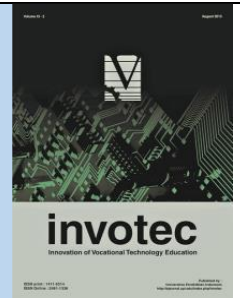




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CAREER ORIENTATION OF VOCATIONAL STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

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ABSTRACT

Vocational (SMK) students must decide their career orientation earlier than their peers in general schooling, yet socioeconomic conditions may constrain the resources, guidance, and role models that inform such decisions. Grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory and Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise, this study tested whether socioeconomic status (SES) predicts career orientation among 124 students at a vocational school, and further explored parental background as a possible role-model mechanism underlying this relationship. Using an explanatory quantitative design, data were collected with a validated five point Likert questionnaire (9 SES items, $\alpha = .89$; 16 career orientation items, $\alpha = .94$) and analysed using descriptive statistics, simple linear regression, one way ANOVA, and correlation analysis. SES significantly and positively predicted career orientation ($\beta = .526$; $B = 0.862$; $t = 6.83$; $p < .001$), explaining 27.7% of its variance ($R^2 = .277$; $f^2 = .38$, a large effect). Career orientation increased monotonically across SES terciles (53.9, 60.0, 68.0; $F(2,121) = 20.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .257$). Students' career plans also mirrored their parent's occupations: 80% of those whose parents were professionals or civil servants planned to enter university, compared with roughly 20% of children of manual labourers, most of whom intended to work immediately. The findings position career orientation not as a purely individual disposition but as a socially situated process reproduced through family economic context and observable role models. They also highlight the need for inclusive career guidance that compensates for unequal access to such role models.

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1. Introduction

Career orientation, the constellation of educational aspirations, occupational goals, and post school plans through which young people give direction to their working lives, has become a defining concern of vocational education because vocational (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan or SMK) students

are required to commit to occupational pathways earlier than their peers in general secondary schools (Super, 1980; Hartung et al., 2005). In Indonesia, this concern is sharpened by a paradox. Although SMK exists precisely to produce work ready graduates, Indonesian Statistics reported that SMK graduates carried the highest open unemployment rate of any education level (8.0% in February 2025 and 7.74% in February 2026), exceeding that of general high school and university graduates (BPS, 2026). Comparative labour market analyses confirm that the vocational advantage in early employment is real but fragile and uneven (Ariansyah et al., 2024), and that SMK is still socially stigmatised as a study track for poorer students who cannot afford general schooling. The gap signals that technical competence alone does not secure a smooth school to work transition and that the formation of career orientation during schooling deserves closer scrutiny.

This study does not treat vocational education as a single occupational cluster. One vocational school in Malang - SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Malang - spans both business/management and technology program, namely Accounting, Office Management, Retail Business, Computer Network Engineering, and Visual Communication Design. Therefore, career orientation is examined as a cross programme construct among students sharing one school context. This allows attention to shift from field specific competence toward socioeconomic status (SES), a contextual factor that cuts across specialisations, together with the parental background through which its influence is thought to operate.

While Indonesian vocational research has examined employability, work readiness, and career adaptability (Mahfud et al., 2020; Ariansyah et al., 2024), comparatively little has treated career orientation as a psychosocial construct shaped by family socioeconomic context. Addressing this gap, the present study tests whether socioeconomic status shapes vocational students' career orientation, and further explores parental background as a possible role-model mechanism through which this relationship operates.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis

2.1 Career Orientation as a Developmental Construct

Career orientation is best understood from a developmental perspective (Vondracek et al., 1986). Super's (1980) life span model and subsequent constructionist accounts treat adolescence as the stage at which vocational self-concepts crystallise into goals and plans (Savickas, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009), while contemporary scholarship reframes orientation as an ongoing self-management process rather than a one-off choice (Hirschi & Koen, 2021; Lent & Brown, 2013) and as the product of a dynamic person environment system (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Empirically, adolescents' career planning and exploration change significantly over the school years (Creed et al., 2007; Rojewski, 2005), and children's reasoning about careers matures with age (Howard & Walsh, 2010). Crucially, Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise specifies the direction of this maturation: young people progressively eliminate occupations perceived as incompatible with their social standing and, when reality intrudes, compromise toward what is accessible. This renders career orientation fundamentally susceptible to a student's perceived socioeconomic boundaries.

2.2 Social Cognitive Career Theory and Contextual Supports

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides the mechanism linking those boundaries to behaviour. SCCT holds that interests, goals, and choices emerge from the interplay of self-efficacy and outcome expectations, themselves shaped by learning experiences and by contextual supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994, 2000; Lent & Brown, 2019; Brown & Lent, 2019). Self-efficacy beliefs are particularly consequential because they translate environmental advantage into agentic action (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Betz & Hackett, 1981) and predict career exploration and identity formation among adolescents (Gushue et al., 2006). Within this framework, SES is not a demographic label

but a bundle of contextual supports consisting of information, encouragement, exposure, and models that raise or depress the efficacy and expectations from which career orientation grows (Fouad, 2007; Duffy et al., 2016; Blustein et al., 2019).

2.3 Socioeconomic Status and Social Reproduction

A parallel sociological tradition explains why those supports are unequally distributed. Bourdieu's (1986) account of economic, cultural, and social capital, together with the broader social reproduction literature, argues that families transmit advantage across generations so that aspirations track origins (Sirin, 2005; Diemer & Ali, 2009; Diemer et al., 2013). Longitudinal evidence is consistent: teenage aspirations predict later attainment and are themselves patterned by SES (Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Beal & Crockett, 2010). Recent work also shows that family SES predicts adolescents' career aspirations partly through perceived parental expectations (Wu et al., 2025), while disadvantage is associated with more fragmented and uncertain career orientation (Khattab et al., 2022). SCCT and social reproduction are therefore complementary: the former describes the psychological pathway, whereas the latter explains the structural gradient along which it operates.

Parents are the most proximate carriers of this influence, and their effect is amplified in collectivist settings. Reviews of family of origin effects document strong parental influences on career development (Whiston & Keller, 2004; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018), and Chinese and Indonesian studies show that parental expectations and career related parenting practices predict adolescents' adaptability and aspirations, chiefly by strengthening self-efficacy (Zhou et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2023). Sawitri and colleagues' programme of research in Indonesia is especially pertinent, demonstrating that perceived adolescent-parent career congruence drives aspirations and career behaviours in a collectivist culture (Sawitri, Creed, & Zimmer Gembeck, 2013, 2014; Sawitri & Creed, 2015, 2017). Consistent with Bandura's (1986) concept of vicarious learning, a parent's occupation functions as a concrete template for the futures a child considers attainable.

2.4 Vocational Education and the School to Work Transition

Finally, the vocational context conditions how these dynamics play out. The quality of the learning environment and students' career competencies shape readiness for transition (Kuijpers et al., 2011; Akkermans et al., 2013), a readiness closely linked to career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Rudolph et al., 2017), and SMK's tighter coupling to the labour market means career orientation has earlier and more consequential implications (Ariansyah et al., 2024; Hirschi, 2018). Yet where socioeconomic supports are scarce, the school may be the only institution able to provide the exposure and role models that more advantaged families often supply informally.

2.5 The Present Study

Drawing on the literature reviewed above, this study proposes one hypothesis (H1): socioeconomic status positively predicts vocational students' career orientation. Beyond testing the linear relationship, the study also examines whether the association is graded across SES levels and whether students' post school plans align with their parents' occupations, thereby exploring the role model mechanism predicted by theory but rarely measured directly in previous Indonesian SMK studies.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The study used a quantitative, explanatory design to test the influence of socioeconomic status on career orientation. Group comparisons across socioeconomic and parental background categories were also conducted to further examine the underlying mechanism.

3.2 Population and Sample

The study was conducted at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Malang during the 2025/2026 academic year. The questionnaire was distributed to students across the school's five vocational programmes, and 124 students participated. The distribution of respondents across grade levels and programmes is presented in the respondent profile (see Table 2).

3.3 Instrument and Measures

Data were collected using a structured five-point Likert questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), together with demographic items (gender, grade, programme, internship status, post-school plan) and parental background items (parents' education, parents' occupation, monthly family income). Socioeconomic status items captured family income and economic assets/ownership (including physical assets, learning facilities, and the surrounding economic environment), drawing on established conceptualisations of SES in psychological and vocational research (Sirin, 2005; Diemer & Ali, 2009; Diemer et al., 2013). Career orientation items captured career goals, outcome expectations, self-efficacy, educational and career aspirations, and post SMK choices, adapted from Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), the Career Aspiration Scale (Gray & O'Brien, 2007), and measures of adolescent career planning (Creed et al., 2007). The full set of research instrument items is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Instrument

Dimension	Item
<i>Socioeconomic Status (9 items ($\alpha = .887$))</i>	
Family income	My family has more than one source of income.
	I do not experience financial obstacles in meeting my schooling needs.
	My parents are able to fund my education to a higher level.
	My parents' employment is relatively stable in the long term.
	My family's economic condition allows us to meet needs beyond basic necessities.
Economic assets/ownership	My family owns a private vehicle for daily needs.
	I have adequate learning facilities (phone/laptop/internet).
	My family's basic needs are well met.
	My neighbourhood has good economic conditions.
<i>Career Orientation (16 items ($\alpha = .942$))</i>	
Career goals	I already have a clear plan regarding the job I want to achieve in the future.
	I know the steps I need to take to achieve my career goals.
	I have a clear picture of the field of work I want to pursue.
Outcome expectations	I am confident that the career choice I make will provide a good future.
	I believe that my educational or career choice will improve my quality of life.

Dimension	Item
Self-efficacy	I consider the long-term benefits when determining my career choice.
	I am confident I can determine the right career choice for myself.
	I am confident in making decisions regarding my career future.
	I am able to overcome difficulties that may arise in achieving my career goals.
Educational/career aspiration	I have the desire to reach a higher job position in the future.
	I want to continue my education to a higher level to support my career.
Post-SMK choice (university)	I have an educational or career target I want to achieve after graduating.
	After graduating from SMK, I consider continuing my education to university.
	I have a strong desire to continue to university after graduating from SMK.
	Continuing to university is my main option after graduating from SMK.
	I prioritise continuing my education over working immediately after graduating from SMK.

Item validity was established through Pearson item total correlations, with all retained items exceeding the 0.30 criterion (SES $r = .53-.82$; career orientation $r = .66-.84$). Internal consistency reliability was high, with Cronbach's alpha of .887 for socioeconomic status (9 items) and .942 for career orientation (16 items) (Hair et al., 2021).

3.4 Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS and included descriptive statistics, assumption checks using the Kolmogorov Smirnov normality test and the Glejser heteroscedasticity test, simple linear regression to test H1, one way ANOVA to compare career orientation across SES terciles and paternal occupation categories, and Spearman correlation to examine the relationships between parental education, family income, and career orientation.

4. Results

4.1 Respondent Profile

Table 2 profiles the 124 respondents. The study sample is dominated by the working class: the most common occupational category among fathers is manual labour, most mothers are housewives, and 40% of families earn no more than two million rupiah per month. This composition matters analytically, because it locates the study among students for whom socioeconomic constraint is lived rather than hypothetical.

Table 2. Respondent Profile (N = 124)

Characteristic	n	Characteristic	n
Gender (Female)	62	Father education (University)	31
Gender (Male)	62	Father education (Senior high)	43

Characteristic	n	Characteristic	n
Grade X	48	Father education (Junior high/lower)	50
Grade XI	60	Mother (Housewife)	77
Grade XII	16	Father (Labourer/informal)	46
Programme (Computer Network Eng).	31	Father (Self-employed/farmer)	39
Programme Marketing	19	Father (Employee)	17
Programme (Accounting)	21	Father (Professional/civil servant)	10
Father (Not working)	12		
Programme (Visual Comm. Design)	21	Income ≤ Rp2 million/month	49
Programme (Retail Business)	17	Income Rp2-5 million/month	55
Programme (Office Management)	14	Income > Rp5 million/month	20
Completed/undergoing internship (PKL)	46	Plan after SMK (Work)	64
Plan after SMK (University)	38	Plan after SMK (Other/mixed)	22

Note. One respondent did not specify a programme. "Other/mixed" plans combine entrepreneurship, work and study, and undecided responses.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Dimension Analysis

Table 3 reports the distribution of both variables and the mean of each underlying dimension on the original five-point likert scale.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Dimension Means

Variable / Dimension	N	Range	Mean	SD
Total scores				
Socioeconomic status (9 items)	124	17-45	33.65	6.92
Career orientation (16 items)	124	31-80	60.40	11.35
SES dimensions (item mean, 1-5)				
Economic assets/ownership			4.04	
Family income			3.50	
Career-orientation dimensions (item mean, 1-5)				
Outcome expectations			3.99	
Educational/career aspiration			3.94	
Career goals			3.85	
Self-efficacy			3.84	
Post-SMK choice (university)			3.39	

Two features stand out. First, career orientation scores spread across nearly the whole possible range, so students in the same school differ sharply in how far they have formed plans; this is a stratified cohort, not a uniformly career ready one. Second, the dimension profile is diagnostic:

students score highest on outcome expectations (3.99) and lowest on university orientation (3.39), and the single lowest item is prioritising further study over immediate work (3.22). This aligns with their stated plans where 52% intend to work directly after SMK and only 31% to enter university and previews the study's central tension: the most academically framed facets of orientation are precisely those that a working-class cohort scores lowest.

4.3 Assumption Testing

The regression assumptions were satisfied (Table 4).

Table 4. Normality and Heteroscedasticity Test Results

Test	Statistic	Sig.	Decision
Kolmogorov-Smirnov (normality)	D = 0.076	0.445	Normally distributed
Glejser (residual on SES)	t = -0.784	0.435	No heteroscedasticity

The Kolmogorov Smirnov test ($p = .445 > .05$) supported normality and the Glejser test ($p = .435 > .05$) supported homoscedasticity, so the regression estimates can be interpreted reliably.

4.4 The Effect of Socioeconomic Status on Career Orientation

Supporting H1, simple linear regression showed that socioeconomic status significantly and positively predicted career orientation ($\beta = .526$; $B = 0.862$, 95% CI [0.61, 1.11]; $t = 6.83$; $p < .001$), giving the equation Career Orientation = $31.40 + 0.862(\text{SES})$. The model explained 27.7% of the variance ($R^2 = .277$; $F(1,122) = 46.63$, $p < .001$), a large effect by Cohen's benchmark ($f^2 = .38$) (Table 5).

Table 5. Simple Linear Regression (Dependent variable: Career Orientation)

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	31.398	4.335	-	7.24	<.001
Socioeconomic status	0.862	0.126	0.526	6.83	<.001

$R = .526$; $R^2 = .277$; $Adjusted\ R^2 = .271$; $F(1,122) = 46.63$, $p < .001$.

To test whether the relationship is graded rather than merely linear on average, students were split into SES terciles and compared by one way ANOVA (Table 6). Career orientation rose monotonically from the low to the high tercile, with a large effect ($\eta^2 = .257$) and significant differences between every pair of groups, indicating a dose response gradient rather than a threshold confined to one extreme.

Table 6. Career Orientation across SES Terciles (one-way ANOVA)

SES tercile	n	Career orientation M	SD
Low	43	53.91	10.88
Medium	42	59.98	8.65
High	39	68.00	9.89

$F(2,121) = 20.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .257$. All pairwise comparisons significant ($p < .01$).

4.5 Parental Background and Occupational Role Models

Family income correlated positively and significantly with career orientation (Spearman $\rho = .24$, $p = .007$), while parental education showed weaker, marginal associations (mother $\rho = .18$, $p = .052$; father $\rho = .15$, $p = .09$). Career orientation rose steadily with paternal occupational standing

from non-working fathers ($M = 54.8$) and manual labourers (58.5), through the self-employed (61.6) and employees (63.4), to professionals and civil servants (66.0), $F = 2.13$, $p = .082$, $\eta^2 = .067$. Notably, the composite SES measure correlated far more strongly with orientation ($p = .54$) than parental education alone, implying that it is experienced economic security the capacity to fund further study and to meet needs beyond necessities rather than parental credentials per se that most shapes orientation.

The clearest signature of role model influence is the alignment between parent's (father) occupations and students' own post school plans (Table 7). Among students with professional or civil service fathers, 80% planned to continue to university; among children of manual labourers the figure fell to roughly one fifth, with about two thirds intending to work immediately a pattern echoed among children of non-working fathers. Students' imagined futures, in short, closely track the occupational worlds they observe at home.

Table 7. Students' Post SMK Plans by Parent's Occupation (row %)

Parent's occupation	Plan: Work	Plan: University	Plan: Other/mixed	n
Professional/civil servant	10%	80%	10%	10
Employee	41%	47%	12%	17
Self-employed/farmer	49%	28%	23%	39
Labourer/informal	63%	22%	15%	46
Not working/none	67%	8%	25%	12

5. Discussion

The results provide a consistent picture. Socioeconomic status is a large effect, graded predictor of career orientation, and the parental data help explain the mechanism behind this pattern. The contrast between the 80% of children of professionals and the 20% of children of labourers who planned to enter university reflects the process of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Sirin, 2005). This finding is consistent with longitudinal evidence showing that SES shapes adolescents' aspirations (Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Ashby & Schoon, 2010) and with recent research indicating that family SES influences aspirations through perceived parental expectations (Wu et al., 2025). Consistent with Bandura's (1986) concept of vicarious learning and Sawitri and colleagues' Indonesian studies on adolescent parent career congruence (Sawitri et al., 2014; Sawitri & Creed, 2017), parents appear to serve as observable role models. A stable and identifiable occupation provides a concrete example of attainable career pathways, whereas its absence may limit the range of futures that students consider possible.

Gottfredson's (1981) theory helps explain why this pattern is particularly evident among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. During middle to late adolescence, students gradually narrow their aspirations to options they perceive as compatible with their circumstances and adjust their goals toward those they consider realistic and attainable. In this predominantly working-class sample, direct employment represented the most visible and attainable pathway. This helps explain why academically oriented items received the lowest scores and why most students planned to work rather than continue their education. Career orientation therefore appears less as a fixed individual characteristic than as a perspective shaped by family economic circumstances and observable role models. This interpretation is further supported by the finding that the composite measure of lived socioeconomic status predicted career orientation more strongly than parental education, which reflects educational credentials rather than everyday socioeconomic conditions.

The findings, however, do not support a purely deterministic interpretation. Social Cognitive Career Theory argues that contextual supports influence career development through self-efficacy and outcome expectations, both of which remain open to change (Lent & Brown, 2019; Lent & Brown, 2013). Likewise, the 73% of unexplained variance suggests substantial room for individual agency, educational experiences, and school-based interventions. Career orientation was also highest among students planning to enter university, highlighting an important measurement consideration. Instruments adapted primarily from academic aspiration scales may not fully capture career orientation among students who intentionally choose employment after graduation. As a result, lower scores on university-oriented dimensions may reflect realistic and adaptive planning rather than weak career orientation (Khattab et al., 2022). The findings therefore demonstrate the influence of social reproduction without suggesting that its effects are unavoidable.

The practical implications follow from these findings. Because socioeconomic status appears to influence career orientation through role models and exposure rather than financial resources alone, schools may help reduce socioeconomic disparities by providing structured career counselling, industry and internship exposure (experienced by only 37% of this sample), and accessible practitioner and alumni role models, particularly for students whose parents are unable to model professional career pathways (Lent et al., 2000; Kuijpers et al., 2011; Akkermans et al., 2013; Whiston & Keller, 2004). Such initiatives address the same mechanisms identified in this study, namely vicarious learning, and may therefore help reduce the influence of socioeconomic inequality on students' career orientation.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The study used a cross-sectional design and was conducted in a single vocational school, so causal conclusions and broad generalisations cannot be made. Future studies involving multiple schools and longitudinal designs would provide stronger evidence, particularly because aspiration and achievement dynamics vary across socioeconomic contexts (Beal & Crockett, 2010). The use of self-report measures may also introduce common method and social desirability bias. Although parental occupation and education were measured, the interpretation that parents serve as role models remains correlational. Future research should examine self-efficacy and adolescent parent career congruence as mediating variables to test this mechanism directly (Sawitri et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2020). It should also investigate programme and gender differences, which were beyond the scope of the present study.

6. Conclusion

Socioeconomic status is a strong contextual predictor of vocational students' career orientation. Its influence operates through observable parental role models and exposure rather than economic resources alone, resulting in students' post school plans closely reflecting their parents' occupations. Because this mechanism is psychological and can be strengthened through educational support, vocational schools have an important role to play. By providing structured career counselling, industry and internship exposure, and accessible practitioner and alumni role models, particularly for students whose families cannot model professional career pathways, schools can broaden students' career horizons and help promote a more equitable transition from school to work.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest and that the study received no external funding.

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