

Preparing for Career Readiness: Vocational Students in RTC-KPVTC in Region XI in Focus

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Abstract: This study explored the lived experiences of vocational students as they prepared for career readiness, focusing on their challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights. While vocational education equips students with technical skills, many still face uncertainties about their employability and transition to the workforce. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to deeply understand the perspectives of vocational students. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with selected students enrolled in the Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration (HVAC/R) program at the Regional Training Center Korea-Philippines Vocational Training Center in Davao City. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was used to identify meaningful themes from the interview data. The study revealed six main experience themes: Gaining Confidence Through Small Wins, Finding Motivation in Peer and Mentor Relationships, Feeling Anxious but Hopeful About the Future, Struggling to Bridge Theory and Practice, Managing Pressure from Family and Finances, and Adapting Despite Limited Resources. Coping themes included Seeking Reassurance and Setting Small Goals, Practicing Beyond the Classroom, Time Management and Prioritizing Commitments, and Resourcefulness and Peer Collaboration. Students shared key insights, highlighting that Practical Experience Matters Most, Support Systems Make a Difference, Adaptability Is a Key to Success, and Career Preparation Goes Beyond Technical Skills. The findings suggest the need for vocational programs to strengthen practical training, provide emotional and social support, and integrate soft skills development.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Career Readiness, Coping Strategies, Employability, Phenomenology, Thematic Analysis, HVAC/R, Technical-Vocational Students, Hard Skills

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I. INTRODUCTION

The transition from vocational education to the professional workforce is a critical phase for students, as it determines their readiness, confidence, and ability to apply the skills they have acquired in real-world settings. This shift involves not only securing employment but also adapting to workplace expectations, industry standards, and professional responsibilities. Vocational students must face challenges such as aligning their competencies with employer demands, gaining practical experience, and overcoming potential barriers to employment. Their success in this transition is influenced by factors such as the quality of their training, exposure to hands-on learning, career guidance, and access to employment opportunities. A smooth transition can enhance their confidence, increase job retention rates, and contribute to long-term career growth, making vocational education a vital pathway for workforce development.

Globally, vocational education systems face challenges in aligning curricula with rapidly evolving industry demands. In countries like Germany and Switzerland have well-established vocational education and training (VET) systems that integrate apprenticeships with classroom instruction, resulting in higher employment rates among graduates. Germany's dual training system, which combines practical on-the-job training with structured theoretical learning, has been recognized for its effectiveness in reducing youth unemployment and improving workforce readiness. Similarly, Switzerland's VET system ensures strong collaboration between industries and educational institutions, allowing students to gain relevant skills that meet labor market demands (Graf, 2020).

A recent study by Pratama et al. (2021) found that both industrial work experience and soft skills significantly contribute to the work readiness of vocational high school graduates. Despite such initiatives, many vocational graduates report feeling underprepared for the workforce,

citing gaps in practical experience and soft skills development. This disconnect often leads to difficulties in securing employment and adapting to professional environments.

Moreover, the global economy's shift towards automation and digitalization presents additional challenges for vocational students. The demand for advanced technical skills and digital literacy has increased, rendering some traditional vocational skills obsolete. Vocational students must now navigate the complexities of acquiring new competencies to remain competitive, often without adequate institutional support or resources (Busse, Lange, & Schumann, 2019). This situation exacerbates feelings of unpreparedness and anxiety about future employment prospects.

In the Philippines, vocational education is primarily overseen by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), which implements various programs to enhance skills training and employability. Despite these efforts, challenges persist. A study by Benaning (2023) highlighted that while there is a high level of knowledge and acceptance of the K-12 program among technical-vocational teachers, issues such as resource limitations and varying levels of readiness among institutions affect the overall effectiveness of vocational training. These challenges can impede students' preparedness for the workforce.

In the context of the Regional Training Center Korea-Philippines Vocational Training Center (RTC-KPVTC) in Davao City, vocational graduates, particularly those in Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration (HVAC/R), face significant challenges in securing stable employment after completing their training. While the program equips students with technical skills, the limited availability of local job opportunities forces many graduates to seek employment outside the region or even abroad. Additionally, the lack of direct industry linkages and limited apprenticeship programs make the transition from training to employment difficult. Many employers prefer candidates with prior work experience, leaving fresh graduates at a disadvantage. Furthermore, vocational careers often face stigma, with some industries perceiving them as lesser than traditional degree programs, which affects both job prospects and career advancement opportunities. These factors contribute to employment uncertainty, making career readiness a critical issue for RTC-KPVTC graduates.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of vocational students regarding their perceptions of career readiness as they approach graduation. Through a phenomenological approach, this research seeks to understand how these students perceive their preparedness for the workforce, the challenges they anticipate, and the strategies they use to cope with these challenges. By capturing their experiences, the study aims to provide insights that can inform vocational education programs, policymakers, and industry stakeholders on how to better support students in transitioning from training to employment.

In conclusion, this study aims to provide policymakers with evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of current vocational education policies and workforce development programs. By identifying areas where vocational students feel underprepared, policymakers can introduce reforms that enhance technical training, promote apprenticeships, and ensure stronger linkages between vocational institutions and industries. Additionally, findings from this study may support policy decisions regarding funding allocations and improvements in vocational education infrastructure.

II. METHOD

This chapter outlines the research design, participants, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures used in the study. Given the focus on the lived experiences of vocational students regarding their career readiness and employability, a qualitative phenomenological approach will be employed.

In conducting this qualitative study on vocational students' perceptions of career readiness, operated under several key assumptions. Assumed that multiple realities exist, as each participant's experience is unique and shaped by personal, social, and contextual factors. This aligns with the constructivist paradigm, which posits that individuals construct their own understanding of reality through interactions and experiences.

Assumed that the participants' perspectives are valuable sources of knowledge, and that by engaging closely with them, gained insights into their lived experiences. This epistemological stance emphasizes the importance of understanding the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences.

Furthermore, recognized that my own background and experiences may influence the research process. By acknowledging this axiological assumption, I committed to reflexivity, continually examining how my values and biases may affect data collection and interpretation.

Lastly, assumed that the language used in this study will play a crucial role in conveying the participants' experiences authentically. This rhetorical assumption underscores the need for a writing style that accurately reflects the voices of the participants, providing a rich, nuanced understanding of their perceptions of career readiness.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the study and discusses the key findings on the lived experiences of vocational students as they prepared for career readiness.

The themes that emerged from the interviews highlight both the positive and challenging aspects of their journey, as well as the coping strategies they used and the insights they gained.

The findings for the first research objective, “What are the experiences of vocational students as they prepare for career readiness?” revealed six main themes: Gaining Confidence Through Small Wins, Finding Motivation in Peer and Mentor Relationships, Feeling Anxious but Hopeful About the Future, Struggling to Bridge Theory and Practice, Managing Pressure from Family and Finances, and Adapting Despite Limited Resources.

The first theme, Gaining Confidence Through Small Wins, highlights how vocational students slowly built their self-esteem through small but meaningful achievements during their training.

These experiences reflect how achieving small tasks builds confidence among students, aligning with Abdul’s (2021) finding that TVET graduates develop greater self-belief when they gain practical competence. Similarly, Nurjanah et al. (2022) emphasized that readiness for Industry 4.0 requires not only technical knowledge but also the confidence developed through repeated practice and mastery of skills. Hirschi (2020) also noted that career preparedness involves the strengthening of self-efficacy, often gained through gradual exposure to increasingly complex tasks. Finally, the Asian Development Bank (2021) underscored that continuous skills development in Philippine TVET is essential to boost learner confidence and ensure workforce readiness.

The second theme, Finding Motivation in Peer and Mentor Relationships, highlights how students drew strength and encouragement from their classmates and mentors throughout their vocational journey.

These responses reflect the crucial role of social support in vocational learning. Abdul (2021) highlighted that support systems improve the career readiness of vocational students by fostering encouragement and resilience. Hirschi (2020) emphasized that career preparedness among students is strengthened through peer interactions and guidance from mentors, which help build confidence and commitment.

The third theme, Feeling Anxious but Hopeful About the Future, captures the mixed emotions vocational students experienced as they looked ahead to entering the workforce.

These responses align with Abdul’s (2021) finding that while vocational graduates often feel unsure about their employment prospects, they still hold on to the belief that their acquired skills will lead to better job opportunities. Hirschi (2020) also explained that career readiness includes both the excitement and the anxiety associated with transitioning to work life, highlighting the importance of managing emotions during this stage.

The fourth theme, Struggling to Bridge Theory and Practice, highlights the difficulties students faced in applying what they learned in the classroom to real-life situations.

These experiences reflect challenges seen in broader vocational education research. Edralin and Pastrana (2022) emphasized that in the Philippine TVET system, there is a persistent gap between theoretical instruction and practical application, which affects graduate preparedness. Pilz and Li (2020) discussed that across countries, the transfer of vocational models often struggles when there is a lack of contextualized, hands-on practice aligned with classroom learning.

The fifth theme, Managing Pressure from Family and Finances, describes how students balanced their academic responsibilities with family expectations and financial challenges.

These findings are consistent with the insights of Kalysh et al. (2023), who noted that career decision-making among students is influenced by family pressures and financial concerns, which can impact their readiness and focus. Muslim et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of recognizing how economic and familial responsibilities shape the vocational education experience and influence students’ coping strategies.

The sixth theme, Adapting Despite Limited Resources, highlights how students showed resilience and creativity when faced with a lack of equipment, tools, or materials during their training.

These experiences reflect the findings of Kilag et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of investing in updated infrastructure and technology in Philippine TVET to meet the needs of students. Allais (2024) noted that international organizations advocate improving resources in vocational programs to bridge quality gaps and ensure student success.

The findings for the second research objective, “What coping mechanisms do vocational students use to address the challenges they experience?” revealed four main themes: Seeking Reassurance and Setting Small Goals, Practicing Beyond the Classroom, Time Management and Prioritizing Commitments, and Resourcefulness and Peer Collaboration.

Seeking Reassurance and Setting Small Goals emerged as a coping strategy for feeling anxious but hopeful about the future.

These coping strategies reflect what Hirschi (2020) described as the importance of building self-efficacy and managing career-related stress through achievable milestones. Abdul (2021) highlighted that career readiness improves when students receive encouragement and break down tasks into manageable parts. According to Kalysh et al. (2023), setting small, realistic goals helps reduce career decision-making difficulties, while the American Institutes for Research (2023) pointed out that supportive environments play a key role in reducing anxiety and improving student engagement.

Practicing Beyond the Classroom emerged as a coping strategy for struggling to bridge theory and practice.

These strategies reflect what Edralin and Pastrana (2022) highlighted about the need for continuous learning outside formal instruction to reinforce skills. Pilz and Li (2020) pointed out that adapting vocational training to local needs often requires extending learning beyond the classroom. Keller and Raemy (2025) emphasized the role of self-directed learning in helping students gain confidence and bridge gaps between theory and practice. Additionally, Nurjanah et al. (2022) underscored the importance of independent practice in preparing vocational graduates for the dynamic demands of Industry 4.0.

Time Management and Prioritizing Commitments emerged as a coping strategy for managing pressure from family and finances.

These coping strategies show how students actively balanced competing demands from school, work, and home life by carefully organizing their schedules. Abdul (2021) emphasized that successful vocational students often demonstrate strong time management skills to handle multiple responsibilities and stay focused on their goals. Muslim et al. (2023) underscored the importance of prioritization when students face economic pressures, noting that those who plan ahead are better able to meet both academic and family expectations without compromising their training.

Resourcefulness and Peer Collaboration emerged as a coping strategy for adapting despite limited resources.

These strategies reflect the adaptive behaviors highlighted by Kilag et al. (2024), who emphasized that Philippine vocational students often overcome equipment and resource gaps through collaboration and creativity.

The findings for the third research objective, “What insights do vocational students have regarding their career readiness based on their experiences in vocational education?” revealed four main themes: Practical Experience Matters Most, Support Systems Make a Difference, Adaptability Is a Key to Success, and Career Preparation Goes Beyond Technical Skills. Practical experience matters most.

Practical Experience Matters Most emerged as a key insight gained by students from their vocational education journey.

This insight aligns with the findings of Abdul (2021), who emphasized that hands-on learning significantly boosts the career readiness of vocational students. Hirschi (2020) also pointed out that practical engagement develops both technical competence and career maturity, helping students transition smoothly into employment.

Support Systems Make a Difference emerged as another important insight from the students’ experiences.

This insight reflects the findings of Hirschi (2020), who emphasized that peer and mentor support strengthens students’ sense of competence and commitment to career goals.

Adaptability Is a Key to Success emerged as a meaningful insight drawn from the students’ vocational education experiences.

This insight supports the findings of Nurjanah et al. (2022), who emphasized that adaptability and technological readiness are essential competencies for vocational graduates facing the demands of Industry 4.0. Kilag et al. (2024) also highlighted that promoting lifelong learning and adaptability within Philippine TVET strengthens graduate employability.

Career Preparation Goes Beyond Technical Skills emerged as an important insight from the students’ reflections on their vocational journey.

This insight aligns with the findings of Abdul (2021), who emphasized that soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving are critical for improving the career readiness of vocational graduates.

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FIGURES

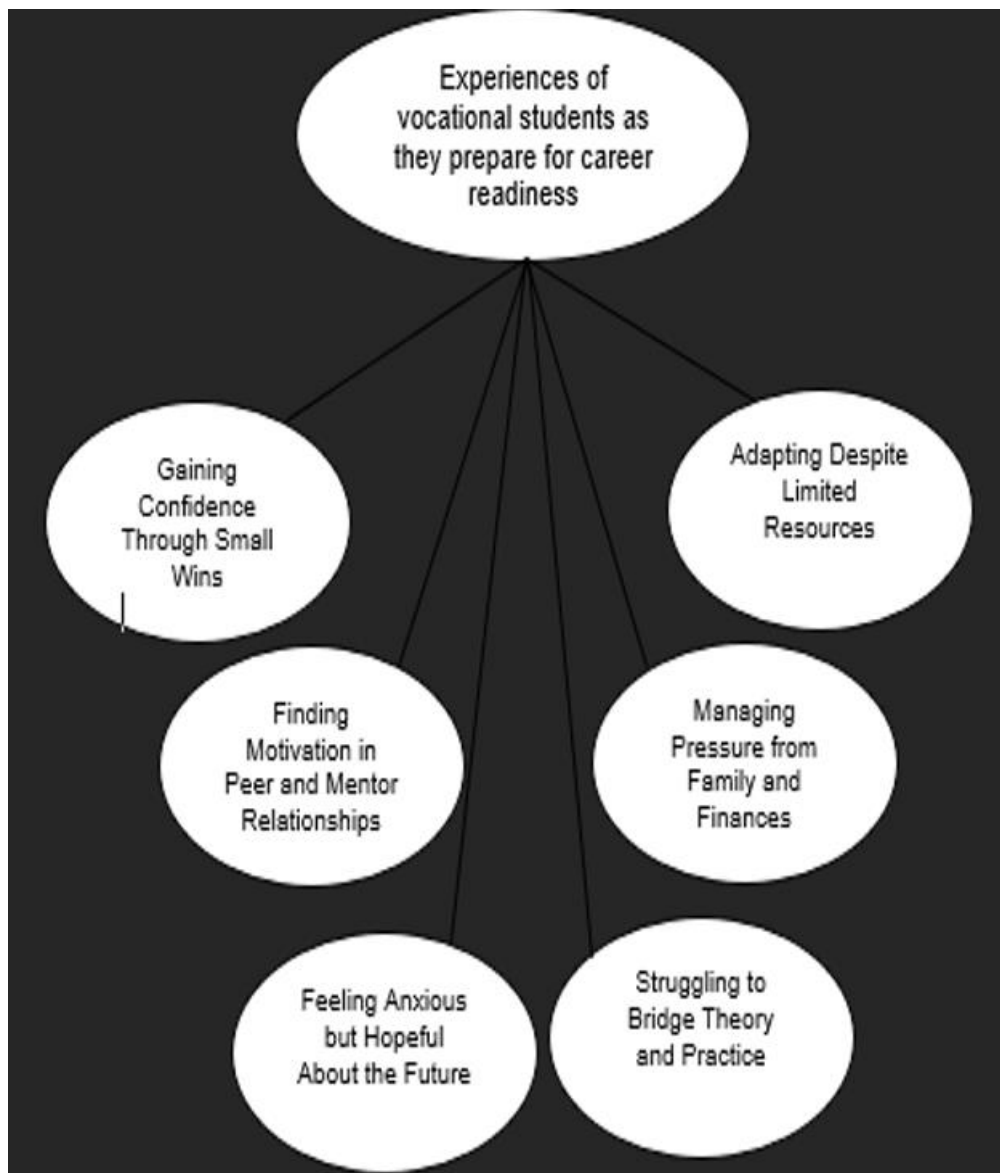


Fig 1 Experiences of Vocational Students as they Prepare for Career Readiness

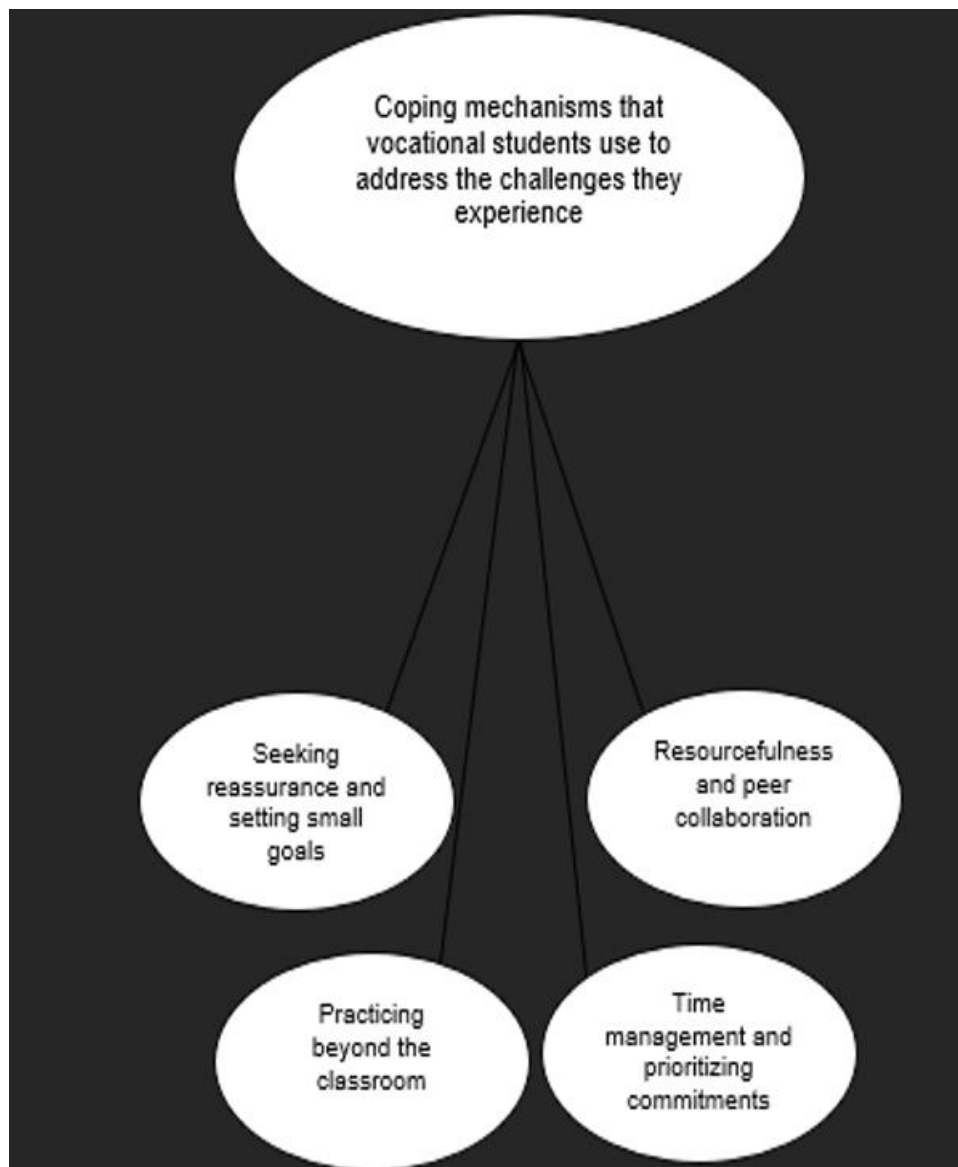


Fig 2 Coping Mechanism that Vocational use to Address the Challenges they Experience

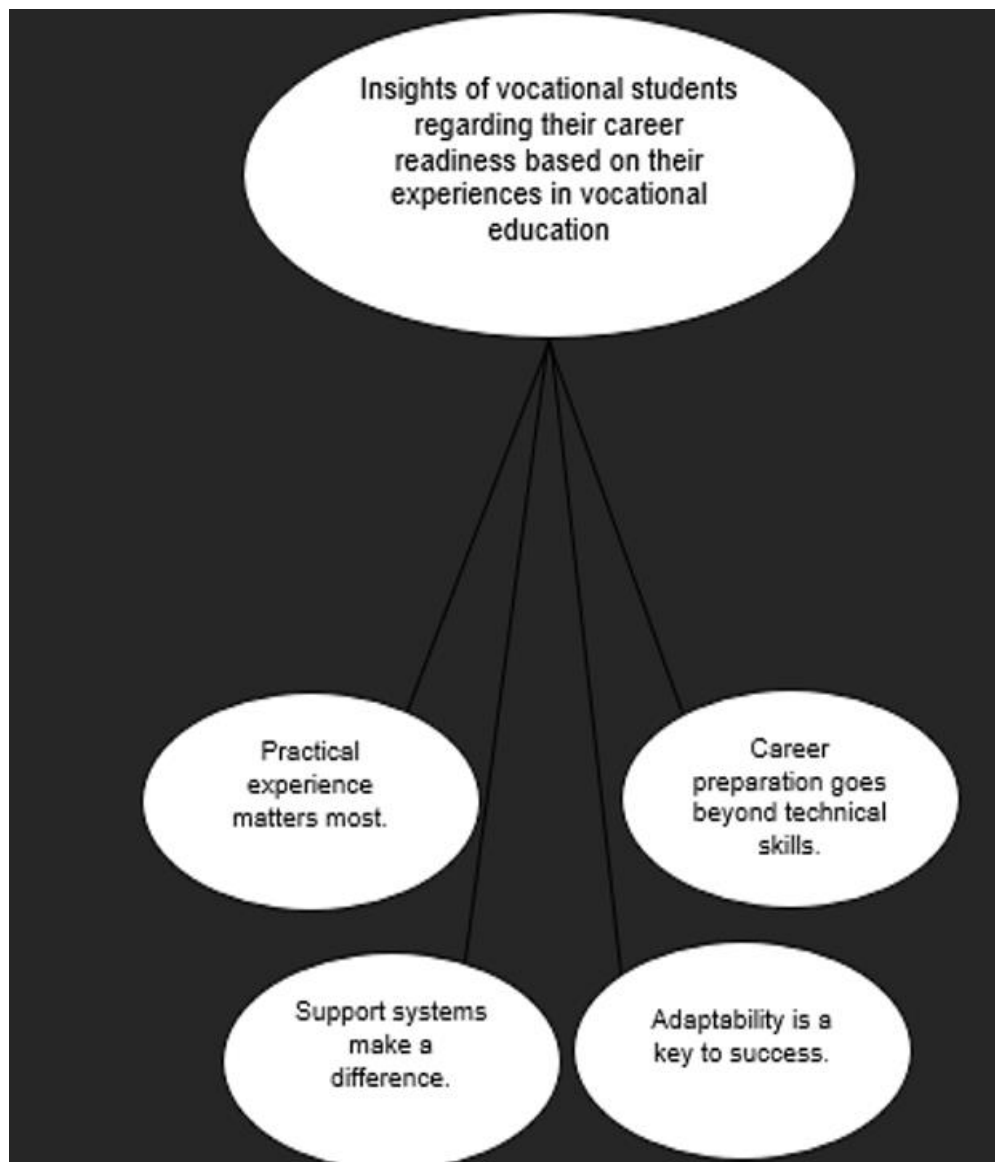


Fig 3 Insights of Vocational Students Regarding their Career Readiness based on their Experiences in Vocational Education