Initial Exploration of Career Awareness of Pre-School and Elementary School Children in Elementary School Career Guidance: A Limited Phenomenological Study

Cucu Arumsari[1,*], Eko Yulianto[2], Gina Sugiana Sugara[1]
[1]Bimbingan dan Konseling, Universitas Muhammadiyah Tasikmalaya, Tasikmalaya, Jawa Barat, Indonesia
[2]Matematika, Universitas Siliwangi, Tasikmalaya, Jawa Barat, Indonesia

Article Info	ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: To explore early childhood experiences in PAUD and elementary school (SD) that contribute to children's initial awareness and understanding of careers in the context of school-based career guidance.

Methodology: Qualitative approach, phenomenological design; tools: semi-structured interviews, direct observation, documentation; analysis method: Colaizzi; participants: two purposively selected children aged 4 and 9; software/tools: manual coding without specific software; data sources: children's verbal responses, behavior, and creative work.

Main Findings: Children's career ideals shaped by visual media, direct experience, and close environment; understanding of work remains basic but developing; schools introduce careers through role-play and visual aids; parents support awareness via play tools and discussion. Four main thematic findings emerged highlighting the importance of combined school-family efforts.

Novelty/Originality of this Study: This study uniquely captures early career awareness from children's perspectives using phenomenological analysis. It introduces fresh insights into how early education environments and families collaboratively shape initial career concepts, offering foundational input for developing contextualized, age-appropriate career guidance in elementary education.

Corresponding Author:
Cucu Arumsari,
Bimbingan dan Konseling, Universitas Muhammadiyah Tasikmalaya,
Jl. Tamansari No.KM 2, RW.5, Mulyasari, Kec. Tamansari, Tasikmalaya, Jawa Barat, 46196, Indonesia
Email: cucu.arumsari@umtas.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Career awareness is crucial for elementary school students' development, laying the foundation for future career planning [1], [2]. Research shows that career guidance programs can effectively increase career awareness among elementar students, particularly in education, exploration, and career planning aspects [3]. While gender does not significantly affect career awareness, cultural background and parental occupation do [2]. Various methods have been employed to enhance career awareness, including training programs focusing on self-knowledge, educational and occupational exploration, and career planning [3]. Additionally, innovative tools like career pop-up books have been developed to support career guidance services in elementary schools [4]. These studies emphasize the importance of early career awareness interventions to ensure successful career development in later stages of life [2].

Career awareness is crucial for elementary school children's development, laying the foundation for future career choices. Research shows that career guidance programs can effectively increase career awareness in

elementary students, particularly in aspects of education, exploration, and career planning [1]. Short-term intervention programs have demonstrated moderate effects on fostering career awareness in fifth and sixth-grade students [5]. While gender does not significantly impact career awareness, cultural background and parental occupation do play a role [2]. Career education at the elementary level should focus on introducing children to various occupations in their environment and developing self-understanding, gender awareness, morals, social skills, self-esteem, and self-efficacy [6]. Parents and teachers play crucial roles in identifying children's talents and interests early on, guiding them towards suitable career paths without imposing their own preferences [6].

Recent studies highlight the importance of developing career awareness in elementary school children. Career guidance programs have been shown to effectively increase career awareness among elementary students [7]. These programs can improve aspects of education, exploration, and career planning, although self-understanding may not change significantly [7]. Research indicates that while gender does not affect career awareness, cultural background and parental occupation do have significant impacts [8]. Modeling techniques have proven effective in enhancing career awareness [9]. Furthermore, early career planning activities can influence future career choices [10]. Key themes in children's career planning include understanding careers, sources of career information, career choices, and comprehension of employment through parental occupations [10]. These findings underscore the importance of early career guidance in shaping children's future career paths.

Although various studies have highlighted the importance of early career guidance and the effectiveness of programs such as modeling techniques and career planning in increasing career awareness among elementary students, most research still focuses on program effectiveness from the perspectives of teachers, parents, or through quantitative outcomes. Few studies have explored in depth the subjective experiences of children themselves, particularly at an early age (preschool and early elementary school), in understanding the concept of careers and professions. In addition, there is a lack of research that comprehensively integrates the role of children's immediate environments (family and school) in shaping their career awareness.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, aiming to explore and understand the subjective experiences of children regarding career awareness in the context of school-based career guidance programs [11]. The participants in this study consisted of two children, one from Early Childhood Education (PAUD) and one from Elementary School (SD). A purposive sampling technique was used to deliberately select participants based on the following criteria:

1. Aged 4 (PAUD) and 9 (SD),
2. Had participated in career guidance activities at their respective schools,
3. Received parental or guardian consent to participate in the study.

This purposive selection was intended to provide an in-depth initial insight into how young children experience and understand the concept of careers.

Data were collected using three main methods: Semi-structured interviews: Conducted individually, using age-appropriate and simple language. Observation: Conducted while children shared or described their dreams to support interview data. Documentation: Included drawings, writings, or materials from career guidance activities at school.

Table 1. Data Collection Instrument Grid

Data Source	Instrument/Tool	Focus of Collected Data
Interviews	Semi-structured interview guide	Experiences, perceptions, and understanding of careers
Observation	Field notes	Non-verbal expressions and behavior when discussing careers
Documentation	Children's creative works	Representations of aspirations and career awareness

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher (human instrument), who served as the data collector, processor, and analyst [11]. In addition, a semi-structured interview guide was developed containing open-ended questions covering: a) Experiences in participating in school career guidance activities; b) Children's perceptions of professions or future aspirations; c) Descriptions of the jobs they want to pursue in the future.

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method [12], which involves the following steps: a) Reading all interview transcripts for a comprehensive understanding; b) Extracting significant statements related to children's experiences of careers; c) Formulating meanings from these statements; d) Organizing formulated meanings into thematic clusters; e) Developing an essential structure of participants' experiences; f) Conducting member checking with participants or their parents to ensure data accuracy.

To ensure data validity: Triangulation was conducted through interviews, observations, and documentation, Member checking was carried out with participants or their guardians to verify data accuracy

[11]. With a small and purposive sample size (n = 2), this study does not aim for generalization but rather for depth and richness of understanding. Its strength lies in the exploratory and descriptive depth, offering valuable early insights into how young children internalize career concepts—an area rarely examined in mainstream research. As this study uses a qualitative approach, no statistical analysis was performed. Data were analyzed thematically using a descriptive phenomenological approach, rather than numeric inference.

3. RESULTS AND DICUSSION

Based on the results of interviews conducted with two children, each from the PAUD level (4 years old) and SD (9 years old), several themes were obtained that describe children's career awareness in the context of career guidance at school. The data analysis process produced four main themes, namely: (1) Children's Ambition, (2) Children's Understanding of Work, (3) The Role of Schools in Introducing Professions, and (4) The Role of Parents in Shaping Children's Career Awareness.

Theme 1: Children's Ambition

Sub-theme: Influence of Visual Media Both participants indicated that the main source of aspirations came from the visual media they saw, either on television, YouTube, or through pictures in books or the school environment. The child from the PAUD level said he wanted to be a doctor because he often saw shows on television and YouTube about doctors helping sick people on the street and transporting patients using ambulances. The scene left a mark on his memory and encouraged him to play the role of a doctor when playing with friends. The child from the SD level aspires to be a chef. The reason is because they often watch cooking competition shows on television and like the character "Chef Rudi" as their idol chef. This child said that the profession of a chef is fun because they can make lots of delicious food, and they also like to see various types of food made on the show.

Sub-theme: Direct Experience and Role Playing Direct experiences experienced by children also influence their aspirations. PAUD children have gone to the doctor when they are sick and experienced the examination process directly. This experience makes them more familiar with the profession and raises an interest in becoming a doctor when they are adults. At home and at school, this child often plays the role of a doctor with his friends. Meanwhile, elementary school children get encouragement for their interest in cooking from daily activities at home. They are used to helping their mother in the kitchen, starting from cooking eggs, making instant pudding, to making simple chili sauce. This experience strengthens their interest in aspiring to become a chef.

Sub-theme: Support from the Closest Environment In addition to direct experience, encouragement from the closest environment such as family also has an influence. PAUD children get doctor props from their mothers to play role playing, while elementary school children get the opportunity and trust from their mothers to cook various types of food at home.

Theme 2: Children's Understanding of Work

Sub-theme: Simple and Visible Understanding Both participants have an understanding of work that is still simple and visible. The PAUD child describes the doctor's job as "injecting and checking stomachs", while the elementary school child explains the chef's job as "making delicious food, later I get a prize of money that I can give to my mother and some for myself to buy a house". This statement shows that children's understanding of work is still limited to activities that they can see directly or imagine based on visual experiences and role-playing.

Sub-theme: Starting to Understand the Value of the Benefits of Work Although simple, elementary school children seem to begin to understand that work has value for themselves and others. For example, the elementary school child realizes that if he becomes a chef, he can get money from his work to give to his mother and for himself. This shows the early development of understanding about the concept of rewards, responsibilities, and the benefits of work in life.

Theme 3: The Role of Schools in Introducing Professions

Sub-theme: Role-Playing Activities, the PAUD child said that he had participated in role-playing activities as a doctor, police officer, and firefighter. According to him, this activity is fun because he can use toy doctor tools such as stethoscopes and toy syringes. This child understands the doctor's job more easily from this activity than just looking at pictures.

Sub-theme: Provision of Visual Media and Stories of Professions Elementary school children said that in their class there are pictures of various professions stuck on the classroom walls. In addition, teachers often tell stories about various jobs during lessons. This child also said that he had participated in an activity watching a video about the cooking process in a restaurant, which made him even more interested in the profession of a chef.

Sub-theme: Introduction to Professions Through School Programs Career guidance activities in schools, although simple, play an important role in introducing various professions to children.

Theme 4: The Role of Parents in Shaping Children's Career Awareness

Sub-theme: Provision of Facilities for Playing Professions Early childhood education children revealed that their mothers often buy toy doctor props and play roles with them. This activity not only strengthens the relationship between children and parents, but also becomes an effective career education media in a relaxed atmosphere at home.

Sub-theme: Involving Children in Household Activities Elementary school children stated that their mothers often asked them to help cook simple foods, such as making fried eggs, pudding, or chili sauce. From this activity, children began to like cooking activities and aspired to become chefs. Sub-theme: Providing Information and Positive Examples Parents also play a role in providing information about professions through stories or watching together. Preschool children are often invited by their mothers to watch shows about doctors, while elementary school children watch cooking shows with their mothers. This activity is a means for children to learn about professions indirectly outside of school.

Career guidance in elementary schools is increasingly recognized as crucial for students' future development. It aims to provide early career awareness, help students understand various professions, and prepare them for future educational and career choices [13], [14]. Career guidance programs have been shown to effectively increase career awareness among elementary school children, particularly in aspects of education, exploration, and career planning [1]. These programs employ various methods, including career guidance packages, instructional approaches, unit teaching, career days, and field trips [14]. The importance of career guidance is underscored by the need to address students' confusion about different professions and their impact on career aspirations [15]. By integrating career guidance into the curriculum, schools can help students recognize work types, set future goals, explore career directions, and align their skills and interests with potential careers [14]. Career days, in particular, need careful planning months in advance to be effective, moving beyond simplistic demonstrations to provide children with realistic views of workers and an appreciation for word [16]. These early interventions are crucial as children begin formulating career decisions at a young age [16].

Based on interviews conducted with two children, one from the Early Childhood Education (PAUD) level (4 years old) and one from the Elementary School (SD) level (9 years old), several key themes emerged that describe children's career awareness in the context of career guidance at school. First, children's ambitions are influenced by visual media, such as television shows and YouTube, as well as direct experiences they have had. The PAUD child expressed a desire to become a doctor after watching shows about doctors helping sick people, while the SD child aspired to become a chef after being inspired by cooking competition shows. Additionally, experiences such as role-playing at home or school, such as pretending to be a doctor or helping their mother in the kitchen, further reinforced their aspirations. Second, children's understanding of work remains simple and is limited to activities they can directly see or experience. For instance, the PAUD child described the doctor's job as "injecting and checking stomachs", while the SD child described the chef's job as "making delicious food and earning money". However, the SD child began to understand that work has value, such as earning money that can be used to help their family.

Research by Hartung et al. [17] also mentioned that role-playing activities contribute significantly to the development of children's self-concept and career aspirations, which can ultimately shape interests and tendencies in future career choices. Therefore, play activities involving professional simulations are a strategic means of introducing various professional choices to children. Research by Dietrich & Kracke [18] shows that parental support in the form of providing career information, encouraging exploration, and involvement in children's career activities significantly influences the development of children's career interests and choices. Intensive family interaction through informal activities is an important supporting factor in the development of children's career awareness.

Schools have an important role in introducing professions through basic career guidance programs. Through role-playing activities at school, profession video screenings, and teacher stories, children can learn about various types of jobs. Early career guidance programs help children gradually learn about career choices and form a vocational self-concept [19]. Career development in childhood and adolescence is a critical process involving identity formation, exploration, and decision-making that can significantly impact future academic and career paths [20], [21].

School-based career education programs have been shown to enhance children's vocational development and academic motivation. These programs can effectively prepare youth for the transition from school to work and life [22]. Research has demonstrated that high school career education classes can increase career decision-making self-efficacy, vocational skills self-efficacy, and short-term outcome expectations [23]. Furthermore, adolescent work experiences contribute to vocational development and educational pursuits, with school-based strategies promoting initiative, engagement, and career maturity [24]. Collaborative efforts between counseling psychologists, school counselors, and other professionals can enhance the effectiveness of

these programs [22]. Overall, school-based career education plays a crucial role in shaping students' career aspirations, academic success, and future vocational pathways.

Research indicates that children's understanding of occupations evolves with age, progressing from simple task-based perceptions to more complex social and economic concepts. Young children initially view jobs as undifferentiated and personalized, focusing on external aspects [25]. As they develop, children begin to grasp functional differentiation and social hierarchies related to occupations [25], [26]. This understanding becomes more sophisticated over time, incorporating concepts of consumption, saving, and social value associated with different jobs [26], [27]. Gender differences also emerge, with boys showing preferences for occupations involving complex "Things" functions and girls favoring jobs with complex "People" functions [27].

The role of schools is also significant in introducing various professions through role-playing activities, visual media, and profession stories shared by teachers. Additionally, parents play a major role in shaping children's career awareness by providing profession-related play materials at home and involving children in household activities, such as cooking. These factors highlight the importance of synergy between schools and families in fostering career awareness in children from an early age. Arumsari [28] research shows that gratitude is an important spiritual dimension in career satisfaction, which is often overlooked in traditional models. In career guidance for children, incorporating spiritual values such as gratitude can provide a more holistic understanding of their career development in the future.

Research indicates that children's career aspirations are shaped by various factors. Family socioeconomic status and parental self-efficacy indirectly influence children's career trajectories through their impact on perceived efficacy and academic aspirations [29]. Structural forces like social class, gender, and ethnicity, along with different spheres of influence such as family, school, hobbies, and media, play significant roles in shaping aspirations [30]. Interests are crucial in both selecting and rejecting careers throughout childhood [31]. Younger children tend to identify strongly with their parents' work [31]. Gender differences are evident in career aspirations, with perceived occupational self-efficacy predicting the traditionality of career choices [29]. Career development is a lifelong process, and career education programs can influence children's occupational aspirations, even in primary school [32]. These findings highlight the complex interplay of factors affecting children's career dreams and aspirations.

Piaget's theory of cognitive development describes distinct stages through which children progress in their ability to think logically [33]. The preoperational stage, spanning ages 2-7, is characterized by egocentrism, transductive reasoning, and an inability to conserve [33]. Children at this stage reason based on appearances and immediate experiences rather than logic or abstract principles [34], [35]. They tend to focus on small, superficial aspects of tasks while losing sight of the bigger picture [35]. This can manifest in difficulties with problem-solving, even in simple programming tasks [35]. The transition to concrete operational thinking, occurring around age 7, enables decentration, logical reasoning about abstract quantities, and the ability to adapt skills to related tasks [35].

Research suggests that children's occupational aspirations begin to form in early childhood, with both realistic and fantasy elements present. At age 4-5, most children express aspirations for real occupations, though these are often sex-typed [36]. The development of career aspirations is theorized to progress through fantasy, tentative, and realistic stages [37]. Fantasy role-playing games provide insight into how individuals negotiate boundaries between their real selves and imagined personas [38]. Overall, early childhood occupational aspirations involve a mix of fantasy and reality, gradually becoming more realistic with age, though unrealistic elements may persist even in older children. For future research, it is recommended to further develop children's career understanding through career construction counseling, [39] suggests that counselors can explore individuals' career choices by interpreting their life stories.

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore children's career awareness in the context of career guidance at school, focusing on children from the PAUD and SD levels. The results show that children's career ambitions are influenced by visual media, direct experiences, and role-playing activities. Children's understanding of work is still simple, limited to what they can directly see or experience, but they begin to understand the value and benefits of work as they grow older. Additionally, the role of schools and parents is crucial in shaping children's career awareness. Schools introduce various professions through role-playing activities, visual media, and career guidance programs, while parents play a role by providing career-related play materials and involving children in daily household activities.

The implications of this study emphasize the importance of both family and school roles in supporting the development of children's career awareness from an early age. This study also provides new insights into how children at the PAUD and early SD levels understand and form their career ambitions, an area that has been

underexplored in previous research. Therefore, it is important for schools to involve parents in career guidance activities to create a supportive environment for the holistic development of children's career awareness.

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