pradana & Nurfaiq, 2021).

This condition becomes even more complex for ninth-grade students who are at a critical stage in determining their educational direction, whether to continue to senior high school (SMA) or to choose a vocational track (SMK). Many of them experience confusion due to insufficient career understanding, limited access to information, and social pressures from family or peers (Rezki, 2023; Zanizar, 2022). These challenges indicate that career decision-making remains a significant issue among early adolescents.

Career understanding in this context should not be seen merely as knowledge about various professions but also as encompassing cognitive (career knowledge and educational pathways), affective (interests, values, and attitudes toward careers), and informational (the ability to access and utilize career information) dimensions. In other words, career understanding represents students' capacity to connect their self-potential with realistic career opportunities (Hasanah, 2018; Suhaida & Surtiyoni, 2024).

Theoretical frameworks further support the importance of the relationship between career understanding and career decision-making. Super's theory emphasizes the role of self-concept in lifelong career development. Ginzberg suggests that Junior High School students are in the tentative stage, where interests and abilities begin to shape considerations. The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) of Lent, Brown, & Hackett highlights the role of self-efficacy in fostering the confidence to make decisions. Similarly, Tiedeman & O'Hara describe how adequate career understanding is essential during the anticipation stage before students finalize their career choices.

Previous studies have also shown similar challenges. Research in Central Java revealed that limited access to information left many Junior High School students uncertain about their educational pathways (Rahmawati, 2020). Likewise, Zanizar's (2022) study on students at UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau demonstrated that career understanding had a significant influence on career decision-making. These findings indicate that while career challenges are generally widespread, students in Samarinda face specific issues, particularly the lack of systematic career guidance and limited information.

Based on these considerations, this study focuses on the relationship between career understanding and career decision-making among ninth-grade students in Samarinda. The selection of these variables is grounded in their urgency in determining students' educational and career directions. Career understanding serves as the foundation for students to recognize their self-potential and the demands of the labor market, while career decision-making represents the concrete step in determining their educational path and future development.

This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it expands the study of career development in early adolescence, an area that has often focused more on senior high school or university students. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a reference for schools, guidance and counseling

teachers, and parents in designing more effective and contextual career guidance strategies for Junior High School students in Samarinda. Thus, this research is anticipated to help students plan their futures in a more directed, realistic, and confident manner.

METHOD

Research Location

This study was conducted at Junior High School Negeri 7 Samarinda. The selection of this location was based on a brief interview with the Guidance and Counseling (BK) teacher and several students. The BK teacher stated that some students still faced difficulties in understanding career information and making career choices. This was further confirmed through interviews with seven students who directly expressed their challenges in choosing a career. Based on these findings, Junior High School 7 Samarinda was considered relevant for examining the phenomenon of low career understanding and career decision-making among Junior High School students

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach with a correlational design. The purpose of this design was to identify the relationship between career understanding and career decision-making. Correlational research is not intended to test causal relationships but rather to describe whether a relationship exists and to what extent the strength of the relationship is observed between variables (Ismail, 2018).

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of all ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Samarinda in the academic year 2024/2025, totaling 270 students. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's sampling table, resulting in 159 students. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, with the criteria being ninth-grade students who were in the stage of determining their secondary education pathway and were potentially facing challenges in career decision-making.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire designed to measure students' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions regarding career understanding and career decision-making (Erlisa, 2021). Respondents were asked to choose the response that best suited their condition by placing a check mark (✓) on the available options. The research instruments consisted of two scales:

1. **Career Understanding Scale**, adapted from Gebrina Rezki (2023). The validity of this scale was tested using the Product Moment Correlation, with items considered valid if r-calculated ≥ r-table at a significance level of 0.05. The results showed a validity range of 0.254–0.679, with high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.787).
2. **Career Decision-Making Scale**, adapted from Christian Tobeang (2019). The validity test used the same method, producing correlation values between 0.303–0.744. This scale demonstrated very good reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.813).

Thus, both instruments were considered valid and reliable for use in this study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the non-parametric Spearman Rank correlation technique, as the data were ordinal in nature. This analysis was used to determine the relationship between career understanding and career decision-making among ninth-grade students of Junior High School Negeri 7 Samarinda.

Research Hypotheses

The hypotheses proposed in this study are as follows:

1. **H_a**: There is a statistically significant relationship between career understanding and career decision-making among ninth-grade students at Junior High School 7 Samarinda.
2. **H_0**: There is no statistically significant relationship between career understanding and career decision-making among ninth-grade students at Junior High School 7 Samarinda.

Spearman Rank Correlation Test Results

According to Azwar (2017), correlational research aims to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables. This type of research is not intended to explain causal relationships but rather to understand the extent to which changes in one variable are associated with changes in another variable. The results of the Spearman Rank Correlation Test, calculated using SPSS version 25.0, are presented below.

Table 1. Spearman's Rank Correlation Test

Variabel	Sig	Notes
Career Understanding – Career Decision-Making	0.000	There is a correlation

Based on the results of the Spearman Rank Correlation Test using SPSS version 25, the significance value was obtained at 0.000 at the 0.05 significance level. The testing criteria are as follows:

- If the significance value ≤ α, then H_0 is rejected and H_a is accepted.
- If the significance value > α, then H_0 is accepted and H_a is rejected.

From the calculation results, the significance value of 0.000 is smaller than α (0.05), thus H_0 is rejected and H_a is accepted. This indicates that the relationship is statistically significant, meaning that there is a real relationship between the variables studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Descriptive Statistics

The demographic characteristics of the respondents indicate that the 159 ninth-grade students at Junior High School 7 Samarinda consist of 75 male students (47.2%) and 84 female students (52.8%). The age of the participants ranges strictly between 14 to 15 years old, which developmentally places them in the early adolescence phase. Understanding this demographic distribution is essential, as early adolescence represents a critical transitional period—or the tentative stage in Ginzberg's theory—where interests and abilities must begin to solidify into actionable educational choices (Cahyono & Setiawan, 2024).

Based on the descriptive statistical analysis, the level of Career Understanding among the students is categorized into three levels: High, Moderate, and Low. The results demonstrate that only 26.4% of students (n = 42) possess a High level of career understanding. The majority, encompassing 59.7% of the students (n = 95), fall into the Moderate category, while the remaining 13.9% (n = 22) are classified in the Low category. This distribution indicates that a significant portion of the student population still lacks a comprehensive grasp of their career potential and the educational pathways available to them.

Similarly, the categorization for Career Decision-Making reveals a varied spectrum of readiness among the students. Only 23.9% of the respondents (n = 38) demonstrated a High capacity for making career decisions. The largest segment, at 56.6% (n = 90), was categorized as Moderate, and an alarming 19.5% (n = 31) scored Low in decision-making readiness. These descriptive findings highlight a crucial gap; despite nearing the end of their Junior High School education, a vast majority of students have not yet firmly decided whether to pursue general senior high school (SMA) or vocational high school (SMK) (Dewi & Susanto, 2021). To present a clearer overview of the data distribution, the descriptive statistics for both variables are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Career Understanding and Career Decision-Making

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Career Understanding	High	42	26.4%	68.45	8.12
	Moderate	95	59.7%		
	Low	22	13.9%		
Career Decision-Making	High	38	23.9%	65.30	9.05
	Moderate	90	56.6%		
	Low	31	19.5%		

Hypothesis Testing (Correlation Analysis)

To rigorously test the hypothesis regarding the relationship between career understanding and career decision-making, a Spearman Rank correlation analysis was conducted utilizing SPSS version 25. As presented in Table 2, the analysis yielded a correlation coefficient (*rho*) of 0.624 with a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Spearman's Rank Correlation Test Results

Variables	N	Spearman's *rho*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Career Understanding & Career Decision-Making	159	0.624**	0.000	H_a Accepted

*Note: *. *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

The significance value of 0.000 dictates the outright rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0) and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis (H_a). Furthermore, the correlation coefficient of 0.624 indicates a strong and positive relationship between the two variables. This statistically proves that as students' career understanding increases, their ability to make definitive and confident career decisions significantly improves.

Discussion

The primary finding of this study confirms a statistically significant, strong positive relationship (r = 0.624) between career understanding and career decision-making among ninth-grade students in Samarinda. This correlation underscores that students who possess a comprehensive grasp of their interests, abilities, and available educational pathways are much better equipped to make confident choices regarding their future. This empirical finding perfectly aligns with the fundamental premise of the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which postulates that self-efficacy and career expectations rely heavily on adequate career exploration and cognitive understanding (Lent & Brown, 2023).

In the national context, these results consistently echo previous studies conducted across various regions in Indonesia. For instance, research involving Junior High School students in Riau similarly found that career understanding directly dictates the trajectory of students' decision-making processes (Zanizar, 2022). Furthermore, other local studies emphasize that the lack of access to structured career information often leads to educational path uncertainty, a phenomenon that remains prevalent among Indonesian adolescents transitioning to higher secondary education (Rahmawati, 2021).

From a broader, international perspective, the challenges of career decision-making during early adolescence represent a well-documented global phenomenon. International studies have shown that career decision-making profiles, including the specific difficulties faced by students, are deeply connected to their baseline understanding of the modern labor market and personal psychological profiling (Gati & Levin, 2022). The quantitative data gathered from Samarinda mirrors this global trend, proving that cognitive readiness is a universal prerequisite for achieving vocational maturity.

When analyzing the cognitive dimension of career understanding, it becomes evident that explicit knowledge about specific educational tracks plays a pivotal role. For Indonesian ninth-graders, understanding the fundamental, practical differences between SMA (General High School) and SMK (Vocational High School) is mandatory. Students who lack this cognitive clarity often experience profound confusion, as they cannot map their current academic standing to the prerequisites of their desired future professions (Hasanah, 2021). The moderate-to-low scores dominating the descriptive statistics strongly reflect these cognitive mapping difficulties.

Beyond sheer cognition, the affective dimension—which comprises a student's personal values, attitudes, and intrinsic interests—acts as the internal compass for decision-making. Making a career choice is not merely a logical deduction but an emotional commitment to a specific future identity. The strong positive correlation suggests that students who successfully integrate their personal values with their

career knowledge exhibit far higher readiness and considerably less anxiety when finalizing their secondary school choices (Suhaida & Surtiyoni, 2024).

The informational dimension also emerged as a critical factor, particularly in today's digital era. While information about careers is abundant on the internet, Junior High School students often lack the analytical maturity to filter and utilize this information effectively. Limited access to verified, structured career information within the school ecosystem exacerbates this confusion, often leading students to make choices based on fleeting social media trends rather than factual self-assessment (Indriani, 2022).

These quantitative findings are powerfully validated by the preliminary qualitative data gathered during the initial phase of this research. Interviews conducted with the Guidance and Counseling (BK) teacher and seven students at Junior High School 7 Samarinda revealed systemic difficulties in navigating career pathways. The students explicitly expressed debilitating confusion about choosing majors, which perfectly explains why over 75% of the sampled population fell into the moderate-to-low decision-making categories.

Furthermore, external environmental factors heavily influence this dynamic and can often override a student's individual understanding. In many instances, even when a student possesses adequate career understanding, social pressures from parents or peers can severely hinder independent decision-making. The influence of the social environment often subverts personal interests, especially in collectivist cultures where parental expectations heavily dictate educational and professional pathways (Hidayati & Prasetyo, 2023).

This dynamic highlights the urgent and indispensable role of school counseling services. Guidance counselors (guru BK) are positioned at the critical frontline to bridge the gap between student potential and realistic career choices. However, traditional methods of simply distributing career pamphlets are no longer sufficient; counselors must employ comprehensive, interactive, and personalized strategies to actively enhance students' vocational maturity (Lestari & Widodo, 2022).

The psychological and developmental implications of poor career understanding are severe and long-lasting. Students who are forced into educational pathways without adequate foundational understanding often experience higher levels of academic anxiety, decreased motivation, and are highly prone to dropping out or changing majors later in life. The strong correlation found in this study serves as an empirical warning that neglecting systematic career education at the junior high level can lead to detrimental effects on long-term student well-being (Wulandari, 2023).

Therefore, the practical implications of this research demand an immediate paradigm shift in how secondary schools approach career guidance. Schools must design contextual, systematic, and data-driven career counseling models specifically tailored for ninth-grade students facing imminent transitional choices. By transforming career understanding from a passive informational transfer into an active, exploratory learning process, educational institutions can empower students to navigate their future with certainty, resilience, and clear purpose (Sari & Kurniawan, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between career understanding and career decision-making among 9th grade students at Junior High School 7 Samarinda. The Spearman Rank Correlation Test showed a significance value of $0.000 < \alpha = 0.05$, indicating that the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted. This means that the better the students' career understanding, the more accurate they are in making career decisions.

These findings are consistent with previous research (Zanizar, 2022), which confirmed that career understanding has a significant influence on career decision-making. They are also supported by the theories of Super, Lent-Brown-Hackett, and Ginzberg, all of which emphasize the importance of self-understanding and career information in the decision-making process. Thus, this study affirms that career understanding is a fundamental aspect that should be instilled early in Junior High School students to enable them to determine their educational and career pathways in a more focused and well-directed manner.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations can be made:

1. For Students

   It is expected that students will become more aware of the importance of career understanding as a foundation for their future. By learning about and understanding the various types of careers available, students can gain insight, self-confidence, and the strength to make career decisions that align with their interests, talents, and potential.

2. For Schools

   Schools and counseling teachers (BK teachers) are expected to provide meaningful contributions through in-depth career guidance services to enhance students' career understanding from an early stage. Schools should develop an accurate and easily accessible career information system for students. In addition, counseling teachers are encouraged to offer opportunities and support during consultation sessions to help students explore what a career is, as well as to provide intensive assistance in addressing any confusion or doubts students may face when making important decisions about their future.

3. For Future Researchers

   For researchers interested in the topic of careers, the findings of this study may offer insights into the importance of developing career understanding from an early age to support each individual's future. However, this study also has several limitations. During the data collection process, some students reported that the questionnaire contained a large number of items, and several items appeared to be similar or repetitive. This indicates the need for further validity testing and the involvement of expert judgment to ensure that each item is truly relevant, not redundant in meaning, and easily understood by respondents. Therefore, future research is expected to improve the instruments used and to explore other approaches or aspects in understanding career decision-making, so that the findings become more in-depth and produce more accurate results.

Author Contributions

Nur Anisa was responsible for conducting the research, collecting data, and writing the initial draft of the manuscript. Muslimin Nulipata supervised the research process and provided guidance during the manuscript preparation. Indo Sennang contributed to the review and refinement of the manuscript and provided valuable feedback for improvement. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interests

The absence of fees in the submission and publication process is a meaningful support for the author, especially as a novice researcher contributing to a scientific publication for the first time. The choice to publish in Reforma: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran was also based on the relevance of the research topic, which focuses on the field of education. Moreover, this publication serves as part of fulfilling an academic requirement as a final-year student in completing a thesis/final project.

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