

Struggling Amidst Limitations: The Psychological Well-Being of Youth in the School-to-Work Transition

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Abstract: The School-to-Work transition is one of the crucial milestones during the developmental phase towards adulthood. This phase poses unique challenges for young people, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds. This study explores the psychological well-being of underprivileged youth during their transition into the world of work. This research is a phenomenological study with data obtained through photo-elicitation interviews from three participants. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is used to analyze the data. The findings are presented through three main themes: (a) the school to work transition, encompassing their initial experiences in entering the labor market; (b) the state of psychological well-being; and (c) traces of self-change, which illustrate both adaptive and maladaptive responses developed throughout the transition. The study reveals that two participants became trapped in unfavorable working conditions and struggled to manage responsibilities in professional settings, further complicated by disharmonious relationships with colleagues, contributing to low job satisfaction. In addition, all three participants expressed difficulty in accepting their current life circumstances. These factors collectively impacted the psychological well-being of the participants.

Keywords: psychological well-being, photo-elicitation, school-to-work transition, youth

How to Cite: Hetri, A.P., & Saptandari, E.W. (2025). Struggling Amidst Limitations: The Psychological Well-Being of Youth in the School-to-Work Transition. *Intuisi: Jurnal Psikologi Ilmiah*. 17(2), 46-56

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26714/intuisi.17.2.2025.46-56>

Introduction

The school-to-work transition refers to the developmental phase in which an individual exits the educational system to enter the labor market (Ng & Feldman, 2007). A primary facet of this transition is the successful entry into the workforce, characterized by attaining economic independence from parents or guardians and achieving the productivity necessary for self-sufficiency (Msigwa & Kipesha, 2013). Data from the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) indicate that the majority of the young workforce in Indonesia holds a senior high school (SMA) equivalent education, comprising 62.17% of the primary human capital entering the labor market (BPS, 2024). However, the highest unemployment rates in Indonesia are found within the 15–24 age group among those whose highest educational attainment is senior high school or vocational high school (SMA/SMK) (BPS, 2024). Furthermore, a significant number of employed youths occupy precarious positions, such as informal sector roles or temporary contracts, which are typically associated with low wages (UNICEF, 2019). Challenging early-career experiences can result in a "scarring effect" (Kawaguchi & Murao, 2014), adversely impacting job satisfaction and individual psychological well-being (Reuter, 2022).

Job satisfaction is frequently associated with an employee's subjective experience within their professional life. It reflects an individual's emotional reaction to their responsibilities, work environment, and workplace social interactions. Moreover, job satisfaction illustrates the extent to which a role aligns with

the employee's needs and expectations (Wolor et al., 2020). Supportive work environments—characterized by positive interpersonal relationships with colleagues and supervisors, emotional support, and career opportunities—can lead to enhanced performance (Waworuntu et al., 2022). A study by Harimurti and Wulansari (2024) found that when individuals feel comfortable and valued at work, they tend to exhibit higher levels of work engagement and maintain a positive perception of their roles. Furthermore, increased work engagement is linked to the growth of psychological well-being.

The psychological well-being of youth during this transition has become an increasingly pertinent issue, given the shifts in labor structures and the escalating demand for specialized skills in the industrial sector. The increasingly competitive dynamics of the labor market require individuals to possess not only academic qualifications but also experience and skills that align with industry needs (Caroleo et al., 2017). However, for many, this transition is not seamless; for those facing prolonged periods of unemployment, the challenges become increasingly complex. A lack of work experience during this period can lead to skill deterioration, which ultimately narrows the opportunity to compete effectively in the labor market (Hofman et al., 2024).

Youth who experience an unsatisfactory transition are prone to exhibiting symptoms of depression and lower levels of well-being that may persist into middle age (UNICEF, 2019). Research by Goldsmith, Veum, and Darity (1997) on high school graduates demonstrates that unemployment leads to various psychological issues, including negative externalities, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and somatization. Additionally, employees with low work engagement are more likely to experience physical symptoms such as burnout (Su et al., 2023). Consequently, robust psychological well-being has the potential to buffer the negative impacts of transition-related stress within this age cohort (Wang & Haworth, 2020).

Psychological well-being plays a critical role in the resilience of youth during the school-to-work transition. According to Ryff and Keyes (1995), psychological well-being encompasses diverse life aspects that contribute to an individual's subjective experience of a meaningful and fulfilling life. An individual in a healthy mental state, free from excessive pressure, and capable of functioning effectively as a human being is considered to possess high psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). There are six dimensions of psychological well-being: autonomy, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth, and self-acceptance (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Based on the aforementioned literature review, it can be concluded that the transition to the workforce is a crucial period for youth. Departing from the academic world and assuming new roles can result in significant reorganization, leading to either developmental progress or maladaptive changes. Therefore, this study aims to explore the psychological well-being of youth during their transition to the workforce. The focus of this research is on recent high school graduates in Yogyakarta who come from families of low socioeconomic status. This study seeks to explore the subjective experiences of youth facing the transition to employment and aims to provide an understanding of the challenges and factors associated with psychological well-being during this period. Ultimately, this research is expected to offer insights into the psychological conditions of youth and the factors that influence them.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to describe phenomena from the informants' perspectives and develop a holistic understanding of the subject matter (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). Data collection was conducted using the photo-elicitation interview (PEI) or photovoice technique. Photovoice enables individuals to express, depict, and identify their conditions through photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). The integration of photovoice with phenomenology facilitates metaphorical and reflective self-expression among participants (Zarzycki et al., 2023). The collected data were subsequently analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

The study was conducted in Yogyakarta with 3 participants. Participants were selected via purposive sampling based on the following predetermined criteria:

- 1) Aged 17–20 years;
- 2) Recent graduates of senior high school (SMA/SMK/MA) in the 2022/2023 academic year;
- 3) Decided not to pursue higher education;
- 4) Currently seeking employment or having recently started a job;
- 5) Monthly family income of Rp 3,000,000 or below; and
- 6) Residing in Yogyakarta.

Result and Discussion

Participants

Table 1. Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	School Background	Graduation (Year)	Occupation
Xania	19	Private High School A	2022	Cashier & Packager
Kamila	20	Public High School B	2022	Beautician Assistant
Ilman	19	Public High School C	2023	Unemployed

Research Themes

This study identified nine emergent themes, categorized into three distinct clusters: (1) School-to-work transition (4 themes), (2) Psychological well-being status (3 themes), and (3) Traces of self-development (2 themes).

Within the school-to-work transition cluster, the themes identified include the role of the school in career preparation, career decision-making, transitional challenges, and workplace conditions. The psychological well-being cluster comprises environmental mastery, social relations during the transition, and self-acceptance. Finally, the traces of self-development cluster includes maladaptive self-development and adaptive self-development. Pseudonyms are employed for all participants to maintain confidentiality.

Cluster 1: The School-to-Work Transition

1. The Role of the School in Career Preparation

This theme refers to the series of learning experiences designed to equip students with practical skills and technical knowledge directly aligned with industry demands. All three participants engaged in Mandatory Internship Programs (PKL) organized by their respective schools. The participants reported that these internships were highly beneficial, as they found practical application more conducive to knowledge and skill acquisition than traditional classroom settings. Kamila noted that the lessons learned during her internship were "directly related to my current job." Additionally, job fairs were held at Xania's and Kamila's schools to support career readiness.

However, Kamila and Ilman observed that teachers often neglected students' specific needs during regular instruction. Kamila recalled that her teachers "often got angry," leading to a "lack of understanding among students." Similarly, Ilman shared that when assignments were given, "the teacher would leave immediately," resulting in a "lack of experience" due to the absence of "proper guidance and direction."

2. Career Decision-Making

This theme describes the considerations involved in the participants' decisions to enter the workforce immediately following senior high school graduation. These decisions were shaped by various lived experiences and conditions, such as family economic status, a declining interest in formal academic learning, the urgent need for income, and a lack of interest in pursuing higher education.

All participants in this study originated from lower-middle-class economic backgrounds. Financial constraints within the family served as the primary consideration in this regard. Xania reported that she did not pursue higher education because "the finances weren't there," noting that "my father's income isn't enough" to support multiple family members.

Beyond financial barriers, Kamila indicated that her parents' condition was a significant factor in her decision-making. As an only child, Kamila felt a moral obligation to replace her father as the primary breadwinner, stating:

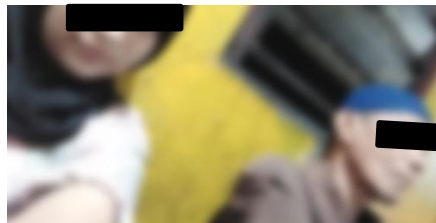


Figure 1. Eating noodle with father

[In Bahasa] "*Faktornya itu pertama, karena bapak udah gak kerja kan, terus aku anak tunggal jadi ya mau gak mau aku melanjutkan kerja, terus juga ya ikut nambah kebutuhanku sendiri sih mbak.*" – Kamila

[In English] "*The factors were, first, because my father is no longer working, and since I am an only child, I had no choice but to start working. Also, I needed to provide for my own needs.*" – Kamila

The drive to provide financial assistance to parents and the desire to avoid becoming an additional financial burden were significant motivators for participants choosing immediate employment over higher education.

3. Transitional Challenges

This theme represents the transitional process experienced by participants where, despite their readiness to enter the workforce, a competitive labor market and a lack of information rendered the job search process highly challenging. Limited access to career education and practical guidance caused participants to feel aimless in navigating the initial steps of their professional lives. Consequently, this lack of direction directly impacted their ability to secure suitable employment.



Figure 2. Heading to a job interview

The discrepancy between the growing labor force and the actual demand for labor across various sectors remains a significant systemic issue. This challenge was reflected in the participants' accounts of their difficulties in securing employment. While presenting Figure 2, Xania explained that searching for and obtaining a job is far from a simple endeavor. Furthermore, based on his experience, Ilman observed that companies tend to prioritize job applicants with higher education degrees over those with only secondary education.

4. Workplace Conditions

This theme describes the participants' attitudes and appraisals of their jobs, rooted in their daily professional interactions and situational experiences. Participants reflected on the emotional and psychological dynamics that emerged upon entering the workforce, ranging from demanding workloads to unsupportive organizational climates. One participant noted that her role as a cashier in a fried chicken outlet was physically and mentally exhausting, a condition exacerbated by suboptimal operational systems, specifically labor shortages that led to an increased frequency of mandatory overtime.

Meanwhile, another participant expressed dissatisfaction with the managerial system at her workplace, particularly regarding the lack of certainty in holiday scheduling and a perceived lack of supportive leadership. These initial experiences serve as a critical baseline for the participants' assessment of the professional world, representing an integral part of their adaptation process and the formation of their perceptions toward professional life.

Cluster 2: Psychological Well-Being Status

1. Environmental Mastery

This theme illustrates the participants' ability to effectively manage and control their immediate surroundings, with a specific focus on the occupational environment. Two participants, Xania and Kamila, reported significant challenges in adapting to the demands of their new roles. Xania, serving as a cashier, experienced difficulties in mastering financial reporting tasks. She explained that encountering obstacles in these reports resulted in prolonged completion times due to a lack of full mastery over her responsibilities. These delays potentially extended the collective working hours of her team. Consequently, feelings of guilt toward her colleagues emerged as a form of interpersonal concern, further contributing to the psychological pressure she experienced during her adjustment to the new work environment.

The second participant, Kamila, who was undergoing training as a health massage therapist at the time, expressed difficulty in memorizing and internalizing the theories of reflexology that formed the foundation of her work. Kamila articulated emotional distress, including feelings of

sadness and a perceived lack of meaningful connection to her occupation. The accounts provided by both Xania and Kamila indicate a perceived lack of competence in managing professional demands and responsibilities.



Figure 3. First Day of Training

[In Bahasa]“*ya emang dari belajarnya itu gak mengharuskan hari itu bisa, cuman emang aku itu kaya gak segampang itu buat ngafalin gitu lo mbak, buat bisa gak segampang itu, butuh seminggu dua minggu baru bisa. Tapi kan, ya namanya juga... aku pengen cepet-cepet kerja kan mbak, jadi aku harus mengusahakan.*” – Kamila

[In English]“*The learning process didn't require me to master it in a single day, but it just wasn't that easy for me to memorize everything, you know? It wasn't simple; it took one or two weeks to get it down. But then again... I wanted to start working as soon as possible, so I had to push myself.*” – Kamila

2. Social Relations During Transition

This theme refers to the nature of the participants' interpersonal relationships with those around them throughout the transitional period. Xania and Kamila described relational experiences within the workplace that were less than conducive, citing difficulties in establishing cooperation, unprofessional interactions, and an unsupportive work atmosphere. Conversely, all participants demonstrated strong positive attachments to their inner circles, including family members, friends, and romantic partners. The emotional support derived from these personal relationships served as the primary source of psychological reinforcement during their transitional journey.

3. Self-Acceptance

This theme illustrates the attitude of evaluating oneself objectively and the extent to which participants accept all facets of their personal identity, including both strengths and weaknesses. Self-acceptance involves the capacity to accept and value oneself holistically, encompassing both positive and negative attributes.

All three participants expressed dissatisfaction with their current life circumstances. Xania described feelings of burnout due to a monotonous routine, coupled with reflective questioning regarding her contribution to her parents and whether her current state brought them sufficient happiness. Meanwhile, Kamila and Ilman expressed profound sadness over their unemployment and their subsequent inability to provide financial support to their families. This led to a perceived failure in meeting the expectations associated with their social roles.

Cluster 3: Traces of Self-Development

1. Maladaptive Self-Development

This theme refers to developmental patterns or processes that do not support the participants' well-being or healthy adjustment. These patterns encompass behaviors, mindsets, and emotional responses. Within this theme, several emotional experiences were identified, including pervasive anxiety regarding the future. This apprehension specifically pertained to career trajectories,

family dynamics, and romantic relationships. Additionally, participants experienced stress and pressure stemming from both internal and external demands, alongside a tendency toward anxiety when facing the inherent uncertainties of the transitional process. Notably, Kamila's anxiety was further exacerbated by adverse experiences encountered at her workplace during her mandatory internship (PKL).

2. Adaptive Self-Development

This theme refers to developmental patterns or processes that foster well-being and healthy adjustment. Interview results indicated that, alongside maladaptive developments, participants also exhibited signs of adaptive self-growth. This was characterized by a more mature mindset, the ability to regulate emotions constructively, and a commitment to ongoing self-evaluation. Their experiences during the transition prompted participants to engage in self-reflection, reassess their attitudes and behaviors, and formulate improved strategies for navigating future life challenges.

Discussion

This study explores the psychological well-being of young people during their transition from school to the workforce. Research by Pavlova et al. (2017) underscores that the school-to-work transition is a pivotal life juncture characterized by a shift toward more open, uncontrollable, and uncertain situations. Individuals are confronted with a new landscape that lacks definitive guidance, thereby necessitating significant emotional, cognitive, and social adjustments. Consequently, this transition profoundly impacts individual psychological well-being (Reuter, 2022).

In the context of the school-to-work transition, educational institutions play a vital role in student career readiness. The findings reveal that all three participants benefited from Mandatory Internship Programs (PKL), which provided practical exposure to professional environments. This aligns with the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes the internalization of workplace soft skills and the enhancement of curriculum-relevant hard skills (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). However, beyond these internships, there remains a deficiency in sustained career counseling. The integration of practical work experience with continuous career guidance is essential to help students understand their career preferences, develop entry strategies, and foster self-efficacy (Nur et al., 2024).

The participants originated from low-income backgrounds, where chronic financial constraints served as a significant barrier, often rendering education a secondary priority. This is consistent with Zaini et al. (2015), who argue that economically disadvantaged families struggle with educational costs as parents prioritize primary needs. The participants felt a sense of responsibility toward their family's financial stability, leading to the decision to work immediately to support themselves and their households. Research by Entwisle et al. (2000) further supports this, noting that a majority of low-income students contribute at least a portion of their earnings to family finances.

Furthermore, marginalized youth often face negative school experiences and challenging life situations (Hofman et al., 2024). This study suggests that economic burdens contributed to a decline in academic interest. Family obligations consciously diverted participants toward financial priorities rather than academic pursuits. Combined with a lack of an academically encouraging environment, these socioeconomic factors lowered the perceived value of education and influenced the decision to bypass higher education (Deswalantri, 2024).

Entering the workforce requires guidance and access to labor market information; a lack thereof can lead to confusion and missteps (Yoto et al., 2013; Dwiyantri et al., 2018). This was evident in Kamila's experience of feeling "aimless" due to the stark contrast between a structured school environment and the dynamic, undefined nature of the professional world. Her difficulty in accessing professional guidance was exacerbated by the costs associated with such services. Youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds

typically have fewer resources to support them during this phase (Gallo et al., 2009; Phelan et al., 2010), yet they are highly receptive to guidance when it is made accessible (ILO, 2004).

Upon employment, participants found themselves constrained by demanding schedules and unpredictable leave. The necessity of overtime sacrificed time and energy that should have been allocated to self-care and social interaction. This imbalance, triggered by various systemic factors, ultimately impacted their job satisfaction.

Participant reports on job satisfaction varied based on their specific work conditions. For Ilman, assisting his father in trade was perceived as low-pressure and enjoyable due to smooth communication. Conversely, Xania and Kamila experienced significant physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion (burn-out) due to high work pressure, unsupportive leadership, and poor organizational management. Both participants expressed intentions to resign, reflecting low job satisfaction. Research indicates that high occupational stress negatively correlates with job satisfaction and psychological well-being, though adequate social support can serve as a vital buffer (Terry et al., 1993).

Three key aspects of psychological well-being emerged: environmental mastery, social relations, and self-reflection. While most dynamics were consistent across participants, differences appeared in environmental mastery (Ryff, 1995). Xania and Kamila struggled with the technical mastery of their roles, financial reporting and massage theory, respectively, which led to interpersonal guilt and decreased self-confidence. In contrast, Ilman adapted seamlessly to his role, demonstrating robust environmental mastery.

Regarding social relations, Xania and Kamila reported professional friction with colleagues, yet this was counterbalanced by positive relationships with family, partners, and friends. These personal circles provided the emotional and practical support necessary to navigate the transition, aligning with the concept that positive social ties lead to higher well-being (Ryff, 1995; Keyes, 2007; Seligman, 2011).

Self-acceptance, a core component of mental health, remained low among participants (Ryff, 1995). They expressed disappointment regarding their life trajectories, particularly the mismatch between expectations and reality. For instance, Ilman felt guilt over his inability to provide financial support as the eldest son, a sentiment common in cultures where males are viewed as the family's economic pillar (Gunawan, 2019; Karjuniwati, 2020).

The transition fostered both adaptive and maladaptive development. Participants, situated in the emerging adulthood stage (Arnett, 2000), experienced significant anxiety regarding their future careers and relationships. This exploration period, while rich in experience, often induces a quarter-life crisis characterized by uncertainty and identity confusion (Santrock, 2011; Robbins & Wilner, 2001). However, the obstacles faced also yielded meaningful lessons, resulting in adaptive development such as increased maturity, self-regulation, and resilience.

Conclusion

This study explored the psychological well-being of youth during the transition to the workforce. The findings indicate that socioeconomic background plays a pivotal role in both the psychological well-being and the educational continuity of young people. Generally, belonging to an economically disadvantaged family creates several longitudinal disadvantages. The three participants in this study faced financial limitations that restricted their access to critical resources, specifically higher education. Consequently, entering the workforce became a necessary strategy to alleviate family economic burdens. However, limited educational attainment significantly constrained their professional opportunities. Furthermore, poor working conditions, exacerbated by low levels of environmental mastery, low self-acceptance, and discordant relationships with colleagues, contributed to poor job satisfaction. Nevertheless, positive relationships with close personal circles served as a vital support system, helping participants navigate the complexities of their lived realities.

As a follow-up to these findings, it is suggested that educational institutions implement advanced career mentoring programs integrated with students' practical work experiences. Such mentoring is essential to bridge the gap between education and the labor market, providing a reflective space for students to deepen their understanding of career interests and preferences. Through sustained guidance, students can develop more navigated strategies for workforce entry and strengthen their self-efficacy in facing post-graduation challenges.

Furthermore, it is imperative for organizations to cultivate equitable and healthy work environments. Strategic measures should include the implementation of structured working hours and the provision of fair compensation for overtime. Companies should also foster positive and inclusive workplace cultures through continuous professional development, creating a climate that supports employee growth. Finally, the government plays a crucial role in strengthening oversight mechanisms and enforcing labor regulations to ensure the protection of workers' rights and promote comprehensive well-being.

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