

Career Development of Low-Income High School Alumni: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Michael P. Tosoc

Master of Arts in Guidance and Counseling, University of Saint Anthony, Iriga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines

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Email of Corresponding Author: tosocmichael1@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examined how low-income high school alumni described and interpreted their lived experiences in making career decisions during high school and how these experiences contributed to their career development. Anchored on Social Cognitive Career Theory, the Psychology of Working Theory, and Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise, the study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participants were purposively selected alumni who experienced low-income conditions during their secondary education. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using IPA procedures, including close reading, initial noting, emergent theme development, and thematic interpretation. The findings revealed that career decision-making among low-income alumni was shaped by socioeconomic constraints, family responsibilities, emotional uncertainty, and personal aspirations. Participants interpreted career choices through affordability, practicality, and family obligations, often adjusting aspirations to align with available resources and perceived opportunities. Despite these challenges, their experiences contributed to the development of practical career awareness, resilience, adaptability, values clarification, self-understanding, and agency within socioeconomic limitations. Retrospective reflections further showed that participants reframed hardship as a source of motivation and recognized the importance of career guidance, mentorship, counseling, scholarship information, and family support in career planning and development. The study concluded that career development among low-income students is influenced by both structural constraints and individual meaning-making processes. It highlights the need for context-sensitive, family-inclusive, and economically responsive career development programs that provide practical information, emotional support, and access to educational opportunities. The findings support Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by emphasizing equitable access to career guidance and educational support for economically disadvantaged learners. The study contributes to educational and social sustainability by informing inclusive career development initiatives that promote informed decision-making, career readiness, and long-term social mobility.

Keywords: Career Decision-Making, Career Development, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Lived Experiences, Low-Income Alumni, Meaning-Making, Resilience, Socioeconomic Constraints, Student Support Services

1. Introduction

Career development is a critical process that shapes students' educational pathways, occupational aspirations, and future employment opportunities. For students from low-income families, career decision-making is often influenced not only by personal interests and abilities but also by financial limitations, family responsibilities, access to educational resources, and perceived opportunities. These conditions make career choices a complex negotiation between aspirations and socioeconomic realities. This study examines how low-income high school alumni described and interpreted their lived experiences in making career decisions during high school and how these experiences contributed to their career development.

1.1 Career Development and Career Decision-Making Among Low-Income High School Alumni

Low-income students frequently encounter barriers that affect career exploration and educational transitions, including limited access to career information, learning resources, transportation, application fees, and postsecondary opportunities. Consequently, career decision-making is often shaped by affordability, family expectations, and perceived feasibility. Social Cognitive Career Theory explains that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal-setting are influenced by contextual supports and barriers (Lent & Brown, 2019). Similarly, the Psychology of Working Theory emphasizes the influence of social class and economic marginalization on career agency and access to meaningful work (Duffy et al., 2016; Blustein et al., 2019). Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 1981) further explains how individuals modify aspirations when occupational options appear unattainable because of social or economic realities. In the Philippines, poverty and inequality continue to influence educational and career transitions. Although career guidance

services are mandated under Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines (2019), implementation varies across schools. As a result, many students rely on family advice, peer influence, financial necessity, and locally available opportunities when making career decisions.

1.2 Themes and Insights on Lived Experiences, Meaning-Making, and Career Development of Low-Income Alumni

Related literature indicates that socioeconomic status significantly affects career development by shaping access to educational resources, social networks, learning opportunities, and career information. Research further suggests that career adaptability can serve as an important resource for individuals facing socioeconomic disadvantage and career-related uncertainty (Santilli, 2022). Students from economically disadvantaged households often make career decisions based on affordability, employment prospects, and family circumstances rather than personal preference alone. Previous studies among Filipino students have shown that educational choices are frequently influenced by personal interests, family considerations, and perceived employment opportunities (Garcia & Ramos, 2022). Positive attitudes toward career decision-making have likewise been associated with greater confidence in selecting educational and occupational pathways (Digamon, 2021). These findings support the view that career development is influenced by both individual and environmental factors. Studies further suggest that career decision-making involves lived experiences, emotions, family interactions, hopes, uncertainties, and reflections. Meaning-making is central to understanding these experiences because individuals often reinterpret past challenges as sources of learning, maturity, responsibility, and practical wisdom. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA provides a framework for understanding how individuals assign meaning to significant life experiences. Research also highlights the importance of support systems. Educational interventions and career readiness programs have been found to strengthen students' preparedness for making informed career decisions (Azhenov, 2023). Parental involvement has also been identified as an important factor influencing students' career decision-making processes and educational planning (Decena, 2024). Financial constraints, limited access to information, inadequate career guidance, and restricted educational opportunities may narrow perceived career options. At the same time, family support, mentoring, scholarships, and effective guidance programs can strengthen career decision-making and adaptability. Hope, career adaptability, and supportive educational environments have also been linked to students' willingness to invest in higher education despite barriers and challenges (Di Maggio et al., 2020).

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Career Development Under Socioeconomic Constraints

Globally, socioeconomic inequality remains a major factor influencing educational attainment and career opportunities. International evidence suggests that students' career aspirations are often associated with social background and access to opportunities, with socioeconomic inequality shaping both educational expectations and occupational ambitions (OECD, 2020). Students from low-income backgrounds often experience barriers that affect their confidence, career exploration, and future planning. Nationally, Filipino students from economically disadvantaged households frequently make educational and occupational decisions based on family affordability and immediate economic needs. This situation reflects broader patterns of poverty and educational transitions among Filipino youth, where socioeconomic conditions continue to influence educational participation and future opportunities (Albert et al., 2021). While policies promote career guidance services, disparities in implementation continue to affect the availability and quality of support provided to students. Locally, low-income learners may depend heavily on family members, community resources, informal networks, and available scholarship opportunities when making career decisions. Their experiences provide valuable insight into how economic realities shape aspirations, opportunities, and long-term career development.

1.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations of Career Decision-Making Among Low-Income High School Alumni

This study is anchored on Social Cognitive Career Theory, Psychology of Working Theory, and Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 1981). Social Cognitive Career Theory explains how self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, goals, and contextual supports or barriers influence career development (Lent & Brown, 2019). It provides a framework for understanding how financial constraints and support systems affect career confidence and decision-making. Psychology of Working Theory emphasizes the role of social class, economic survival, marginalization, and access to opportunities in shaping career development (Duffy et al., 2016; Blustein et al., 2019). It helps explain why low-income students often prioritize practicality, stability, and family responsibilities when making career decisions. Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 1981) explains how individuals modify or narrow occupational aspirations based on perceived accessibility and social realities. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding how low-income students adjust career goals in response to financial limitations and available opportunities. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for interpreting how low-income alumni understood, negotiated, and assigned meaning to their career decision-making experiences.

1.5 Research Gaps in the Study of Career Decision-Making and Career Development Among Low-Income Alumni

Existing studies on career decision-making frequently examine socioeconomic status through quantitative approaches that identify relationships among variables but provide limited understanding of how students interpret their experiences. Consequently, the subjective meanings attached to career decisions among low-income students remain underexplored. Another gap concerns population focus. Much of the existing literature concentrates on current students, while fewer

studies investigate alumni who can reflect retrospectively on how earlier career decisions influenced their later educational, occupational, and personal development. A further methodological gap exists in the limited use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to examine career development among low-income Filipino alumni. Previous Philippine studies have successfully employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore lived experiences and meaning-making processes among specific populations (Cunanan & Yabut, 2019). By focusing on lived experiences, meaning-making, and retrospective reflection, this study contributes a deeper interpretative understanding of how socioeconomic realities shape career development.

1.6 Alignment of Career Development Among Low-Income High School Alumni with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with:

- SDG 4 – Quality Education, by contributing knowledge that may strengthen career guidance, educational access, and informed decision-making among economically disadvantaged learners.
- SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, by examining factors that influence career preparation, employability, and access to meaningful work opportunities.
- SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities, by highlighting the effects of socioeconomic barriers on educational and career outcomes and identifying strategies that may support more equitable opportunities.

The study supports these goals by generating evidence that can inform context-sensitive career development programs for low-income students.

1.7 Importance of the Study to Multidisciplinary Sustainability and Equitable Career Development

The study contributes to socio-economic sustainability by promoting equitable access to career development opportunities for economically disadvantaged learners. It supports educational sustainability through the improvement of career guidance programs, student support services, and informed educational planning. The findings also contribute to community and institutional sustainability by encouraging collaboration among schools, families, guidance counselors, alumni, policymakers, and community stakeholders in addressing barriers to career development. Furthermore, the study supports policy and governance sustainability by providing evidence that may strengthen career guidance initiatives and educational interventions for vulnerable student populations. Overall, the study advances understanding of how low-income students navigate career decision-making and how educational institutions can develop sustainable, inclusive, and responsive support systems that promote long-term career growth and social mobility.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was selected because it focuses on understanding lived experiences and how individuals interpret significant events in their lives. IPA seeks to provide a detailed examination of personal lived experience and how individuals make sense of significant events in their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate when the objective is to understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their lived experiences within specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approach is phenomenological, interpretative, and idiographic, allowing careful examination of participants' experiences and the meanings they attached to career decision-making. The study explored how low-income alumni understood the influence of financial limitations, family responsibilities, school support, and future aspirations on their career development. The analysis followed the principles advanced by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009).

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study focused on alumni from various high schools who experienced low-income conditions during their secondary education. The research setting was considered important because participants' career decision-making experiences were shaped by the educational and socioeconomic environments in which they completed high school.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents consisted of high school alumni who came from low-income families during their secondary education and had experience making career-related decisions while in high school. Participants were selected based on their ability to provide meaningful reflections on their experiences and interpretations of career decision-making within the context of socioeconomic constraints. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity and ensure confidentiality.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who met the inclusion criteria. Eligible participants were high school graduates who experienced low-income conditions during high school, had made career-related decisions during that period, and were willing to participate in in-depth interviews. Consistent with IPA principles, a small and relatively homogeneous sample of approximately six to ten participants was considered appropriate because the study

emphasized depth of understanding rather than statistical representation. The objective was to generate rich and detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences rather than produce generalizable findings.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide aligned with the study's research questions and theoretical framework. The interview focused on participants' experiences in making career decisions during high school, their interpretations of those experiences, the perceived value of those experiences to their career development, and the forms of support they believed would have been beneficial. The semi-structured format allowed participants to describe experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to explore meanings, emotions, and interpretations in greater depth. The interview guide underwent review and refinement to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the objectives of the study.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured the necessary permissions and identified participants who met the inclusion criteria. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, confidentiality measures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time before providing informed consent. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participant preference and availability. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and supplemented by field notes. Following each interview, recordings were transcribed verbatim, checked for accuracy, and stripped of identifying information. Field notes and reflexive memos were maintained to support interpretation throughout the research process.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with participants' accounts. Initial notes were then developed to capture significant statements, language use, experiences, and underlying meanings. The analytical process emphasized detailed examination of participants' narratives and the meanings attached to their experiences, consistent with IPA procedures described by Smith and Osborn (2007). Emergent themes were generated from the initial notes and used to identify important aspects of each participant's account. The process was repeated for each participant while maintaining bracketing to minimize the influence of prior interpretations. Patterns of similarity and difference were subsequently identified across cases. The final analysis organized findings into superordinate and subordinate themes and interpreted participants' experiences in relation to financial constraints, family responsibilities, school support, career choices, and the theoretical foundations of the study.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and possible risks. Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts and reports. All interview recordings, transcripts, and related documents were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. Sensitivity was exercised when discussing potentially emotional topics such as financial hardship, family pressures, and career uncertainty. Participants were allowed to decline any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. The dignity, privacy, and well-being of all participants were prioritized throughout the conduct of the study. Principles of trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, guided the conduct and reporting of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Efforts were made to ensure accurate representation of participants' experiences through careful data collection, systematic analysis, and transparent documentation of the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Career Decision-Making as Negotiated Aspiration Under Economic Constraint

3.1.1 Financial Limitation as a Frame of Choice

Participants consistently described financial limitations as a primary factor influencing career decisions. Affordability, educational expenses, and family capacity to provide support shaped how they evaluated career options and educational pathways. These findings indicate that socioeconomic constraints influenced not only career outcomes but also the decision-making process itself. Financial limitations affected participants' confidence and perceptions of attainable opportunities, supporting the view that socioeconomic status significantly influences educational and career aspirations. This finding is consistent with Laroco (2022), who reported that low family income restricted students' career aspirations, and with Peng & Yue (2022), who noted that socioeconomic disadvantage may lead to indecision and reduced confidence in career planning.

3.1.2 Family Responsibility as Career Pressure

Participants frequently connected career decisions with family obligations. Career choices were often evaluated in relation to supporting parents, helping siblings, and reducing financial burdens on the household. The findings suggest that career decision-making among low-income students is strongly influenced by relational responsibilities rather than purely individual preferences. This supports Jamim et al. (2022), who found that family members significantly influence students' career decision-making processes through family-related factors, parental influence, and household circumstances.

3.1.3 Emotional Uncertainty and Fear of Wrong Choice

Participants reported feelings of uncertainty, pressure, and fear when making career decisions. Many viewed career choices as critical because of their potential impact on future financial stability and family welfare. These findings demonstrate that career decision-making involves emotional as well as practical considerations. Limited resources and restricted access to career information intensified participants' concerns about making incorrect decisions. This supports Koçak et al. (2021), who emphasized that career decision-making should be understood through a holistic perspective that includes family, school, and work-related influences.

3.1.4 Pragmatic Adjustment of Aspirations

Participants described modifying or redirecting career aspirations toward options they considered more attainable. Career goals were often adjusted according to financial realities, educational costs, available support, and perceived opportunities. The findings suggest that participants exercised constrained agency by adapting aspirations to realistic circumstances rather than abandoning them altogether. Such adjustments reflected socioeconomic realities rather than a lack of ambition. This interpretation aligns with Peng & Yue (2022), who noted that self-efficacy and employability positively influence career planning and decision-making among students.

3.2 Socioeconomic Hardship as a Source of Career Maturity and Adaptability

3.2.1 Development of Practical Career Awareness

Participants reported developing a more realistic understanding of career opportunities through their experiences. They considered factors such as educational costs, scholarship opportunities, family resources, job availability, and long-term stability when evaluating career paths. These findings indicate that socioeconomic hardship contributed to practical career awareness and informed decision-making. Participants became more conscious of realistic opportunities and constraints, which strengthened their ability to plan within their circumstances. This observation supports Peng & Yue (2022), who emphasized the role of self-efficacy, employability, and understanding career requirements in career decision-making.

3.2.2 Strengthening of Resilience and Career Adaptability

Participants described hardship as a factor that strengthened perseverance, flexibility, and the ability to adjust plans when encountering obstacles. They continued pursuing goals despite financial and educational challenges. The findings suggest that adversity contributed to the development of resilience and career adaptability. Participants learned to modify plans, seek alternatives, and persist in the face of uncertainty. This interpretation is consistent with Abdul Rahim et al. (2021), who concluded that career maturity and career decision-making self-efficacy significantly predict career adaptability.

3.2.3 Clarification of Values and Purpose

Participants linked career goals to family welfare, personal stability, responsibility, and long-term improvement of living conditions. Career success was often defined by the ability to support family members and achieve security. These findings demonstrate that career development became closely connected to personal values, dignity, and purpose. Participants viewed career choices as a means of improving both individual and family well-being. This supports Zhang et al. (2025), who found that parental support, career values, and psychological capital are significantly associated with career adaptability.

3.2.4 Emergence of Agency Despite Constraint

Participants demonstrated efforts to make decisions, seek opportunities, and continue pursuing education despite structural limitations. Although financial barriers restricted choices, participants remained active in shaping their futures. The findings indicate the presence of agency within socioeconomic constraints. Participants were not passive recipients of hardship but actively responded to challenges by exploring alternatives and maintaining future goals. This supports Peng & Yue (2022), who emphasized that strengthening self-efficacy and employability can improve career decision status among disadvantaged learners.

3.3 Career Development as a Retrospective Process of Meaning-Making

3.3.1 From Confusion to Self-Understanding

Participants reflected that experiences which once seemed confusing later contributed to greater self-awareness. Through reflection, they developed a clearer understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, and decision-making patterns. These

findings suggest that career development is a cumulative and reflective process. Retrospective interpretation allowed participants to recognize lessons learned from earlier experiences and understand their personal growth over time.

3.3.2 Reframing Limitation as Motivation

Participants described using financial struggles and socioeconomic challenges as sources of motivation to pursue educational and career goals. Difficult experiences became incentives for perseverance and improvement. The findings indicate that participants constructed positive meaning from adversity without romanticizing poverty. Hardship served as a source of purpose, determination, and hope, helping participants remain committed to long-term goals despite obstacles.

3.3.3 Recognition of Missed Support

Participants identified several forms of support that would have improved their career decision-making experiences, including career guidance, scholarship information, mentoring, counseling, and family-oriented planning. These findings highlight the importance of structured support systems in career development. Participants' reflections suggest that effective interventions should provide both informational and emotional assistance to help students make informed career decisions and manage socioeconomic challenges.

3.4 Need for Context-Sensitive and Family-Aware Career Support

3.4.1 Early and Practical Career Information

Participants emphasized the need for accessible and practical career information during high school. They expressed a desire for clearer guidance regarding career pathways, educational requirements, and employment opportunities. These findings suggest that students from low-income backgrounds require timely and realistic information to support informed career planning. Early access to career information may reduce uncertainty and improve decision-making confidence.

3.4.2 Mentorship and Role Models

Participants identified mentorship and exposure to successful individuals as valuable forms of support. They believed that role models could provide guidance, encouragement, and realistic perspectives on career development. The findings indicate that mentorship can strengthen career confidence and expand students' understanding of available opportunities, particularly for those with limited access to professional networks.

3.4.3 Family-Inclusive Guidance

Participants emphasized the importance of involving families in career planning and guidance activities. Family members were viewed as significant influences on educational and occupational decisions. These findings suggest that career programs should recognize the family's role in decision-making and provide opportunities for collaborative planning between students and their families.

3.4.4 Emotional and Decision-Making Support

Participants expressed the need for emotional support and assistance in managing uncertainty, pressure, and anxiety associated with career decisions. Many believed that counseling and personalized guidance would have improved their decision-making experiences. The findings indicate that career development programs should address both practical and psychological dimensions of career planning. Emotional support, counseling, and decision-making assistance can help students navigate socioeconomic constraints while maintaining confidence and direction.

3.5 Overall Interpretative Synthesis

The findings reveal that career development among low-income high school alumni is characterized by negotiation, adaptability, and meaning-making. Participants interpreted career decision-making as a process shaped by financial limitations, family responsibilities, emotional uncertainty, and practical adjustments. At the same time, they viewed their experiences as contributing to maturity, resilience, self-awareness, and purposeful career development. The integration of findings demonstrates that participants exercised agency despite socioeconomic constraints and transformed career decision-making into a developmental experience. Interpreted through Social Cognitive Career Theory, the Psychology of Working Theory, and Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 1981), the findings highlight the need for career development programs that are responsive to economic realities, family influences, and students' unique support needs. Such programs should provide career information, mentorship, financial literacy, counseling, family engagement, and practical planning support to promote informed and sustainable career development among low-income students.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study found that career decision-making among low-income high school alumni was shaped by socioeconomic constraints, family responsibilities, emotional pressures, and personal aspirations. Participants interpreted career choices based on affordability, practicality, and family obligations, resulting in adjustments to their aspirations. Despite these challenges, their experiences contributed to career development by strengthening resilience, adaptability, self-understanding, practical career awareness, and purposeful motivation. The findings also demonstrated that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis effectively captured participants' meaning-making processes and highlighted the need for career development programs that are responsive to the realities of economically disadvantaged students.

Schools should strengthen career guidance programs for low-income students by integrating scholarship awareness, financial literacy, career information, and decision-making support. Guidance counselors should provide individualized or small-group interventions that address financial barriers, family expectations, and emotional concerns related to career choices. School administrators should establish partnerships with alumni, professionals, higher education institutions, and scholarship providers to expand access to career resources. Parents and guardians should also be involved in career guidance activities to support students' aspirations and career planning. Future studies may explore similar experiences in other settings, conduct longitudinal investigations, or compare the experiences of current students and alumni from low-income backgrounds.

The study was limited to a small, purposively selected group of low-income high school alumni and focused on their retrospective accounts of career decision-making experiences. As an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the findings were based on participants' personal narratives and interpretations within their specific contexts and were not intended for statistical generalization. The results therefore reflect the lived experiences of the selected participants and may not represent all low-income students or alumni.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and participant welfare were observed throughout the research process. Appropriate measures were implemented to protect participants' identities and personal information, and participants were informed of their rights, including the right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage. Ethical considerations were maintained during data collection, data management, analysis, and reporting of findings.

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