

SHS Graduates' Employment: Curriculum Impact and Challenges

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Abstract

The K-12 system in the Philippines aims to improve education quality, equip graduates with industry-relevant skills, and enhance labor market readiness. Hence, this study delves into the experiences of senior high school (SHS) graduates who entered the workforce directly, evaluating the K-12 curriculum's effectiveness in preparing them for employment while identifying the challenges they face at work. The researchers employed phenomenological approach and utilized purposive sampling to select seven SHS graduates from Mandaue City. Semi-structured interview guide was conducted during the data collection process. Subsequently, thematic analysis was applied using Braun and Clarke's method to identify themes within the participants' responses. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Senior High School's Impact on Employment Success, (2) Perceived Employment Challenges and Disparities, (3) Shortcomings of SHS Curriculum in Workforce Preparation, and (4) Factors Shaping Career and Life Trajectory. The study's findings underscore the multifaceted impact of SHS education on employment success, including the need for a balanced curriculum that integrates practical skills development to prepare students for the evolving workforce. This study recommends enhancing the SHS curriculum with hands-on learning, fostering industry collaboration, allocating resources, and tracking graduates' employment trajectories for continuous improvement and relevance in the job market.

Keywords: *SHS graduates; K-12 curriculum; Employment; Challenge; Phenomenology*

1. Introduction

Before its major educational reform, the Philippines had only 10 years of basic education, unlike most countries that offer 12 years before college (UNESCO, 2011). The 2013 Basic Education Act then mandated two years of senior high school (SHS) along with four years of junior high school, six years of elementary, and compulsory Kindergarten (Official Gazette, 2013). This reform aimed to allow students of varying learning abilities to develop skills and lifelong learning (Abragan et al., 2021). According to DepEd Memo No. 169, s. 2018, graduates from SHS can choose higher education, middle-level manpower, entrepreneurship, or employment. The improvement of the curriculum in DepEd aligns with preparing SHS graduates for lifelong learning and employment, as mandated by the K12 program. These changes focus on enhancing learning activities and the curriculum to equip students for employment after they have graduated from SHS (Carada et al., 2022; Canezo & Naval, 2016).

To achieve this objective of the SHS curriculum in addressing the concern of employment readiness for graduates, SHS creates several opportunities. Firstly, standard requirements are set to ensure that graduates possess the necessary knowledge and skills to be employable. Additionally, SHS enables students to apply for Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) Certificates of Competency (COCs) and National Certificates (NCs), enhancing their job prospects. Partnerships with various companies are established, particularly for technical and vocational courses, providing students with valuable industry connections and potential employment opportunities. Moreover, SHS allows students to gain work experience while studying, potentially leading to job offers from companies upon graduation. Overall, the SHS curriculum is designed to equip students with the skills, certifications, and practical experiences necessary for successful employment outcomes (Official Gazette, 2012).

Several studies have analyzed the impact of the Philippines' K12 educational reforms on workforce readiness and employment outcomes. For instance, a study conducted by Carada et al. (2022) compellingly demonstrates that SHS graduates exhibit a commendable array of skills essential for thriving in the contemporary workforce. This research adeptly identifies both technical prowess and emotional intelligence as indispensable predictors of

employability among senior high school graduates, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of skill acquisition and its implications for career success. Another study conducted by the Philippine Business for Education (PBE) in 2018 revealed that the inaugural cohort of SHS graduates possessed approximately 93% of competencies deemed essential for meeting the demands of the country's industries (Llego, 2022). These competencies, encompassing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, underscore the potential of SHS graduates to contribute effectively to the workforce and address the evolving challenges of the nation's economic landscape.

Existing literatures assess the employability of high school graduates. They aim to determine if these graduates possess the necessary competencies, skills, and factors that make them ready and likely to be employed in the workforce. However, there is a need to delve deeper into the actual experiences and perspectives of senior high school graduates who immediately enter the workforce. There is limited focus on exploring the experiences of these graduates regarding their ability to secure employment and the challenges they face in the job market. Understanding the impact of their educational background on employment opportunities, identifying challenges encountered in the workforce, and exploring their future career and life paths can provide valuable insights for improving the effectiveness of the K-12 curriculum in preparing students for successful transitions into the workforce.

Recognizing the limitations of existing research, this study aims to conduct a phenomenological exploration into the experiences of SHS graduates who chose immediate entry into the workforce over pursuing higher education. The primary objective is to assess the effectiveness of the K-12 curriculum in securing employment opportunities for these graduates and to identify the specific challenges they encountered in the realm of employment. Through qualitative analysis and in-depth interviews with participants, the research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing employment outcomes for Senior High School graduates who opt for immediate workforce entry. This study intends to fill the existing gap in research by providing valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and future aspirations of this specific group, contributing to enhancing the effectiveness of educational pathways and career preparation strategies for young individuals transitioning into the workforce directly from Senior High School.

This proposed research aims to provide valuable insights into the experiences and outcomes of SHS graduates who directly enter the workforce. By exploring their lived experiences, challenges, aspirations, and perceptions, the study deepens the understanding of how well the K-12 curriculum prepares students for employment and the factors influencing their job opportunities. This understanding is crucial for policymakers, curriculum developers, career counselors, and other stakeholders involved in shaping educational and workforce programs. Furthermore, identifying the challenges these graduates face in employment can inform targeted interventions and support mechanisms for a smoother transition from education to the workforce, ultimately aligning educational objectives, workforce demands, and the career aspirations of Senior High School graduates.

2. Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological study aims to explore the experiences of Senior High School graduates who immediately entered the workforce. It aims to determine the efficacy of the K-12 curriculum in securing employment and to identify the challenges these graduates have faced. Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. How does a participant's educational background from Senior High School contribute to their ability to secure employment?
2. What challenges did the participants perceive in their employment experiences?
3. How do the participants envision their future career path and life trajectories?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Reforming the Philippine Education System: Integrating Senior High School to meet Global Standards

A study shows that in order to support sociocultural, political, educational, and economic advancements in the Asia-Pacific area, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) emphasizes the collaboration between member states. Since education is the foundation of all progress, the ASEAN has stressed the necessity of implementing K–12 basic education programs across the region. The Philippines has a high percentage of college graduates, yet the country's educational system still lags behind that of its ASEAN neighbors, indicating the urgent need for extensive change. Other ASEAN countries' K–12 curricula have improved educational quality in comparison to the Philippines' comparatively recent introduction, enabling their graduates to compete globally. With this approach, Philippine education will become more akin to that of the most developed ASEAN nations. The K–12 toolkit for basic

education institutions is the first step in this transition, which begins at the bottom up. Additionally, by bringing Philippine educational institutions into line with international institutions, the synchronization of the academic calendar will enable students to pursue higher education (Department of Education and SEAMO INNOTECH, 2012).

The laid-out concepts underscore the importance of when the Philippine education system reformed its curricula by adding two years of senior high school by adopting to western and eastern education systems. The curricula are composed of essential standards as provided by the Republic Act 10533 in the Philippines. Adapting the international standard of a 12-year basic education curriculum in the Philippines gives better opportunities for every Filipino to become globally competitive (Irmano et al., 2022). The initiative to implement the K to 12 curriculum in the Philippines seeks to elevate the quality of education, bringing it closer to the standards observed in the most developed ASEAN countries. This transformation begins at the grassroots level, with the rollout of the K to 12 toolkit for basic education institutions. Additionally, synchronizing the academic calendar enables Philippine educational institutions to engage in collaborative endeavors with international counterparts, facilitating broader educational opportunities for students (Department of Education and SEAMO INNOTECH, 2012).

3.2 The Structure and Tracks of Senior High School Education in the Philippines

The Republic Act No.10533 or also known as “Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013”, the enhanced basic education program encompasses at least one (1) year of kindergarten education, six (6) years of elementary education, and six (6) years of secondary education, in that sequence. Secondary education includes four (4) years of junior high school and two (2) years of senior high school education (Official Gazette, 2013).

SHS students should undertake a standard core curriculum and will choose from four tracks: academic, technical-vocational and livelihood (TVL), sports, or arts and design. The academic track is further divided into four strands: Accountancy, Business, and Management (ABM); Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM); Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS); and General Academic Strand (GAS). The TVL track also has four strands and various specializations under each one: home economics; information and communications technology (ICT); Agri-Fishery Arts and Industrial Arts.

The K-12 program is intended to prepare students for higher education and to equip them with skills and knowledge enabling them to be competent globally. As per the Department of Education (DepEd), the SHS Curriculum within the K to 12 Program strives to cultivate graduates who are holistically developed, possess essential 21st-century skills, and are prepared for their future, whether it involves higher education, intermediate skills, or entering the workforce or entrepreneurship (DepEd, 2016, as cited in Abrigo & Orbeta, 2023).

3.3 Current Status and Challenges of Senior High School Curriculum Implementation in the Philippines

Currently, DepED is still enhancing the implementation of the senior high curriculum as it is in the face of high dissatisfaction with the program. A survey conducted by Pulse Asia commissioned by Sen. Sherwin Gatchalian in 2023 demonstrated that only 41% of 1,200 respondents expressed satisfaction with the program, while 42% said they were unsatisfied, and 16% were undecided (Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), 2023). One of the key factors contributing to the high dissatisfaction with the K-12 program is its failure in fulfilling its promise to equip students with the essential skills needed to secure employment upon completing senior high school. The DepEd announced plans to enhance the SHS curriculum, emphasizing increased opportunities for students in terms of employment, entrepreneurship, advanced education, and training. Initially introduced in 2016, the SHS program extended the basic education system by two years to meet global benchmarks. Its goal was to produce SHS graduates ready for employment, but according to DepEd, various studies indicate that the program has not met this objective effectively (PIDS, 2023).

The status of curriculum was even worsened when the pandemic emerged in the country greatly affecting its effectiveness in delivering quality education to the students. The effectiveness of virtual learning for K-12 students compared to traditional face-to-face instruction remains debated, possibly due to teachers' limited expertise in remote teaching methods and students' varying levels of motivation to participate in virtual learning (Arnesen et al., 2019). There are various challenges that may hinder the smooth functioning of public schools. The operational issues that school confront are insufficient facilities, lack of teachers, and application requirements to be able to offer different SHS tracks. Conversely, private schools primarily encounter limitations due to the lack of student demand or enrollment (32.9%), compliance with application requirements for offering different SHS tracks (13.2%), and inadequate facilities (12.7%) (Uy & Martinez, 2018).

To bridge the gap between the challenges faced by the education sector and the ongoing efforts to address them, Vice President and DepEd Secretary Sara Duterte admitted in 2023 that the department only managed to

construct 3,673 new classrooms, falling short of its target (Chi, 2024). This highlights ongoing insufficiencies in addressing classroom shortages, which have persisted through various DepEd administrations. According to DepEd's report, approximately 5,000 schools in the Philippines lack basic necessities, significantly hindering students and teachers and impacting the quality of education. This lack extends to insufficient classrooms, textbooks, and teaching resources, posing challenges to effective learning. The overall lack of resources and infrastructure in schools directly affects students' ability to attend classes regularly and concentrate on their studies, ultimately compromising the quality of education they receive (Bai, 2023).

Another issue faced by the department is the pressure many students feel to choose alternative tracks or strands in their chosen schools. Initially enrolling based on the availability of their preferred tracks or strands, students later encountered discontinuations due to teacher shortages or low student enrollment. This forced students to either transfer schools or switch to different tracks or strands. Some compromised and chose alternative strands as their initial choices were unavailable at their preferred schools (Orbeta et al., 2018).

The potential of Senior High School (SHS) graduates to secure employment is underscored by a study conducted by the Philippine Business for Education (PBE) in 2023. This study highlighted that with comprehensive training and skills development opportunities, SHS graduates become highly employable. PBE Executive Director Justine Raagas emphasized that SHS graduates are employable given the right exposure and training to develop better mechanisms for government, industry, and academe to collaborate, bridging the gap between education and the workforce (PBE, 2023).

This notion aligns with findings from Carada et al. (2022), which demonstrate that SHS graduates possess cognitive, technical, and emotional skills crucial for employability. Another study by PBE's workforce development program further supports this, showing that out of 294 K-12 graduates who underwent work-based training, 222 successfully secured employment, resulting in an overall employment rate of 76% (PBE, 2023). These findings collectively highlight the effectiveness of providing SHS graduates with the right training and opportunities for workplace exposure in enhancing their employability.

However, despite the overall positive outlook on SHS graduates' employability, the report from the Bureau of Curriculum Development highlights variations in employment outcomes across different SHS tracks. According to their findings, the SHS TVL track showed the highest employment rate at 9.7%, followed by the Academic track at 6.2%. In contrast, the Arts & Design and Sports tracks reported significantly lower employment rates at 0.03% and 0.02%, respectively (Llego, 2021). These statistics suggest a notable discrepancy in employment prospects among graduates from various SHS tracks, highlighting the need for further investigation into the factors influencing such disparities. The findings underscore the complexity of the job market dynamics and the multifaceted nature of employability factors beyond academic qualifications and soft skills. Thus, there is a compelling need for continued research to better understand the nuances of employability and to inform educational policies and practices aimed at enhancing graduates' workforce readiness.

3.4 The Role of Work Immersion in Preparing Students in the Workforce

Work Immersion is an integral part of the SHS curriculum, designed to expose students to real-world job environments and bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical application (Aid, 2018). It provides students with firsthand experience in workplaces relevant to their chosen tracks or strands, fostering essential skills like professionalism, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork. According to Okabe (2013), this experience not only helps students explore career options and make informed decisions about their future but also deepens their understanding of industry norms and practices, preparing them for the transition from school to work or further education. Participation in a work immersion program during senior high school is essential for it exposes students to the realities of the job, allowing them to develop and refine their work habits and ethics. It also serves as a tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the module designed specifically for work immersion purposes (Okabe, 2013).

According to DepEd, work immersion in SHS is designed to equip learners with life and career skills while aiding them in deciding on post-secondary education or employment paths. DepEd aims to facilitate partnerships with institutions to provide learners with work immersion opportunities, hands-on experience, and additional learning resources. The goal is for learners to understand and apply school-taught principles and theories, enhance technical knowledge and skills, improve communication and human relations abilities, and develop good work habits, attitudes, and respect for work (DepEd, 2017). This concept aligns with the study by Estrada et al. (2020), which highlights that students who undergo work immersion have experienced personality development, including improvements in social skills, confidence, and behavior patterns.

Multiple studies have explored the impact of work immersion programs on Senior High students. Students view work immersion as valuable, meaningful, and challenging, offering a realistic glimpse into post-graduation life. Bustamante

(2019) highlights how work immersion provides employment simulation and allows students to apply classroom competencies to real work settings. Similarly, Cruz and Permejo (2020) note that students develop strong work potency, gaining confidence in managing tasks and improving communication skills. They also excel in communication and interpersonal skills, crucial for navigating diverse work environments. Borling et al. (2023) further support these findings, demonstrating that work immersion significantly boosts leadership, self-efficacy, and communication skills, contributing to students' social development.

The readiness and willingness of enterprises to accept work immersion activities of senior high school students are evident (Budomo, 2020). While most enterprises do not require interns, they are prepared to engage with SHS students in work immersion, indicating industry support for bridging the gap between classroom learning and practical experiences. By engaging in work immersion, learners can practically apply their learned skills and test themselves outside the school environment. This experience not only allows them to apply previous training but also exposes them to social interactions in a work setting, fostering valuable skills and values for their transition into real-life scenarios after high school (DepEd, 2017).

3.5 Reluctance Towards Employing Senior High School (SHS) Graduates

Senior high school graduates have acquired valuable skills through the K-12 program, rendering them employable. However, employers often exhibit hesitation in hiring SHS graduates and prefer candidates with college degrees, as noted by PIDS (2022). This preference for college degree holders is prevalent across various sectors, impacting the job prospects of SHS graduates significantly. Hence, DepEd urges companies to employ more K-12 finishers to give them opportunities to show that they are job-ready (Monzon, 2022). Additionally, the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry's Human Resources Development Foundation Inc. (PCCI HRDF) highlighted that companies are reluctant to hire fresh graduates, possibly due to the perceived lack of necessary skills and training provided by the current SHS program (Orbeta et al., 2018).

Private firms specifically criticize the SHS program for its insufficient skills and training alignment with industry needs. They point out the limited 80-hour work immersion requirement in the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) track, which they argue fails to provide adequate depth for skill application or the development of crucial soft skills like communication, work ethic, teamwork, leadership, and appropriate attitudes and values for potential job roles (Egay, 2021).

Moreover, The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) reported during a House committee hearing that around 180,000 local jobs are available for high school graduates. However, employers express concerns about the readiness of SHS graduates for the workforce, prompting a recommendation for a more focused SHS curriculum to cultivate strand-specific competencies for work (PBed, 2023). The May 2023 report from DOLE also indicated job prospects for high school graduates such as positions in production, machine operation, call centers, sales, and technical support. This finding is consistent with Orbeta et al.'s (2018) study, where employers noted that available job opportunities for SHS graduates mainly comprised entry-level positions in administration, customer service, sales, and marketing. Consequently, senior high graduates often receive lower salaries than college degree holders in entry-level positions (Cuy & Salinas, 2019).

Coetzee et al., (2019) found that individuals' mindset about employability influences self-confidence in finding or creating employment opportunities. It is seen as one of the identified factors reflected in numerous which affect SHS employment. As stated by Norman and Hyland (2023), confidence is one issue that often comes and will hinder the employability of SHS graduates. Lack of confidence has a significant predictor influencing the employment of SHS graduates. Twenty percent of SHS graduates enter the workforce while the others pursue college education because they lack the confidence to be work-ready (PIDS, 2022). These findings suggest that improving confidence through the target interventions may enhance senior high school graduates' employability. Education has a substantial impact on employment prospects (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2012).

To address and alleviate employers' doubts in hiring SHS graduates, industries have emphasized the importance of acquiring soft skills, which are highly valued by employers. Soft skills development, as emphasized by research from Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Center, plays a crucial role in job success, with 85% of success attributed to well-developed soft skills and people skills (Mann, 1918, as cited in National Soft Skills Association, 2015). Soft skills, also known as people skills, are crucial for effective teamwork and goal achievement. Employers highly value these skills, even in technical roles, as they enable employees to collaborate effectively and contribute positively to the workplace environment (Kenton, 2023). They include personality traits, attitude, adaptability, motivation, and etiquette, essential for success in professional settings. Unlike hard skills, which are job-specific and measurable, soft skills are key factors in retention and career advancement decisions (Doyle, 2022).

Several studies have explored the employment potential of Senior High School (SHS) graduates, noting the value of their foundational education in developing essential skills like literacy, numeracy, and soft skills necessary for effective workplace communication and performance. Additionally, SHS programs often include vocational training, providing graduates with industry-specific knowledge and technical competencies. Notably, a study by the NCES (2023) highlighted the employment success of high school graduates in the United States, with 61% of those aged 25-34 being employed in 2020 (COE, n.d.).

However, challenges remain, with studies like Horn's (2006) indicating that some SHS graduates face barriers in entering the workforce due to a perceived lack of readiness. In response, the study of Homan et al. (2019) focused on workforce competencies among high school graduates. The findings indicate a promising trend in high self-reported competency scores, particularly in social-dynamic or soft skills, which viewed as important as technical skills in securing entry-level employment. Other authors like Cho and Jyung's (2014) delve into factors influencing the employment decisions of vocational SHS senior students which showed significant differences among schools.

The findings from international studies echo similar sentiments to studies conducted in the Philippines. Firstly, Abas and Imam's (2016) research highlight a crucial connection between enhanced conceptual and analytical skills and workplace success among recent graduates. This emphasizes the importance of a deep understanding of the theoretical concepts and effective information analysis for senior high school students preparing for their careers. Furthermore, Garido and Gahera stress the value of practical application and networking for STEM students. Immersion experiences not only enrich students' theoretical understanding but also help them establish industry connections that can lead to future opportunities like mentorship or internships (Gardio and Gahera, 2018, as cited in Icbn, 2019). Similarly, Icbn's (2019) study focuses on Senior High School Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) students and highlights their proficiency in essential competencies and personal attributes through immersion experiences. This demonstrates the effectiveness of vocational education in preparing students for the workforce by equipping them with practical skills and desirable qualities. Collectively, these insights underscore the importance of practical experiences, soft skills development, and industry connections for senior high school students entering the job market. Additionally, studies by Carada et al. (2022) and Orbeta et al. (2020) aim to measure students' employability skills and actual performance in the labor market, further contributing to our understanding of factors shaping students' readiness for employment.

The reviewed literature highlights the reform efforts in the Philippine education system, emphasizing the integration of senior high school to meet global standards set by ASEAN. It discusses the structure of senior high school education, challenges in curriculum implementation, and the role of work immersion in preparing students for the workforce. Additionally, it addresses the reluctance of employers to hire senior high school graduates and the importance of soft skills in enhancing employability. By exploring the participants lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges, this study aims to uncover how their educational background from Senior High School contributes to their ability to secure employment and to identify the specific challenges they face in the realm of employment. The findings of this study are crucial for informing targeted interventions, enhancing soft skill development, and bridging the gap between education and workforce demands to improve the overall employability of SHS graduates.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The research design utilized for this study adopts a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing the phenomenological method to explore the in-depth experiences of Senior High School graduates regarding employability. Phenomenology, as a form of qualitative research design, focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals within the world through in-depth interviews and conducting a rigorous analysis of the collected data to identify common themes, patterns, and insights that emerge from participants' rich narratives (Creswell, 2013). This method allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' subjective experiences, perspectives, and the ways in which they make sense of the world around them. By employing this approach, the study aims to delve into the in-depth experiences of senior high school graduates, their perceived challenges, and the contribution of the abilities and knowledge from the Senior High School curriculum that attributed to their employability journey.

4.2 Research Participants

The participants in this research were seven Senior High School graduates from various schools within Mandaue who had opted to enter the workforce rather than pursue a college degree. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, a non-probability method chosen based on the population's specific characteristics and the study's objectives (Crossman, 2019). The rationale behind selecting these participants aligned with the research objectives,

which aimed to assess how the K-12 curriculum affected employment opportunities and to identify the challenges faced by these graduates in the workforce. The inclusion criteria for selecting participants in this study were as follows: they had to be senior high school graduates from Mandaue with a minimum of two years of employment experience, they must not have pursued college education after high school, and they must have graduated from any senior high school strand under the K-12 curriculum.

4.3 Research Instruments

The researchers prepared semi-structured interview guides for conducting individual interviews with seven chosen SHS graduates who immediately entered the workforce. These guides consist of open-ended questions, giving the participants the chance to share their thoughts and views on topics relevant to the study. The open-ended nature of these questions enables the researchers to delve deeply into the participants' responses, exploring a range of perspectives. Consequently, using open-ended questions encourages participants to reveal more information about themselves and their experiences.

4.4 Data Gathering Procedures

Prior to the conduct of the study, an informed consent was given to the participants. The primary data collection method employed was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview format allows the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by senior high school graduates transitioning into the workforce and their perceptions of employability within the industry. The probing questions evolved during the interview process, providing opportunities for participants to share their experiences and insights (Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004). Interview questions were designed to uncover participants' perceptions of their own employability, the resources they found beneficial during their transition, and their overall experiences in the working industry. All interview sessions were recorded with participants' consent, enabling accurate transcription of responses to assist in data analysis. Researchers also permitted participants to use their preferred language during interviews to ensure comfort and facilitate open communication. Data validation techniques, including member checking and peer debriefing, were employed to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of findings. Ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and respect for participants' autonomy, were upheld throughout the process to maintain the study's integrity.

4.5 Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data, thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilized. This approach involved identifying recurring themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' narratives, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the job search process and the participants' perceived employability. The method comprises six-step stages, which include: (1) familiarizing yourself with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order for the researchers to come up with the desired themes, the researchers meticulously followed these steps, ensuring a rigorous and systematic analysis of the data. This methodological approach facilitated a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences regarding their transition from senior high school to the workforce.

4.6 Ethical Consideration

In conducting this research study, participants were provided with informed consent documents outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, ensuring their voluntary participation. Additionally, confidentiality measures were strictly upheld, with all participant information anonymized and stored securely to protect their identities. Moreover, respect for participants' autonomy was maintained by allowing them to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. Furthermore, data collected through interviews were used solely for research purposes and were not shared with any third parties. Throughout the process, competence and monitoring remained integral, with the research team demonstrating proficiency in both methods and subject matter.

4.7 Rigors of the Study

To ensure trustworthiness of findings, credibility and confirmability were given utmost attention. Rigorous

measures were implemented to enhance the credibility of the study, including member checking and peer debriefing (Williams & Kimmons, 2022). Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings and interpretations with participants to verify data accuracy and completeness. Meanwhile, to achieve peer debriefing, research process, data analysis techniques, and interpretations were shared with colleagues or experts in the field. To strengthen confirmability, the study referenced literature and findings from other authors that aligned with the researcher's interpretations. Established theories, concepts, and empirical evidence from previous studies were incorporated, contributing to the overall confirmability of the research findings.

5. Results and Discussion

In this chapter, the researchers described the qualitative analysis of the data. The researchers analyzed the data into generative themes, which were described individually. They were then evaluated how the themes overlapped and assessed based on how the data were presented. Upon analyzing the data, the following themes emerged in this study. These came from the raw data, encoded according to the steps in data analysis.

5.1 Theme 1: Impact of Senior High School Education on Employment Success

Senior high school education plays a crucial role in enhancing individuals' employability by focusing on work immersion experiences which develop participants' practical skills and competencies. These immersive programs offer real-world exposure and equip students with essential workplace skills (Okabe, 2013; Aid, 2018). Employers highly value candidates who have undergone work immersion during their senior high school years. This educational background not only prepares individuals for the job search and hiring process but also significantly contributes to their success in the workforce. Based on participants' experiences, two subthemes emerged: (1) personality development, and (2) soft skills acquisition.

Subtheme 1.1: Personality Development

Work immersion provides students with practical industry experience, contributing significantly to their personality development. Personality development refers to the ongoing process of refining and improving one's individual traits and characteristics. It plays a crucial role in boosting confidence and fostering high self-esteem (Juneja, 2015). The participants perceived that they have developed certain personalities driven by these immersion experiences.

“Yes, labi na sa behaviour and attitude kay nakuha jud nako didto...encounter...grabe kaayu an mga bata... giyano yano rag ani mi...naglagot na siya ba. Nya ako nag patience ra ko...yes (na develop akoang patience sa pagsbaota mga bata). (Yes, especially in terms of behavior and attitude, I really learned a lot there... encountering... the children are intense... it's like we're just playing around... he's already getting angry. But I just remained patient... yes- I was able to develop my patience with children.) -P1

“Naay na learn, kanang pagpa ubos” (I learned something, which is to be humble.) -P3

“Akong nagamit ra jud no...kay kuan confident ra gyud.. dili ka mauwaw... makig communicate sa mga tao nga imong na encounter ana nga work.” (For me the only useful thing that I was able to use is confidence... You won't feel embarrassed to communicate with the people you encounter at work.) -P5

“More on education you learn from other people in my case...Personal development you learn how to socialize an empathize with people...” (More than education, you learn from other people; in my case, personal development teaches you how to socialize and empathize with people...) -P6

“...baga gyud kag nawong dapat, maong the good thing pag senior high nako” (You should have confidence, that's the good thing from senior high)- P7

The findings of the study underscore the significant impact of work immersion on personality development among senior high school graduates. Participants expressed how their work immersion experiences helped them gain confidence, a crucial factor for their employability (Coetzee et al., 2019). Alongside self-confidence, quotes from the participants also highlight how work immersion contributed to the development of patience, humility, empathy, and

social skills—traits highly valued in the workplace. These insights support the notion that work immersion programs play a vital role in enhancing the employability of senior high school graduates. These programs foster personality development, cultivating essential attitudes, traits, and behaviors necessary for personal growth and success in the workforce (DepEd 2017; Estrada et al., 2020).

Subtheme 1.2: Soft Skills Acquisition

Soft skills are interpersonal, social, and communication abilities that enable individuals to effectively interact and collaborate with others in various professional and personal settings (Kenton, 2023). During their work immersion, participants perceived that they had developed and refined their soft skills, such as communication, interpersonal interaction, teamwork, and time management, which greatly contributed to their ability to work in their current jobs.

“...nagamit gyud ang work immersion nako...ang kanang kuan pag communicate sa patients.” (I was able to utilize my experience in work immersion... the aspect of communicating with patients...)-P2

“kuan tong di ka dapat ma late... discipline... di jud ka angay mo kuan jud ug masuko sa imong costumer ana.” (Like... you shouldn't be late...discipline...you shouldn't get mad at your customer, like that)-P3

“akong nakat on na skills nako pag immersion kay communication skills...kanang teamwork... kanang time management skills.” (The skills I learned from work immersion are communication skills...teamwork skills, and time management skill.) -P7

Soft skills are crucial in enabling participants to effectively interact and collaborate in both professional and personal settings. The study revealed that participants developed essential soft skills during work immersion. These skills greatly contributed to their success in their current job roles. This finding is supported by research from Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Center, which emphasized that 85% of job success depends on well-developed soft skills and people skills, while only 15% comes from technical skills (hard skills) (Mann, 1918, as cited in National Soft Skills Association, 2015). The quotes from participants support Egay's (2021) notion concerning the practical importance of soft skills in the workplace and their significant impact on job performance and overall success.

5.2 Theme 2: Perceived Employment Challenges and Disparities

The experiences of participants in the study illustrate the myriad challenges and disparities in the employment context, exploring the difficulties faced by the graduates both in the application process and within the workplace environment. The findings of the thematic analysis indicate the presence of five distinct themes that are linked to the challenges faced by participants, namely: (1) limited job choices, (2) inadequate experience, (3) entry-level jobs, (4) lower wages, and (5) biased treatment.

Subtheme 2.1: Limited Job Choices

Navigating the transition from senior high school to the job market can be intimidating for many graduates. Despite their enthusiasm to kick-start their careers, they often find themselves confronted with a significant challenge: a limited array of job opportunities. Compounding this issue is the phenomenon of credential inflation, wherein employers demand higher educational qualifications than necessary for certain roles. As a result, senior high graduates encounter difficult barriers in securing employment, as they contend with fierce competition from individuals with advanced levels of education.

“Naa sad toy call center to nga mag interview na unta mi ba nya ilang gipangita diay mga college. Nya senior high pa baya mi ato nya wala mi kabalo nga college diay.” (There was this call center where we were supposed to have an interview, but we didn't know they were specifically looking for college students. We were still in senior high school back then, and we didn't know they required college education.) -P1

“Hmmm kuan if di ka college graduate, ubos ra jud ka. Di ka kaabot sa ,kanang mga manager, dika ka abot gud diha kay low raman gud imohang kuan gud...senior graduate ra.” (If you're not a college graduate, you'll really be at a disadvantage. You won't be able to reach the higher positions like manager because your qualifications are limited. You won't reach there because your education level is just at the senior high graduate level.) -P3

“base sa akong experience, naa koy kauban nga college graduate sila, though mas skills pa ko nila , pero kay shs graduate rako mas ubos ang rate nga ilang hatag kaysa katung college level, adtu sila ga base.” (Based on my experience, I have a companion who is a college graduate. Although I have more skills than them, because I only graduated from senior high school, the rate they offer is lower compared to those with a college degree. They base it on that.)-P4

“uhmm it all relays all in college for example engineering, uhmm agriculture. You can’t really work on those places uhmm unless you have a college degree.” -P6

“gusto gyud nako mag flight attendant... rare ra kaayu sila modawat og senior high school graduates.” (I really want to become a flight attendant... they rarely accept senior high school graduates.) -P7

Participants in the job market encounter significant challenges, especially in securing employment. They may desire to apply in different job sectors; however, most job qualifications require higher education. The participants perceive that they are limited in job choices, as many positions in the industry necessitate a college degree. This trend aligns with findings highlighted by the PIDS (2022), in which employers often hesitate to hire SHS graduates as they prefer candidates with college degrees. This preference for college degree holders is prevalent across various sectors, significantly impacting the job prospects of SHS graduates.

Subtheme 2.2: Inadequate Experience

Beyond the obstacles presented by employers favoring candidates with advanced education, individuals entering the job market after senior high school often confront discrimination related to their lack of experience. Despite their potential and the experiences gained following graduation, their qualifications are frequently undervalued or dismissed. This dual challenge not only restricts job opportunities but also undercuts the importance of the skills and knowledge acquired outside of formal education. Thus, the rejection of senior high school graduates reflects a broader issue of overlooking their potential due to a perceived lack of experience.

“So mas better gyud naa gyud kay experience ana samtang nag skwela pa ka para puhon maka work naka dili naka mag lisod.” (So it's really better to have experience while you're still studying so that eventually, when you start working, you won't have a hard time.) -P5

“My first application nag apply ko sa IT park uhmm tungod kay daghan kaayung applicants they rejected me because I didn’t have any experience in call center work they want people who has experience 1 year or 2 year experience and they didn’t give me a chance so I guess that’s an example of getting rejected” - P6

Participants shared undervalued experiences, which aligns with concerns raised by The PCCI HRDF. The PCCI HRDF highlighted companies' hesitance to hire fresh graduates due to potential gaps in necessary skills and training not provided by the current SHS program (Orbeta et al., 2018). Additionally, DOLE reported that although there are many local job openings for high school graduates, employers express concerns about the skill readiness of current SHS graduates for the workforce. This prompts a recommendation for a more focused SHS curriculum to cultivate strand-specific competencies for work (PBED, 2023).

Subtheme 2.3: Entry-level Jobs

High school students seeking employment may find themselves predominantly encountering entry-level positions that align with their limited experience and academic commitments. An entry-level position usually doesn't require any prior education or experience, as individuals often receive on-the-job training to succeed. These roles can be either part-time or full-time and are often the first job for many individuals. This situation indicates a significant gap in job opportunities requiring higher education qualifications.

“kani diay diri sa McDonald’s kay bisan wala ka nag skwela, bisag senior high school raka, kay dawaton raman ka nila basta kamao raman ka moluto, nindot imong behavior, kana sang mga call center...dawat gyud nilang mga senior high.” (In places like McDonald's, even if you haven't attended school and only finished senior high school, they will accept you if you know how to cook, have good behavior, just like in call centers.) -P1

"...maka ana gyud ka na as a senior high student gyud, kutob ragyud as a kanang janitress, ingana ... ubos, dili pariha sa uban na naka graduate na... Kanang naa gyud silay kanang specific na ipa trabahoun like IT ka, ...computers ka ibutang... Pero if ever kung senior high students... sagaran sa senior high students-janitress, crew, mga ingana. Mao nay kasagaran na dali gyud masudlan ra kung senior high student ka." (...you can really say that as a senior high student, you'll likely end up as a janitress, like that... bottom level, not like others who have graduated... Those who have specific jobs like IT, working with computers... But if ever you're a senior high student, most likely you'll end up as a janitress, crew, and the like. That's usually the case, it's easy to get into if you're a senior high student.)-P2

"Ahh companies? ohh... Like crew food... foods ,food industry" -P3

"pero akong makita daghan maka kuan ug senior high like mga call centers... Like eighteen (18) above... ing ana. Ang ilang dawaton kasagaran sa mga job karon kay makadawat sila ug kanang mga senior high graduates." (But what I see is that many senior high students can work in call centers... Like eighteen (18) and above... like that. They mostly accept job applications from senior high graduates nowadays.) -P5

The perceived challenges shared by the participants echo similar concerns raised by Orbeta et al., (2018), wherein graduates of Senior High School (SHS) employment programs are limited to entry-level positions, support staff roles, and service-oriented jobs. As a result, graduates of Senior High School (SHS) employment programs often find themselves constrained to entry-level positions, support staff roles, and service-oriented jobs, aligning with the limited job opportunities available to high school graduates as outlined by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) report (PBEd, 2023).

Subtheme 2.4: Lower Wages

Disparities in the workforce persist for senior high school graduates, who encounter unequal opportunities and outcomes in comparison to their counterparts with higher education levels. Conversely, individuals with higher education often enjoy advantages such as better access to well-paid employment opportunities and more favorable treatment within the workplace. Senior high school graduates, despite entering the workforce earlier and accruing practical experience, frequently encounter obstacles stemming from their lower educational attainment. This leads to a reduced number of job opportunities and a slower pace of career progression compared to individuals with higher educational qualifications, ultimately resulting in lower earnings in comparison.

"Dili enough, kay ngano no? mahug lang ni diri nga part time lang sya kanang six hours nya inoras pajud ₱58 nya six hours ra, lahi rajud biya nang full time nya usahay rajud biya among duty sad. Karon one week ko walay duty, asa nasad kog kuan magkuhag kwarta, ig sweldo na gamay ra kaayo di kaabot og 1k [₱1,000] gamay raman kaayo." (It's not enough, you know Why? This will only fall as a part-time job, I only earn ₱58 an hour, and it's just for six hours. Full-time jobs are different; sometimes our duties are demanding too. Now, I have a week off duty, and I'm wondering where I'll earn money from. When the salary comes, it's very little, barely reaching ₱1,000. It's really not much.)-P1

"actually di jud sya enough.. .kay ako pa mang i-roll-roll ang kwarta kay.... kani adlaw Kani akong sweldo kay i-divide pani nako ,sa akong family, para nako." (actually, it's really not enough... because I'm the one who has to roll the money... like today, my salary, I divide it among my family, for myself.) -P3

"pero kay shs graduate rako mas ubos ang rate nga ilang hatag kaysa katung college level, adtu sila ga base. Maoy nay naka affect pud ang rate nga salary rate." (but since I'm just a senior high school graduate, they offer me a lower rate compared to those with college degrees, that's where they base it. That's what affects the salary rate as well.) -P4

"completely dawaton ka nila kaysa sa mga nay work experience ang nakaapan lang kay gamay kag sweldo sa sinugdanan kong senior high school graduate ka kay kong college graduate ka mas dako og 1k." (They prefer those with work experience over those who have only recently graduated but the bad thing is, starting salary is lower if you're just a senior high school graduate compared to if you're a college graduate, it's higher by ₱1,000.) -P7

Seen from different perspective of senior high school graduates, although they join the workforce earlier and

accumulate practical experience, they often encounter challenges due to their lower educational attainment. Moreover, senior high school graduates tend to earn less than those with college or university degrees. As mentioned by Cuy and Salinas (2019), the financial benefits of obtaining a college degree compared to a high school diploma are higher than ever. This highlights how important higher education is in today's economy and the differences faced by people with different levels of education.

Subtheme 2.5: Biased Treatment

Another challenge faced by senior high school graduates is the unequal or unfair treatment. It is defined as unfair or prejudiced between students in senior high school and those in college based on their educational level. Discriminatory practices based on educational background can further exacerbate inequalities in career progression, as senior high school graduates may face obstacles in accessing training programs or advancement opportunities, perpetuating biased treatment.

"kanang mga subject namo diba, kanang mag storya mi...mura mig mag debate ba like ilaha kunong mga subject i compare nila namo "kanang inyong research? assignment rana sa among college uy." (Like our subjects, right? Like when we discuss, it's almost like we're debating, you know, they compare their subjects to ours saying; "Your research is just an assignment in our college")-P1

"Oh... kanang i lookdown ka nga ing ana nga wala kay grado kay senior high ra ka.." (Yeah... when they look down on you because you're only a senior high graduate.) -P3

"lahi ang pagtrato sa senior high...nakasuway ko grabe ilang discriminate namo Kami ilang palihukon sa tanan, Lima man mi kabuok nga na hire, pero kami Ang pinaka bata, singkahan me... ila me patrabohon ug straight which is bawal diay na mao na ara gyud ko ka feel ug discrimination" (The treatment for senior high is different... I've experienced it, they badly discriminate against us. We do all the work, there were five of us hired, but we were the youngest, they belittle us... they make us work straight through, which is apparently not allowed, that time I truly felt discrimination.) -P7

Societal views on education profoundly impact the experiences of participants entering the workforce. Despite possessing practical skills and valuable experience, the participants often encounter discrimination and challenges due to prevailing attitudes regarding educational attainment. Recent research investigated how individuals who haven't attended a 4-year college perceive social stigmatization related to their educational background (Meisel et al., 2022). Furthermore, this perception can lead to limited job opportunities and wage disparities for senior high school graduates, who may be overlooked for positions in favor of candidates with higher educational qualifications.

5.3 Theme 3: Shortcomings of SHS Curriculum in Workforce Preparation

The deficiencies and inadequacies within the Senior High School (SHS) curriculum present significant obstacles to its ability of equipping students with essential skills in preparation for the job market. Because of these circumstances, they face difficulties at work due to not having learned these skills or experienced them during their senior high school program. These shortcomings include: (1) pandemic impedes real work experience, (2) limited practical application, and (3) educational resource scarcity.

Subtheme 3.1: Pandemic Impedes Real Work Experience

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions to education in the Philippines and worldwide. School closures, challenges with online learning, and disruptions to practical training have negatively impacted students' learning experiences. Several changes and difficulties arose, and schools had to make various adjustments quickly and were not fully prepared for the shift to digital teaching methods, therefore failing to deliver quality education and equipping students with the essential skills needed in the workforce.

"...more on module man mi atu sauna...pandemic man to nga time. Wala mi naka try ug OJT." (...we focused more on modules before... it was during the pandemic time. We haven't tried OJT) -P1

"pero sauna man gud kay module... Kanang wala'y ipakita nga actions... kanang igo ra nimo basa-basahon nya maka ingon jud ko nga ang module sauna kay wala- dili jud sya- wala jud syay impact sa akong nasudlan nga work karon." (But back then, it was modular... When there are no actions shown... When you just skim

through it and I would really say that the module back then, it's like it doesn't really have - it really doesn't have any impact on my current work) -P2

“Tumong man gyud mig ato ug pandemic sad, dili gyud mi ka study gyud kay na tunga na sad to, kay needed ug money then study ka, so murag na tunga gyud ang hunahuna.” (It happened to be pandemic at the time, that's why we can't really study properly because it's half-way through, because you needed money then you study, so it seems like the thought is divided.) -P5

Participants expressed that the pandemic significantly impacted their learning, resulting in limited educational attainment. Virtual learning during these times was not condemned as effective as face-to-face instruction due to lack of teachers' pedagogical expertise in remote delivery (Arnesen et al., 2019). Consequently, when transitioning to the workforce, they found their acquired skills less applicable. This gives more reasons for employers not to hire senior high graduates because no work immersion has been implemented. This contradicts their requirement for senior high graduates to undergo work immersion, leading to disappointment among employers who perceive longer work immersion periods as necessary, as 80-120 hours of work immersion is deemed insufficient (Orbeta et al., 2018; Egay, 2021).

Subtheme 3.2: Limited Practical Application

Aside from the impact of pandemic, participants have also perceived that senior high school education, while offering valuable academic knowledge and critical thinking skills, sometimes misses the mark in fully preparing them for the practical challenges of life beyond the classroom. This shortfall can be attributed to a lack of emphasis on real-world relevance, practical application, and keeping pace with the dynamic demands of various industries.

“Kanang gikuha nila nga strand kay itudlo gyud nila ba, kana ganing ma apply gani sa imong trabaho igka dako ana gani. Kay pag senior high nako wala jud koy ma apply jud.” (They (teachers) should really teach their chosen strand, that is applicable when you work in the future...because during my time in senior high, I really couldn't apply anything) -P1

I think they could go into uhm into a deeper explanation more specifics on how to get paper works in so... like uhhh for example where to get the MIT, you need a lot of requirements applying for a job...” -P6

“Wala gi tudlo sa Senior high kung unsa gyud gali Ang work nga sa imong sweldo naay daghanng deduction kana, sa senior high ilang gi tudlo unsaon nimo pag buhat unsaon nimo pag trabaho pero Wala nila gi tudlo Ang government deduction, kung unsa gyud na Ang adulting.” (In senior high, they did not teach you about the real work where there are many deductions from your salary, they teach only you how to do the job but they don't teach you about government deductions, about adulting) -P7

Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the program, citing its lack of practical preparation for the real-world workforce. While they acknowledge being taught with valuable skills necessary for securing employment, they feel inadequately prepared for the complexities of adult life and simple practical skills needed in workforce. Specifically, they highlight the absence of guidance on essential requirements like obtaining necessary documents and understanding government policies such as salary deductions, which were not addressed during their senior high school education. The dissatisfaction of the participants shares similar sentiment to the respondents surveyed by Pulse Asia for they feel unsatisfied due to its failure in fulfilling its promise to equip students with the essential skills needed to secure employment (PIDS, 2023).

Subtheme 3.3. Educational Resource Scarcity

Educational resource scarcity refers to the limited availability or insufficient allocation of essential materials, facilities, programs, or opportunities within the education system. This scarcity may manifest in various forms, including inadequate teaching materials, insufficient infrastructure, or a lack of specialized tracks or strands offered in Senior High School (SHS) programs. The participants perceived not having enough of the resources needed for good learning, which results in things being tough for students in their learning due to educational resource scarcity.

“Ma enhance guro kung kanang more on pun an guro nila ug mga courses gali... like gas... para ma explore gyud sa usa ka tawo kung unsa gyud ilang i major..so ang ma suggest nako if ever sa deped dapat daghan

silag mas eh offer nga strand para naa gyud kay specific na mas ganahan gyud, ug adtu ka...kay naay mga school nga kuwangan...dili sila kumpleto ug strand" ("Maybe it would be enhanced if it's about what courses they are more inclined towards or interested in..." like GAS... to truly explore what someone will major in... Thus, my suggestion to the Department of Education is that they should offer more diverse strands so that there are specific options that students will really be interested in, and where they can excel... because there are schools that lack certain strands, they are not complete in terms of offerings.")- **P4**

"Kuwang gyud ang technology sa senior high, Wala tay computer, wa tay calculator, walay printer..." (The technology is really lacking in senior high. We don't have computers, calculators, or printers.) -**P7**

Senior high school students in the Philippines confront a significant challenge, which is insufficient funding for our education. The available courses are limited in variety and fail to cater to students' individual preferences. Furthermore, many schools lack essential materials, depriving students of necessary resources. This issue aligns with DepEd's report, which states that the lack of infrastructure and facilities impacts the quality of education. Consequently, students may find it challenging to maintain the pace of their studies and excel academically, indicating a lack of necessary resources for success (Bai, 2023).

5.4 Theme 4: Factors Shaping Career and Life Trajectory

The exploration of key factors shaping the career and life trajectory of Senior High School Graduates involves delving into their aspirations and perceptions regarding future career paths and life routes. Through an in-depth analysis of participants' desired life courses, influenced by their experiences in the workforce, societal perceptions, and broader life encounters, several critical factors emerge. These include considerations of (1) financial stability, and (2) discernment to higher education.

Subtheme 4.1: Financial Stability

Through many lived experiences, the participants articulate various career path selections, long-term life plans and desired achievements. Each participant's unique journey shapes their perspective and priorities, leading them to identify and express the goals that hold significance to them. Endowed with a keen awareness of prevailing societal challenges on a global scale, a substantial majority emphasized the utmost significance of attaining financial stability in their life agenda.

"Need nako maka kwarta kay family problem kay financial biya, akoang problem no kay financial." (I need to make money already because family problem is financial, right. My problem right now is financial)" -**P1**

"Gusto jud ma kuan jud nga ,naa gud me kanang maharuhay jud mi sa akong pamilya ,kanang dili nami maglisod,di na mi kuan like mahilantan akong manghud maadto naghospital ,nya makuan gud naa nami kwarta ba makwartahan nami" (I really want it to be like comfortable for my family, where we won't struggle, like when my little sibling gets sick, we get to take them to the hospital...and it's really like, we have money now, you know. We get money.) -**P3**

"I just want to be financially stable I guess" -**P6**

"As of now ako plan pa gyud kay kwarta and ang gusto nako ma achieve is mo stop ug work as early as I can" (As of now, my current plan is money and what I want to achieve is to stop working as early as I can) -**P7**

For centuries, a persistent challenge for our evolving society, especially for students has been the capacity for financial security and stability, "not only during the pandemic, money is always the problem of the people in the society. A financial problem like budgeting is not easy to solve" (Bautista & Manuel (2020). Henceforth, SHS graduates gradually conveyed their perspectives, emphasizing the rationale behind the significance of financial stability that involves the consideration which were especially pertinent given that Senior High School (SHS) was originally intended to serve as a pathway to employment, providing students with job opportunities to alleviate financial challenges.

Subtheme 4.2 Discernment to Higher Education

In the aftermath of the implementation of SHS in the Philippines, there emerged a complex interplay between educational aspirations and financial constraints among its graduates. While SHS was introduced to boost students' preparedness for both higher education and the workforce, the reality of financial barriers has prompted many graduates to reconsider their academic trajectories. As a result, this costs a division among the graduates into two distinct groups: those who opt to pursue higher education and those who remain solely as senior high school graduates. Nevertheless, a resilient subset remains resolute in their aspiration to continue pursuing a higher form of education.

“if ever kung kuan,(if ever given the opportunity to continue college) kuan palang gyud... oo, gusto gyud kaayo as in.” (If ever something (if ever given the opportunity to continue college) if only... yes, I would have really wanted it.)” -P2

“Goal jud nako kay mu skwela man jud ko...” (My ultimate goal is to study)”P3

“maka proceed ko ug college then maka graduate ko'g college mao ra na akoang...goal sa life...mas nindot man gud sa mata sa mga tao nga graduate ka ug college...kaysa senior high graduate lang ka.” (My only goal in life is to proceed to college and be able to graduate from college...It's more pleasing in the eyes of people when you're a college graduate... than just being a senior high graduate”) -P5

Based on some of the participants' perspectives, it is more favorable in contemporary society to obtain a college degree rather than solely completing senior high school. Alternatively, it may solely be an ambition to pursue further education. By scrutinizing societal financial challenges through global standards and comparing the benefits of college for earnings even with the added expenses of a four-year degree, it was concluded that college is still worthwhile (Daly & Bengali, 2014).

However, despite being presented with the provided statements and information, certain participants held divergent views on pursuing higher education, ultimately opting not to pursue further academic endeavors.

“Choose nako nga di mo skwela kay para kanang financial maka tabang lang ko... sa among family.” (I chose to not go to school so that I can help financially... to my family)” -P1

“Not interested in continuing college... the main thing that hinders me for pursuing a college education,it cost money and... time” -P6

“no, dili pako interested (to continue college) ang factor ana kay ang kwarta. dili ko ka imagine ug unsaon nako pag balance ang akong kwarta if mo school ko karon” (no, I am not yet interested (to continue college) the main factor behind that decision is money. I can't envision how I'll manage my finances if I were to go to school now.) -P7

Recognizing the participants' perceptions, it becomes evident that a significant number tends to cite financial considerations as a primary reason for not pursuing higher education. It was said that the recent decades have brought agreement that higher education is, if not a cure, then at least a protection against underemployment (Shell, 2018). The author also pointed out that about 40% of all those who have dropped out of college still make somewhat more money than others who just have higher education experience. Based on the analysis of the participants' perceptions, it becomes evident that pursuing college may present financial challenges without assured significant benefits if not diligently pursued. This perspective underscores the importance of critically assessing the value of higher education, particularly in relation to the Senior High School curriculum's capacity to adequately prepare students for both academic and professional pursuits.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlights the positive impact of senior high school education on employment success, emphasizing the significance of personal growth from work immersion and the acquisition of soft skills as key factors in securing employment. However, it also reveals significant challenges and disparities in the workforce, such as limited job choices based on education, entry-level positions due to lack of experience, lower wages, and biased treatment. Additionally, the study highlights shortcomings in the senior high school curriculum's preparation for the workforce. Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring better employment opportunities and career prospects for SHS graduates. Factors like financial stability and informed higher education choices emerge as critical

considerations for graduates navigating the job market and their future prospects. These findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to education that balances academic knowledge with practical skills development, addresses workforce challenges and disparities, and equips graduates with the tools necessary to navigate a dynamic employment landscape and make informed decisions about their future.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Enhance practical skills integration in the SHS curriculum by adding more hands-on learning experiences that directly apply to real-world job tasks.
2. Foster closer collaboration among industries to align curriculum with industry needs and ensure that graduates are equipped with relevant skills and knowledge.
3. Allocate resources and funding to address educational resource scarcity, ensuring that schools have access to up-to-date teaching materials, technology, and training for educators.
4. Incorporate soft skills development, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, into the curriculum to help graduates enhance these essential skills valued by employers.
5. Conduct a similar qualitative study on specific tracks within the K12 program, facilitating longitudinal analysis to track the employment trajectories of Senior High School graduates.

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