



Navigating futures: High school career guidance in Vietnam's Mekong Delta through teachers' insights

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Abstract

This study examines the career guidance practices of high school teachers in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, with an objective to understand their perspectives and roles in facilitating students' career decisions. Utilizing a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 teachers, purposively selected from 10 high schools across 7 provinces, to represent a cross-section of the educational landscape in the region. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, meticulously identifying recurring topics and ideas across the interviews to understand the challenges and opportunities in career guidance. The analysis highlighted the critical need for tailored educational strategies to enhance career preparedness. These findings aim to inform policymakers and educators in the Mekong Delta and similar regions, offering a foundation for developing effective career guidance frameworks.

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Introduction

The Mekong Delta region of Vietnam is currently undergoing a remarkable transformation. Traditionally reliant on agriculture, this region has experienced a notable shift towards a more diversified economic landscape. This transformation holds significant implications, especially in the realm of education and career development for high school students (Garschagen et al., 2012). Career guidance, once of peripheral concern, has gained increasing attention in recent years. In the past, career choices here were often restricted by

familial and societal expectations, with many students following traditional agrarian paths in line with their parents' occupations. However, as the region's economic horizons broadened, so did the need for career guidance to navigate this evolving landscape (Loan & Van, 2015). As such, the role of career guidance has become crucial in empowering students to explore their potential and aspirations. This evolution reflects a deeper understanding of career development as not just a choice but a strategic journey, critical to every student's educational experience and life beyond the classroom.

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The education system in the Mekong Delta plays a crucial role in shaping the futures of its youth. High schools, as pivotal institutions in students' lives, have begun incorporating career guidance into their curricula (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2022). This integration reflects the region's recognition of the importance of preparing its youth for the diverse career opportunities emerging within the shifting economic landscape (Collins et al., 2017).

As traditional career pathways in agriculture become less predominant, high school students in the Mekong Delta are faced with a plethora of diverse career opportunities. The transition from conventional roles to a broader spectrum of options has placed new demands on career guidance within high schools (Garschagen et al., 2012; Nguyen & Ye, 2015). However, despite its importance, there is a surprising lack of comprehensive research and literature on this subject, particularly within the specific context of the Mekong Delta. This gap in research is noteworthy, considering the Mekong Delta's distinct economic landscape and its unique challenges and opportunities for career development.

In the field of career guidance, high school teachers assume a pivotal role as mentors and guides for students, assisting them in navigating their educational paths and considering future career prospects. Nevertheless, teachers confront distinctive challenges, encompassing resource constraints, ever-evolving industry landscapes, and the intricate balancing act between traditional teaching obligations and contemporary career counseling demands. The objectives of this article are to examine the roles, practices, and challenges faced by high school teachers in the realm of career guidance within the context of the Mekong Delta while highlighting insights and implications for improving career guidance practices.

Literature Review

Career Guidance in High Schools

Career guidance in high schools is a vital process that aims to empower students with the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness needed to make informed decisions about their educational and vocational futures (Dodd et al., 2022; Pascual, 2014). This empowerment is framed by classic and contemporary theories of career development. Ginzberg's career development theory (Ginzberg, 1988) postulates that individuals progress through stages of vocational choice, an evolution that begins in adolescence

and continues into adulthood. Similarly, Super's career development theory (Super, 1992) offers a lifespan perspective, suggesting that personal growth, self-concept, and experiences influence a career trajectory that extends beyond the formative years into ongoing stages of exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement. Together, these theories underscore the complexity of career decision-making in adolescence, a critical period for laying the groundwork for future career development and fulfillment.

One fundamental aspect of career guidance is self-assessment. High school students engage in activities that help them identify their strengths, weaknesses, interests, and values (Harackiewicz & Hulleman, 2010). Tools such as interest inventories, personality assessments, and skills evaluations are commonly used in this self-discovery phase (Santilli et al., 2020). Access to labor market information is a cornerstone of effective career guidance (Baker et al., 2018). This knowledge empowers them to make strategic career decisions, considering not only their passions but also the practicalities of the job market (Donald et al., 2018). High school counselors provide guidance, support, and a safe space for students to explore their concerns and uncertainties (Bryan et al., 2011). Engaging parents or guardians in the career guidance process is another crucial aspect. It ensures that students receive consistent support and encouragement both at home and at school (Oomen, 2016). In today's digital age, technology plays a significant role in career guidance (Hooley et al., 2015; Sibgatova et al., 2016). Online career assessment tools, virtual career exploration platforms, and digital resources provide students with accessible and up-to-date information.

Challenges in Career Guidance

There are challenges that can impact the effectiveness of career guidance programs and the extent to which students benefit from them. One prominent challenge is the limited resources available for career guidance programs (Archibald et al., 2011). Many high schools operate with constrained budgets, making it challenging to allocate funds for comprehensive career counseling services. Additionally, there is the challenge of evolving industry trends and the rapid pace of technological advancements (Sibgatova et al., 2016). The job market is dynamic, and new professions continually emerge while others become obsolete. The diverse needs of students present another layer of complexity (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Theresa, 2015). High schools enroll students

with varying abilities, interests, and career aspirations. Engaging parents or guardians, while beneficial, can also be challenging (Barnes et al., 2020; Suryadi et al., 2020). Not all parents have the same level of involvement in their child's education, and some may not fully understand the importance of career guidance. A challenge often overlooked is the need for ongoing professional development for career guidance practitioners (Poulsen & Buland, 2020; Reid & West, 2011).

The Teacher's Role in Career Guidance

Career guidance in high schools relies heavily on the active involvement of teachers, who often serve as the primary mentors and influencers in students' lives. Teachers are not merely instructors; they are influencers who can profoundly impact students' career decisions (Liu & Loeb, 2021; Vernon & Drane, 2020). In many cases, students form strong bonds with their teachers, which can enhance the effectiveness of career guidance (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Xiao et al., 2018). This role of teachers is underpinned by a theoretical framework. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy posits that a teacher's belief in their ability to effectively teach and guide is a critical determinant of their instructional behavior (Bandura, 1978). The theory of planned behavior further elucidates that a teacher's intent to provide career guidance is shaped by their attitudes, the perceived norms of their educational context, and their perceived control over the career guidance process (Ajzen, 1991).

Existing Practices in Vietnam's Mekong Delta

Formal roles for career counselors are rare, resulting in limited access to critical resources for both students and teachers. These resources include updated reference materials, counseling facilities, file management systems, and diagnostic tools, which are essential for constructing comprehensive counseling profiles for students (Patel et al., 2008; Tran, 2018). Furthermore, the individuals tasked with career guidance in these high schools often lack formal training in this domain. Frequently, this responsibility falls upon teachers of other subjects or homeroom teachers, who may not have received specialized career counseling training (Giang et al., 2020; Hai et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a noticeable deficit in the depth of knowledge among teachers and career counselors about the labor market and the diverse requirements of various careers (Patel et al., 2008). This knowledge gap hinders their ability to provide accurate

and relevant guidance to students (Dang & Tran, 2020; Giang et al., 2020). These practices and challenges underscore the multifaceted nature of career guidance within high schools in Vietnam's Mekong Delta.

Methodology

Research Design

Our chosen research design was qualitative, and for good reason. Career guidance is a nuanced field with multifaceted dimensions that extend beyond mere statistics or quantitative data. It involves understanding the intricate human experiences and perceptions that shape the career choices of high school students. Qualitative research provided the flexibility and depth required to unearth these complex dynamics (Cohen et al., 2018).

Participants

Our research utilized a snowball sampling technique beginning with our initial contacts in partnered high schools. We conducted interviews with 28 teachers from 10 different public high schools spread across 7 provinces in the Mekong Delta region. These participants are referred to as P1 to P28 in our documentation. This approach allowed us to gain a comprehensive overview of career guidance practices in high schools and the roles that teachers play. While these educators do not encompass the entire teaching population of the region, they were strategically selected to represent a cross-section of the area's career guidance practices.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were our primary data collection method. Their semi-flexible nature allowed us to strike a balance between our research objectives and the unique narratives of each teacher (Cohen et al., 2018). The interview protocol was designed and reviewed by colleagues in the field to ensure that questions were clear, unbiased, and aligned with our research objectives. Pilot interviews were initially conducted to refine the questions, thereby enhancing the validity of the instrument. Each interview, adapted to either in-person or remote settings based on participant preference and availability, spanned 30 to 40 minutes. Questions were intentionally open-ended to provide the teachers with the freedom to express their views and experiences regarding career guidance.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis served as the foundational method for unpacking our qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We extracted initial codes such as “teaching according to textbook themes”, which several educators emphasized as their primary instructional content, and “main focusing on self-exploration”, where teachers encourage students to reflect on their interests and abilities. Other identified codes were “mainly focusing on skill development”, pointing to an emphasis on practical abilities crucial for the workplace, and “focusing on career orientation for students”, reflecting efforts to steer students towards understanding various career possibilities. These codes gave rise to broader themes such as “challenges in career guidance”, encompassing the struggle with resources and keeping pace with labor market trends, and “experiential learning and reflection”, highlighting the teachers’ use of real-world experiences to inform career development. These themes provided a structured insight into the Mekong Delta high school teachers’ approaches to career guidance, which we further enriched with direct quotations to illustrate the diverse educational landscape.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were the bedrock of our research. Informed consent was the cornerstone of our ethical approach. Before any data were collected, teachers were fully informed about the study’s purpose, data collection methods, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Their identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, preserving their anonymity. We maintained a professional and respectful relationship with the participating teachers, ensuring their voices were heard and valued.

Results

General Information about Participating Teachers

Table 1 provides an overview of the specific subjects or departments to which the participating teachers are assigned within their respective high schools. The most frequently assigned roles included teaching Vietnamese Language and Literature, and serving as Homeroom Teachers. These responsibilities were taken on by a significant proportion of the teachers and were likely

to have significantly shaped their engagement with and perspectives on career guidance. Additionally, a small fraction of teachers were assigned to Natural Sciences, while a few held officer roles within their schools.

Main Content of Career Guidance Activities

In our examination of the methods employed by Vietnamese teachers in delivering career guidance, we discover a spectrum of approaches, each tailored to empower students in different aspects of their personal and professional development.

Teaching according to textbook themes

In the realm of career guidance, some teachers adhered to a well-structured plan, aligning their teaching strategies with the official guidelines from the Ministry of Education and Training. These lessons encompassed a range of activities, as described by P12: “For each class, we prepared short skits related to the lesson content, followed by question and answer sessions and report writing”. These teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to a systematic approach aligned with the prescribed curriculum. While the approach ensures a standardized curriculum delivery, it might not fully accommodate the diverse preferences and needs of students from varying backgrounds. However, it is worth noting that some educators injected creativity and innovation into their teaching methods, such as incorporating drama and interactive sessions, to enhance engagement and adapt to students’ differing learning styles.

Table 1 Teaching assignments and positions of participating teachers

Subjects/ Positions	Number of Teachers
Vietnamese Language and Literature	16
Homeroom teachers	15
Social sciences	5
Officers	3
Natural sciences	2

Table 2 Main content covered in guidance activities

Content	Frequency
Teaching according to textbook themes	26
Main focusing on self-exploration	8
Mainly focusing on skill development	6
Focusing on career orientation for students	6
Focusing on experiential learning and reflection	4

Main focusing on self-exploration

Some teachers recognized the importance of self-exploration as a critical component of career guidance. P2, for instance, implemented a “Flipped Classroom” model, encouraging students to engage in independent learning and critical thinking. This method empowered students to develop autonomous thinking, creativity, and critical analysis skills. It encouraged them to research, reflect, and communicate their findings, preparing them for the decision-making processes involved in choosing a career path.

Mainly focusing on skill development

For some teachers, career guidance extended beyond theoretical knowledge and focused on skill development. These educators engaged students in various activities geared toward enhancing their practical skills and abilities. As P26 shared, “Direct teaching through a series of classroom activities and the organization of activities to develop students’ critical thinking skills”. This approach reflected an understanding that having knowledge alone was not enough; students must also possess the practical skills required for their chosen careers. These skills could encompass communication, problem-solving, teamwork, or technical competencies, depending on the specific career paths students aspired to.

Focusing on career orientation for students

Career orientation was a fundamental aspect of effective career guidance. Some teachers organized their lessons to provide students with a clear direction regarding potential career choices. This involved exposing students to various professions, career trends, and job market dynamics. As P11 suggested, activities like “organizing meetings and discussions for students to present, followed by teachers summarizing key points” were essential in this regard. By offering insights into different careers, these teachers helped students develop a broader perspective on their options.

Focusing on experiential learning and reflection

Experiential learning and reflection played a vital role in career guidance. Teachers understood the significance of real-world experiences and their impact on students’ career development. As mentioned by P15, organizing activities such as “field trips, real-life experiences, and club activities” was instrumental in this regard. These hands-on experiences exposed students to the practical aspects of various careers, helping them gain a deeper understanding of what each profession entailed.

Furthermore, the process of reflection allowed students to evaluate their experiences, strengths, and weaknesses, contributing to more informed career choices.

Challenges in Teaching Career Guidance: A Complex Terrain

The evolving landscape of Vietnamese education is ushering in the prominence of career guidance as an essential component of the curriculum. However, in this novel domain, teachers are encountering a spectrum of challenges, as illuminated by the insights of teachers featured in [Table 11](#).

Table 3 Challenges encountered in career experience activity facilitation

Challenges	Frequency
Limited availability of reference materials	20
Ineffectiveness of training sessions	15
Passive engagement of students	10
Misalignment of teaching with expertise	8
Inadequate teacher experience	8
Challenges in organizing field trips	6

Limited availability of reference materials

Teaching career guidance as a separate subject with its own dedicated textbooks brings forth a set of distinctive challenges for educators. According to [Table 8](#), the most prevalent challenge faced by the majority of teachers is the limited availability of reference materials. P14 highlights this difficulty, stating, “Addressing students’ queries about career choices for university admission under the new program. There is no reliable, official information available”. This scarcity of authoritative reference materials poses a significant obstacle in providing students with the guidance they require.

However, it is not just the scarcity of materials that presents a challenge; confusion regarding which books to follow is also a concern. P10 expressed uncertainty, stating that educators are often unsure whether to rely on books or copy content from the internet when teaching career guidance. This ambiguity regarding the choice of resources can lead to uncertainty about whether the materials adequately meet students’ needs. This challenge underscores the pressing need for comprehensive and accessible reference materials that are not only available but also suitable for delivering effective career guidance education.

Ineffectiveness of training sessions

Ineffectiveness of training sessions is a notable challenge that affects the quality of career guidance

education. Teachers like P8 have voiced concerns regarding the outcomes of certain training sessions. This issue raises questions about the adequacy and relevance of training programs available to educators.

It's crucial to recognize that career guidance is a specialized field, and teachers require specific knowledge and skills to deliver it effectively. Unfortunately, some training sessions may fall short in providing this specialized expertise. P9 shared their experience, highlighting that even when provincial departments of education organized training sessions for teachers, they often proved ineffective. These sessions were typically quite short, lasting just one or two days, and the trainers merely read content directly from textbooks. This lack of practical knowledge and contextual relevance rendered the training inadequate for the complex task of guiding students' careers. P11 added to this perspective, noting that the quality of training sessions was inconsistent. Some sessions attempted to be formal and bureaucratic, lacking the effectiveness needed to empower teachers. Interestingly, officers or staff from universities sometimes conducted school visits to consult with students. These external professionals, with their formal training and specialized knowledge, were often more effective in providing career guidance.

Passive engagement of students

Passive engagement of students during career guidance lessons emerged as a prevalent concern among teachers. Many educators expressed frustration with the apparent lack of interest and involvement exhibited by their students. This challenge was brought to the forefront by P10, who observed that students often approached career guidance lessons with indifference, seemingly disinterested in the topic at hand. Such passive engagement can have a detrimental impact on the effectiveness of career guidance efforts, as students may not fully absorb or benefit from the valuable guidance provided. P24's perspective further emphasized this issue, with the observation that some students appeared ignorant and indifferent during career guidance sessions. These students occasionally devoted their attention to homework from other subjects, casting doubt on their commitment to the career orientation process. Some seemed to be influenced by their parents' career intentions, while others appeared more interested in keeping up with the latest trends on platforms like TikTok or Facebook. The cumulative effect was a classroom atmosphere where students did not seem to believe in the importance of career guidance, which presented a significant obstacle for teachers.

Misalignment of teaching with expertise

Another significant challenge arises from the misalignment of teaching with educators' expertise and the lack of clear career direction among students. Educators frequently encounter situations where they are required to teach subjects or provide guidance beyond their areas of expertise, which can pose a substantial obstacle to effective instruction. For instance, P3, a mathematics teacher, expressed the difficulty of adapting teaching materials that fall outside their area of expertise. This misalignment underscores the necessity of specialized training and resources for teachers to effectively deliver career guidance. Furthermore, the challenge of misalignment between teachers' backgrounds and the subject matter is compounded by students' unclear career direction. As highlighted by P19, who specialized in literature but lacked specific knowledge in career guidance, teachers may struggle to orient students' future careers based on their personalities or preferences.

Inadequate teacher experience

One of the significant challenges in the realm of career guidance education is the limited experience among teachers tasked with delivering this crucial subject. This challenge has been identified as a substantial obstacle to the effective delivery of career guidance in schools. As emphasized by P3, some teachers may find it challenging to teach career guidance due to their limited experience in this specialized field. This misalignment between the subject matter and the teacher's background highlights the necessity of specialized training and resources for teachers to deliver career guidance effectively. P10, who started teaching just four years ago, shared their perspective, saying, "when I was a high school student, no one guided me on how to choose a career. Suddenly, as a homeroom teacher, I was asked to teach career guidance with just one week's notice. I felt overloaded trying to prepare lesson plans". This sentiment underlines the broader issue of inadequate experience among teachers in the realm of career guidance. In many cases, teachers may not have received formal training in this area or had the opportunity to develop expertise over time.

Challenges in organizing field trips

Organizing field trips as part of career guidance activities posed logistical challenges for some teachers. P16 shared difficulties in coordinating field trips and ensuring their relevance to the curriculum. Field trips can be valuable for providing students with real-world exposure to various careers. However, these challenges

highlight the need for effective planning, resource allocation, and collaboration to maximize the benefits of such experiences for students.

Discussion

The findings of this research illuminate the state of career guidance in the Mekong Delta, revealing both similarities and differences when compared to the existing literature on this subject. One parallel between the research findings and the literature is the significant issue of teacher training and specialization. The literature underscores the importance of equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge for effective career guidance (Archibald et al., 2011; Poulsen & Buland, 2020). In the Mekong Delta, however, teachers often lacked proper training and specialization in career guidance, reflecting a shortfall also evident in the broader literature (Bryan et al., 2011; Loan & Van, 2015). The research highlighted that these educators received minimal training, leaving them ill-prepared to navigate the intricacies of career counseling. A shared challenge highlighted in both the literature and the current research is the burden of teacher overload. The literature frequently emphasized how teachers, in various contexts, often faced heavy workloads that limited their capacity to provide comprehensive career guidance (Reid, 2022; Reid & West, 2011). Similarly, this study found that teachers in the Mekong Delta were grappling with the demands of daily teaching responsibilities, leaving them with insufficient time and resources for effective career guidance.

However, there are also notable differences and new insights emerging from this research. While the literature highlights the critical role of specialized career counselors in shaping student outcomes (Gong et al., 2013; Reese, 2010; Sanders et al., 2017), this study brings to light a different scenario in the Mekong Delta, where dedicated career counselors are notably absent. Instead, teachers, often already burdened with their general teaching responsibilities, are tasked with providing career guidance. This additional duty may result in a dilution of the efficacy of career guidance, as teachers struggle with inadequate training and preparation, a situation that leaves them ill-equipped to facilitate the kind of developmental process Ginzberg's and Super's theories (Ginzberg, 1988; Super, 1992) describe as essential to students' career maturation. Our findings suggest a misalignment with these theoretical frameworks, as

the teachers' lack of specialized skills could inhibit their ability to adequately support students' vocational development and self-concept formation. Furthermore, the expressed feelings of overload and a lack of interest among teachers indicate a systemic issue where the ideal of comprehensive career guidance is not matched by the reality on the ground.

This study also sheds light on the distinct challenge of limited reference materials, which stands in contrast to the existing literature's recognition of the pivotal role of such materials in effective career guidance (Archibald et al., 2011; Santilli et al., 2020). In this study, teachers must navigate the challenging terrain of career guidance with limited reference points, potentially hindering their capacity to offer well-informed advice. Moreover, the study uncovers a significant issue concerning the qualifications and expertise of teachers tasked with career guidance. The literature has long underscored the importance of specialized training and expertise in delivering effective career counseling (Reese, 2010; Sanders et al., 2017). However, in the Mekong Delta, teachers were asked to fulfill this role without clear qualifications or specialized training. Teachers may inadvertently steer students toward or away from particular career paths based on their individual experiences and perceptions, potentially misaligning students' interests and aptitudes with suitable career options.

Furthermore, the study highlights that some teachers in the Mekong Delta rely heavily on the content presented in textbooks when delivering career guidance. This approach contrasts with the literature's recognition of the need for dynamic and personalized guidance (Gong et al., 2013; Reese, 2010). Relying solely on textbooks could result in a static and outdated approach to career guidance, potentially limiting students' exposure to emerging opportunities and hindering their ability to adapt to evolving career landscapes. Finally, the research also revealed a significant new insight regarding the unclear career direction among students in the Mekong Delta. While existing literature acknowledged the importance of students having some degree of career awareness (Donald et al., 2018; Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Xiao et al., 2018), this study found that many students lacked a clear understanding of their future career paths.

While our findings offer a detailed exploration of career guidance within the Mekong Delta, the themes we uncovered resonate with global challenges in the field. The necessity for specialized teacher training, the balancing of economic shifts with educational needs, and the evolution

of career pathways are issues echoed in the international arena of career guidance. Educators worldwide grapple with similar dilemmas of guiding students through an increasingly complex labor market, a phenomenon not confined to the Mekong Delta but prevalent across diverse global contexts (Gong et al., 2013; Gough, 2017; Sanders et al., 2017). By situating the Mekong Delta's experiences within the broader international discourse, this study contributes valuable insights into the interplay between localized education practices and the universal principles of career development, offering potential strategies and considerations for stakeholders beyond Vietnam's borders.

Conclusion

The research findings spotlight the intricate landscape of career guidance practices in the Mekong Delta, with teachers at the forefront of equipping students with skills for informed career choices. Unique aspects include the absence of dedicated career counselors, the scarcity of reference materials, questions regarding teacher qualifications and expertise, limited teacher experience, and a reliance on textbook content. To address these challenges, recommendations include prioritizing comprehensive training programs for teachers, focusing on specialized knowledge and staying current with career trends, and addressing the scarcity of reference materials through collaboration and centralized databases of career-related information and tools.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The research focused solely on the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, and its findings may not be universally applicable to other contexts. Future research should explore career guidance practices in diverse settings to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies employed. Additionally, this study primarily relied on teacher perspectives. Future research could benefit from incorporating the viewpoints of students, parents, and other stakeholders to provide a holistic view of career guidance practices and needs.

In conclusion, the findings of this research illuminate the unique landscape of career guidance in the Mekong Delta. Teachers in this region take on significant responsibilities, and their approaches are shaped by various challenges. Efforts to provide specialized training, access to reference materials, and ongoing support for teachers can contribute to more effective career guidance. Ultimately, the aim is to empower students in the Mekong

Delta to make well-informed career choices and navigate the complex world of work with confidence.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research study. There are no financial or personal relationships with any individuals or organizations that could influence the research findings or the interpretation of the data.

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