Full Length Research Paper

Reasons for school dropout in vocational high school

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This study aims to discuss the causative factors that lead to vocational high schools dropout by referring to the opinions of the students who did leave the school. A qualitative phenomenological research method has been designed and adopted. The study group consisted of 19 children and young adults (15-24 years old) who continue their education in Yozgat Center Vocational Education. "The history of school dropout" is accepted as the main criteria of the study group. The results revealed that the school dropout was mainly based on institutional (academic failure and discontinuity), social (friends), economic (economic insufficiency) and individual (not favoring the school) ground. Especially students, who continue vocational high schools due to the fact that they do not have any other option, rather than their actual choice to do so, will always run the risk of discontinuity in education. Based on these facts, further evaluation/research on the concept of vocational high school needs to be carried out in a larger scale.

Key words: School dropout, school chosen, vocational high school.

INTRODUCTION

A common consensus could not be reached on how to define the term "school dropout". While some researchers defined the issue as "not enrolling in school even after reaching the compulsory school age"; others defined it as "discontinuing school for two consecutive weeks in one term," and structured their criteria accordingly. Additionally, latter definition causes statistical problems when the student decides to go back to school in later terms and receives his/her diploma.

Long-term discontinuation, failing to get admission, transfer to different schools, can all be also defined as "school dropout" (Gökşen et al., 2006). "School dropout" is also defined as leaving the current step of education without graduating or completing the ongoing educational program by a student who currently continues his/her education (Suh, 2001; Dekkers and Claassen, 2001).

Although some countries try to prevent students from dropping out through enforcing compulsory education, the "school dropout" is accepted as a common global educational problem. According to UNICEF data (2004), the ratio for schooling throughout the world is 81% in the primary school phase. This can be interpreted as; nearly 121 million children, mostly consisting of females, are left out of the educational system. While primary school education is mandatory in most of the countries; the high number of students who are left out of the first phase of the education, indicates a higher schooling in higher phases of education with a lower graduation ratio. For

example, while graduation ratio in middle education (general and vocational) is 83% in OECD countries and 94% in European Union [EU] countries; the mean ratio in Turkey is about 56%. This is the second lowest level among OECD countries after Mexico (49%) (OECD, 2013, 53). In other words, Turkey has the second lowest graduation ratio in middle school education, placing herself in a much lower position below OECD and EU average. Ministry of Education [MoNE] indicates that the schooling ratio of 70.6% in the period between 2011-2012 is a supporting fact of these data (Özoğlu et al., 2013). The leading school dropout causative factors can be classified as individual, economic, socio-cultural and institutional. Expectations of students from the programs they admitted are classified as individual variables. Rumberger (2001) explains individual variables by students' approach, behavior and moral values. Academic relationships of students such as their eager to learn as well as their social engagements as being member of the school are effective on the decision of school dropout.

It is widely accepted that; the low income has an impact on academic failure and school dropout (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Bryk and Thum, 1989; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Larson, 1998; McNeal, 1999; Pong and Ju, 2000, Rumberger, 2001). Children of families with a lower income constitute the risk group of school dropout (Cairns et al., 1989; Alexander et al., 2001; Suh et al., 2007). Socio-cultural variables such as family, ethnic origin social environment or social gender are also used to explain school dropout. Researches show that regarding social gender, comparing with female students, male students demonstrate a higher tendency to drop out of school. Drug and sexual abuse and other problems in the family are also considered as risk factors for school dropout (Cairns et al., 1989; Suh et al., 2007; Sum et al., 2003). Teacher-school relationships and academic failure are considered as institutional variables which are effective on school dropout. Researches indicate a strong relationship between school dropout and academic failure (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Suh et al., 2007).

Studies showed that the above variables are also similar to the variables in Turkey which has an impact on school dropout. The study carried out by Şimşek (2011) which included high school students, showed that the male students have a higher tendency to drop out of school compared to female students. Likewise, students with Arabic and Kurdish ethnic origin demonstrate a higher school dropout tendency than students with Turkish origin. Moreover, school dropout tendency is higher among those students who like their teachers than those who do not. Özer et al. (2011) indicated that family's and friends' support decreases the risk of school dropout while problems such as disciplinary penalty, alcohol-tobacco usage and anti-social behavior increase the risk of school dropout. MoNE (Özoğlu et al., 2013, 214) indicates that forfeiting education right and his/her personal willingness are the main reasons for school dropout among high school students. In the academic years 2011-2013, 59% of male students and 53% of female students left school due to the above reasons. The second reason behind the decision to drop out of school is the wish of the students; 29% of male students and 31% of female students who chose to leave school were based on their own will. 12% of male students and 16% of female students dropped out due to other reasons. Gökşen et al. (2006), in their comprehensive study among primary schools students, showed that, school dropout is related with different reasons including the educational system and school facilities, socio-cultural facts and economic circumstances. According to this research, higher sense of belonging to and taking possession of the school among students increases the rate of continuity in school education. Working and failure to provide educational expenditure and the tuition fees increase the risk of school dropout. In their studies, Özdemir et al. (2010) indicated that the students who have dropped out of school tend to come from economically disadvantageous, crowded and migrant families; and even more among higher than fifth grade students. Additionally, they have pointed out that a supporting, success-oriented and reliable school climate increases the engagement in school and school satisfaction. Taş et al. (2013) indicated that, main causative factors behind the vocational high school dropouts can be school-oriented, family-oriented and individual-oriented. In his study among higher education students, Bülbül (2012) concluded that students who left school have had problems adapting academically and demonstrating economic insufficiencies.

Therefore, it can be strongly suggested that school dropout is related to economic, socio-cultural, institutional and individual variables. Two different studies performed by Educational Reform Initiative [ERI] (ERG, 2010; 2012) have concluded that the highest ratio for school dropout is observed in middle school education and in vocational technical high schools. MoNE (Özoğlu et al., 2013) additionally indicated that compared to the general middle schools, the school dropout ratio is higher among vocational religious high schools and vocational high schools. Both studies concluded that the higher ratio of school dropouts among these vocational schools brings up the necessity of discussing and questioning these schools. Such a questioning can also be used as guidance for determining education policies in the future.

The vocational schools in Turkey, along with the academic teaching, aim to prepare trained labor force for job fields and professions and also prepare the students to further higher education. In this context, there are high schools that operate under different names such as Health Vocational High Schools, Tourism High Schools, and Industrial Vocational High Schools. But in Turkey, the students who fail to attend academic high schools are forwarded to the vocational high schools. Passing an elimination exam is a precondition to register in any

academic high school. Students currently spend consi-derably high amounts of money in order to attend private training courses. That is why the vast majority of the students who are attending the vocational high schools consist of those poor students or students of families with low income that private courses are not affordable for them. Leaving the school by those students from poor and economically disadvantageous segments and the students from those vocational high schools wherein the level of education is not open for higher education, brings them to be divest from the opportunity of any occupation. In Turkey, there is only one published article (Taş et al., 2013), which investigates the reasons of dropouts in vocational schools. The present study is expected to meet a need in Turkish literature; therefore, it aims to discuss the causative and potential factors leading to school dropout in Turkish vocational high schools, addressing the opinions of students.

   In this context the participants were asked the following questions:

1. Why did you prefer the vocational school? What was/were the main reason(s)?
2. When you were a student, how did you use to define yourself as a student?
3. What did the school mean to you while you were a student?
4. Did you experience any problems with the school (your teacher, management or the lessons), friends and your family? Can you give some examples?
5. Why did you leave the school? What was/were the main reason(s)?

METHODOLOGY

Research model

This study was designed with a phenomenological approach as a qualitative research. Phenomenological studies can be defined as the studies which focus on particular facts that have been experienced but could not be reached in detailed and deeper comprehension and acknowledgment (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011). The aim of this study is to understand the underlying factors affecting students' dropout, especially for vocational high school students.

Study group

The research group of the study consisted of 19 students who continue their education in Yozgat Center for Vocational Education[1]. Benchmark sampling technique (an intention-focused sampling

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[1] Yozgat is the capital city of Yozgat province in the Central Anatolia region of Turkey. Yozgat Center for Vocational Education is one the Ministry of National Education institution, aims to earn children aged 14-18 a profession by giving apprenticeship training. Additionally here the individuals, regardless of their age can have further education to become more skilled in their profession.

method) has been adopted to evaluate the study group. While structuring the sample group, the main criteria were accepted to be "the history of school dropout." Of all participants 15 were males whereas 4 were females. The participants were between 15 and 24 years of age. While 6 of the participants do not work, 13 of them were found to be employed. Fifteen of the participants have dropped out of school in the 9th grade, while 4 of did so in the 10th grade.

Data collection instrument

Study data were collected by using a semi-structured interview form. Relevant literatures were reviewed and concepts involving the school dropout were considered in the interview form. An interview form draft was designed by specified concepts related with the research intentions. The draft has been finalized according to the opinions obtained from the academicians who conduct studies on educational sciences. All interviews were performed on a face to face basis throughout the study. First of all, the participants were given information about the research and only volunteers are included in the study. All interviews were recorded by a voice recorder. Three of the participants have asked to stop the recording, indicating that they feel nervous and uncomfortable when the recorder is on. Answers of these participants were set down in writing. During the interview, any approach which may pose a negative effect on data collection process of the study has been avoided; and the role of the researcher was limited to collection, analysis and interpreting of the data.

Data analysis

Research data were analyzed by using a descriptive analysis method. Descriptive analysis is based on a definitive analysis approach by making direct references to the words of individuals without changing the authentic style of the participant (Kümbetoğlu, 2005). First of all, collected data were transformed into texts in computer environment. The text was read a few times by the re-searcher and required encoding has been performed. The questions asked the participants were used to structure the main theme while the answers formed the sub themes. Then, by referring to the codes added, opinions of the participants were placed in main and sub themes. Main and sub themes were placed into tables for easily understanding. The data in tables were supported with the opinions of participants. During encoding; "P" was used to define participants. All participants were given numbers according to the order of interviews; such as P1, P2, P3. These codes were used when referring to the opinions of participants in texts or tables. In qualitative studies, there are different aspects in terms of reliability and validity. While validity is an aspect to be assessed during presentation and analysis of data in qualitative studies, reliability is mainly related to acknowledging the different concepts such as "suitability" ("suitability of method for intention of study") or "discussion" (discussion of research data and interpreting the data) (Kümbetoğlu, 2005). In this context, regarding reliability and validity of the study different ways were adopted. First of all; written interview recordings were checked by an outsourced expert whether the recordings are transformed into computer environment in a correct manner to increase the validity of the research. Secondly, the research process was described in detail. In terms of reliability of the research, the data were transformed without any change, and interpreted with other data when needed. Additionally, regarding all main themes and sub themes derived from the study, inter-encoders reliability analyses were conducted by a specialist, experienced in quantitative studies. For this procedure, Miles and Huberman's (1994) reliability formula was adopted; and the reliability percentage of encoders was calculated to be 84%.

Table 1. Opinions about reasons for choosing vocational high schools.

Main theme	Sub themes	Participant code
	Score sufficiency	P1, P4, P5, P8, P12, P15, P16, P17
	Vocational expectations	P2, P6, P9, P19
	Family ınfluence	P7, P18
Reason for choosing the school	Influence of friends	P11, P8
	Close location of the school	P3, P14
	Interest	P10, P15
	Other	P13

FINDINGS

All findings were presented with direct references to the words of the participants in line with the intention of the study.

Reasons for choosing vocational high schools

First of all, in order to find the reasons for choosing these institutions, the participants were asked why they had chosen vocational high schools. The answers are given under "school choosing" main theme with seven sub themes in Table 1.

When opinions of participants are taken into consideration, it can be seen that the majority of participants explain their reasons for choosing a vocational high school is related to institutional reasons such as "score sufficiency". This group of students pronounced the reasons of their preference as follows:

"My score was sufficient for that school. Other schools were full, so I made my choice (P12)."
"My score was enough for that school. It was not sufficient for other schools so I went there. I didn't want to study either. That was the main reason, I didn't want to. Working was easier for me. I still think the same way now (P16)."
Reason for choosing these schools, participants have also referred to economic variables. Participants who were thinking in this way shared their opinions as follows:

"It was the vocational school… an easier future for me. That was my reason. Vocational high schools are more advantageous than general high schools, that's why I chose it. Finding a job is easier, that's why I chose there. (P6)."
"How should I say, let's see. I want to have my own profession. No one has managed this in my family, so I wanted to have a profession. (P19)."

Some participants, on the other hand, told that their reasons were; "*I wasn't thinking. My friends were enrolling so I did too. My score was not enough too…*

(P8)" and "*There was Quran education so my father wanted me to go there. I didn't oppose but I didn't continue when I failed the class (P7)".* With these words, these participants have explained the social-cultural variables such as "*friendship*" and *"family will".*

Perception of school

The participants were also asked about their perception towards the school as this issue is thought would have both direct and indirect influence on dropping out of school. Opinions of participants on this matter are given under "school perception" main theme title in Table 2.

When opinions of the students are considered, majority's perception is found out to be positive. Participants talked about their perception by saying; *"I liked it. I felt enthusiastic about going to school. Then we got bored and tired, and stopped coming (12)."*

On the other hand, according to some participants, school was not a favored, but a boring place. Some participants quoted out: "*I never liked school. We didn't attend either. We were always wandering in the city. We never actually did go to school. We were walking, playing with birds, just wandering. We didn't actually go to school. And teachers didn't do something about this either (P11)."*

By indicating the opportunity of getting a "job" as their
Only one student referred to the school as a place to learn a profession by stating; *"How can I say, I wanted to have my own job, to be independent in the future. But I couldn't continue for some reasons. But I will continue; no matter how old will I be; we should benefit from these advantages government gave. Our fathers and mothers can't support us forever (14)."*

Academic self- concept

The participants were asked how they regard themselves as a student to learn about their self-concept in terms of their academic life. This has been thought to have direct and indirect influence on school dropout. Opinions of participants on this matter are given in Table 3, under

Table 2. Opinions on school perception.

Main theme	Sub themes	Participant code
	A favored/good place	P1,P2, P7,P9,P10,P12,P13,P15,P18,P19
School perception	A not favored/boring place	P3,P6,P8,P11,
	A place to learn a profession	P14

Table 3. Opinions on academic self- concept.

Main theme	Sub themes	Participant code
	Successful	P2, P3, P9, P10, P12, P18
	Medium level of success	P1, P8, P11, P13
Academic self-concept	Unsuccessful	P5, P7
	Spoiled	P6
	Favored	P14
	Undesired	P17

Table 4. Opinions on their conception of their social relations.

Main theme	Sub themes	Participant code
	No problems	P1,P2,P7,P8,P9,P10,P12,P13,P15P16,P18
Social relations	Some problems	P2, P4, P14, P17

"academic self-concept" main theme and six sub themes.

When academic self-concept of participants is taken into consideration, it can be seen that some participants defined themselves as *successful*, *moderately successful* and *favored* students, but some defined themselves as "*unsuccessful*", "*undesired*" and "*problematic*" students, with a low academic self-concept perception. A participant who claimed that he/she was an unwanted student; shared his/her ideas as follows:

"During my studies, I was a student who nobody wante, nobody accepted me and I was transferred from one school to another. My previous school was a place where dormitory kids were educated. From there (previous school) I was sent to another school (the one which the student left) by my family. There, my friends did not accept me as I was coming from the other (previous) school (P17)".

Another participant who told that he/she was a "spoiled" student said; "*I was sent to disciplinary committee, but not that much. Of course I was not sent due to serious stuff, which required penalty. Not that heavy stuff, but kind of like behaviors of a spoiled child. From primary school to high school I was a problematic child. Maybe this may be was a little because I was the youngest kid of the home in my family (P6)."*

Their conception of their social relations in the school

The participants were asked whether they had any problems with school administration, teachers, friends or family members during their studies. This issue was also thought to be directly or indirectly influential on school dropout. The opinions in this matter are classified in six sub themes under the main theme of "social relations". Opinions of participants are given in Table 4, under relevant sub themes.

When social relations identity perceptions of participants are taken into consideration, majority of participants said that they have not experienced any problems with their family members, friends or school environment.

A participant explained her/his problematic relationship with their teacher as *"We had a problem with a teacher of ours. We had an event... He beat me there. Tried to throw me out of school… I didn't experience any problem with any other teacher. (P2)".* While a participant claimed to have problems due to the rules applied by the school management, said that; "*I was sent to the disciplinary committee for fighting with others all the time (P17)".* Another participant said; "*I was receiving psychiatric support back then. I had a disorder, which was discovered later. I got obsessed on that, which this affected… My*

Table 5. Opinions on reason of school dropout.

Main theme	Sub themes	Participant code
Reasons for school dropout	Discontinuity	P1, P6, P9, P11
	Economic reasons	P2, P3,P8,P10,P18
	Influence of friends	P13,P14
	Academic failure	P4,P6,P7,P15,P19
	Influence of not liking school	P5, P8, P16
	Disciplinary issues	P17

friends always made fun of me, nobody would ever talk to me (P14)"; indicating the friendship factor as the reason behind the problem.

Reasons for school dropout

The participants were asked why they had dropped out of school. The opinions were classified under "reason of school dropout" main theme with five sub themes. Opinions of participants are given in Table 5.

Participants explained their decisions for school dropout with different reasons. Some participants related their decision to dropping out of school with institutional reasons such as "discontinuing", "academic failure" and "disciplinary" penalties.

Other participants explained their reasons for leaving the school with individual and social variables by saying; *"I was interested in vehicles but I didn't want to learn about how they work or how to assemble them; (P16)"* or *"… My friends always made fun of me. Nobody would ever spoke to me. That's why I had to leave the school (P14)."*

On the other hand, some participants based their decisions on economic variables by saying that: *"I was studying textile; but after my father died, I had to leave school. Because without income, it was very hard. Textile study materials, especially for that school, were very expensive. Of course without income... That time, my mother did not have any income and my brothers were workless. They didn't study either. My father was paying for my education. When he passed away; my teachers offered to pay my expenses. But to what extent could they pay?... My mother also said so. Anyway, that's how I left school (P18)."*
"Why I dropped out of school?... I didn't like it and also our financial situation was not that great, so I decided to leave. My family was able to pay but our condition was not that good. My mother also agreed. We may say, yes, it was financial difficulties (P8)."
"We had a house built here, it caused us economic difficulties. My father could not pay the debt, then, we decided to get a job rather than continuing school. We built our own house. I dropped out the school all of a

sudden ma'm. Due to financial reasons… (P10)."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings revealed that, the reasons behind leaving school where the participant have chosen, were mainly related to institutional (sufficiency of score), economic (expecting to get a job) and social-cultural (influence of family and friends) variables. School preference/ educational demand of individuals are generally evaluated according to their expectations, demands and requirements from an education. On the other hand, the expectations and demands that influence the decision of individuals are not necessarily sufficient. Rules and elimination systems play a restrictive role in applying to an educational program (Tural, 1994). Only one participant (P10) declared that he/she has selected his/her school because he/she is actually "interested in it". These results pointed out the fact that institutional (score sufficiency) and social (influence of family and friends) variables can be rather more influential than individual will. A study from Denmark showed that school preference of students from families with similar income levels are based on cultural capital of the student, which have acquired from their family, rather than the financial status of the family (Jaeger, 2009). It has been discovered that, 65.4% of students coming from families with a higher education level choose academic high schools of science; while only 4% of students coming from these families apply to a technical high school (Özoğlu et al., 2013, 36). These data may be interpreted as; socio-cultural and economic level of the family plays a more influential role on school preference.

Influence of institutional variables can be explained by considering the educational policies of the countries. In Turkey, a student to be able to continue his/her education in an academic high school is determined by the score he/she gets in a countrywide annual competitive exam which is performed centrally. In this scope, vocational high schools provide an option for students who cannot pass the exam and therefore cannot continue academic high schools. Students who fail to get a sufficient score in the central examination of the ministry can be accepted by different vocational high schools according to the

mean score of their primary school diploma. On the other hand, a law that has been passed in Turkey in 2012, has increased compulsory education from 8 years to 12 years, making high school education mandatory. Even though this law seems to be a positive development, it is also regarded to have a negative influence on individuals, due to the fact that it enables people to graduate from high school via remote education; making attaining education unnecessary. To sum up, one can say that students who fail to get a sufficient score in the central exam to continue an academic high school, mainly choose to go to a vocational high school, or start working while trying to graduate by means of remote education. Eleven of our participants were continuing remote education.

Vocational expectations as a reason of preferring these schools can be explained with income necessities. In fact, school preferences of the students after primary school reflect their vocational preferences. In this context, the level of income and earnings expectation of individuals transforms into their vocational expectations (Ünal, 1996). The present research agrees with the researches on vocational high school preferences in Turkey (Çakar, 2000; Gürol, 2002; Tek, 2006; Yolcu, 2011) which have reflected that the students choose a vocational high school with the expectation of getting a job earlier.

Rumberger (2001) indicated that individual factors such as approach, behavior and attitude of students may influence the school dropout. On the other hand, the latter study concluded that some participants have positive perceptions towards academic self-concept, social relations while some have negative perceptions. When academic self-concept is considered as an expression of past experiences and social relationships of individuals that influence on their emotions, social relationships and experiences in school life may also be considered as an influential fact on the school dropout. For example, different researches showed the protective influential role of positive teacher support on the school dropout (Özer et al., 2011; Lessard et al., 2010; Englund et al., 2008). Therefore, the results of the present study showed similarities with the findings of latter studies.

Respecting the institutional reasons there are researches that emphasized on the significant relationship between school dropout and academic failure (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Suh et al., 2007) Academic failure is the leading center of attention for educational scientists. Trying to explain academic failure solely based on cognitive features of the students, will of course make a realistic approach difficult. Academic failure is thought to be related to social-cultural-economic reasons. For example; some researchers underlined the fact that income has a strong influential effect on academic failure and school dropout (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Bryk and Thum, 1989; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Larson, 1998; McNeal, 1999; Pong and Ju, 2000, Rumberger, 2001).

The lower the income, the higher the risk regarding school dropout (Cairns et al., 1989; Suh et al., 2007). On the other hand, the research of Carneiro and Heckman (2002); which aimed to answer whether income or family features have a stronger influence on the student's will to continue school education, pointed out that socio-cultural features of the family has a deeper influence than income.

Discontinuation was found to be another institutional variable that results in school dropout. Current study showed similarities with other studies which indicate that students with a higher school absentee rate have a higher tendency to leave their school education (Rumberger, 1995; Goldschmidt and Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 1995; Swanson and Schneider, 1999; Suh et al., 2007; Taş et al., 2013). The present study enlightened that the participants have listed their reasons for absence in school as the boredom they feel at school, their unloving attitude towards the school and their preference of wandering around different parts of the city. This finding can also be defined as an explanatory fact for variables caused by individual reasons such as not liking school.

When social variables that result school dropout are taken into consideration, the influence of friends has also been found to have an important effect that causes the student to leave school. Among two participants who said that they have left school due to social reasons, one said that he/she has left the school due to bad friendships around the school while the other said that he/she has been alienated due to his/her illness. In terms of female students, the unsafe environment around the school or feeling insecure in the school environment reportedly found to be influential on deciding to leave school (cited Taş et al., 2013; Taş et al., 2013). The status of participants who claimed that they left school because they have been marginalized by their peers, may be explained by social alienation concept. In fact researches discovered that; social alienation has an influence on low academic success rate and school dropout (Warrington, 2005).

School dropout due to economic reasons was another finding of our study. This finding also supported the results of other studies (Bryk and Thum, 1989; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Larson, 1998; McNeal, 1999; Pong and Ju, 2000, Taş et al., 2013). The fact that 13 of our participants were working at different jobs indicated that income level was an important influential causative factor leading the school dropout. For example; a scholarship program, which has been realized by Indonesian Government during Asia Economic Crisis has resulted in 30% decrease in number of school dropouts (Cameron, 2009). This example can be considered as an important indication in terms of government's responsibility for preventing students from school dropout.

As a result, it is clear that the school dropout is strongly integrated with different economic, institutional, individual and social variables. Rather than individuals, the government has the prime responsibility for preventing and

eliminating the causes that lead students to leave school. The government is the primary mechanism which enables individuals to benefit from a well-defined education system that meets their educational needs as a basic human right. Especially, students who continue vocational high schools due to the fact that they do not have any other option, rather than their actual choice to do so, will always run the risk of discontinuity in education. Therefore, students will continue to drop out of school. Based on these facts, further evaluation/research on the concept of vocational high school needs to be carried out in a larger scale.

Conflict of Interests

The author have not declared any conflict of interests.

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