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Progressive Vocational Education across Middle and Secondary Stages: Skill Exposure to Career Aspiration

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Abstract

Vocational learning is increasingly being recognised as part of school education rather than as a pathway reserved for students after general schooling. In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 call for early exposure to vocational activities, experiential learning and greater connection between learning and the world of work. Yet research on vocational exposure, career exploration, self-efficacy and career aspiration is often discussed in separate strands. This conceptual paper brings these strands together and proposes a developmental framework linking skill exposure in the Middle Stage with career aspiration in the Secondary Stage. An integrative conceptual review was undertaken using career-development literature, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Indian policy and curriculum documents. The framework describes a progression from skill exposure and skill awareness to interest and exploration, perceived relevance, deeper skill engagement, career awareness, career self-efficacy and career aspiration. It also recognises teacher support, parental

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support, career guidance, peer influence, school resources and community or industry exposure as contextual conditions that can shape the process. The argument is that the value of school-based vocational education lies not simply in teaching a skill, but in giving students repeated opportunities to experience, reflect, explore and connect skills with possible futures. The framework offers a basis for curriculum planning, school management and future empirical research on progressive vocational education in India.

Keywords: Vocational Education; Skill Exposure; Career Exploration; Career Self-Efficacy; Career Aspiration; Middle Stage; Secondary Stage

Figure 1

Proposed Progressive Vocational Education Framework

Middle Stage (Grades 6–8)	Developmental Mechanisms	Secondary Stage (Grades 9–12)
Skill Exposure	Experiential Learning	Deeper Skill Engagement
Skill Awareness	Perceived Relevance	Career Exploration
Interest & Exploration	• Self-Efficacy Development • Contextual Support	• Career Awareness • Career Self-Efficacy • Career Aspiration

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis based on the literature and policy documents reviewed in this paper.

Table 1

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis.

Construct	Meaning in this paper	Stage / role
Skill exposure	Initial encounters with practical activities, skills and forms of work.	Middle Stage: foundation
Skill awareness	Understanding what different skills and occupations involve.	Middle Stage: awareness

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Interest and exploration	Trying, comparing and reflecting on areas of curiosity or ability.	Middle Stage to transition
Perceived relevance	Seeing how learning connects with life, education, work or enterprise.	Transition mechanism
Deeper skill engagement	More structured practice and development in selected areas.	Secondary Stage: deepening
Career awareness	Understanding occupations, pathways, requirements and possibilities.	Secondary Stage: direction
Career self-efficacy	Confidence in one's ability to learn, explore and pursue pathways.	Cross-stage mechanism
Career aspiration	Developing increasingly informed educational and occupational goals.	Secondary Stage: outcome

Constructs and Their Proposed Role in the Developmental Pathway

1. Introduction

For many students, the first meaningful encounter with the world of work does not happen when they leave school. It begins much earlier through the activities they see, try and discuss in school, at home and in their communities. This matters because ideas about work and possible careers develop gradually. Students need opportunities to discover what different kinds of work involve, what they enjoy doing, what they can learn to do and where particular skills may lead. School education can provide these experiences in a structured and equitable way.

This issue has become particularly relevant in India. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places vocational education within mainstream schooling and calls for exposure to vocational learning from the Middle Stage. It proposes hands-on learning, work-related experiences and

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opportunities to understand local forms of work. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 carries the same direction into the school curriculum by giving practical engagement and understanding of different forms of work a more visible place (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020; NCERT, 2023).

The policy direction raises a more useful question: not simply whether schools should offer vocational education, but how that learning should develop as students grow older. The Middle Stage can provide breadth and curiosity; the Secondary Stage can provide greater depth, pathway information and more purposeful exploration. Recent national work also points to the need for stronger integration of vocational and employability skills across school education rather than treating them as isolated offerings (NITI Aayog, 2025).

Career-development research also suggests that exploration begins well before students make formal career decisions. Career exploration involves learning about oneself as well as learning about educational and occupational possibilities. A meta-analysis by Kleine et al. (2021) found meaningful links between career exploration, career-related self-efficacy and other developmental factors. More recent work on middle-school interventions reports benefits for areas such as career decision-making, self-efficacy and future orientation (Wang & Wang, 2025). Research with middle-school students has also highlighted the roles of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals and parental support in career exploration (Şen-Baz, 2026).

These strands of literature are useful, but they do not always speak to one another. Studies of vocational education tend to focus on curriculum and implementation; career-development research often concentrates on exploration and self-efficacy; and policy documents mainly describe what schools should provide. What is less visible is the developmental link between these elements across the school years. This paper addresses that gap by asking how broad skill exposure can gradually become meaningful career exploration and, eventually, career aspiration.

The argument is deliberately not deterministic. Exposure to a skill does not automatically create a career goal. A student may enjoy an activity but choose another pathway, or may develop an aspiration through family and community experiences rather than school. The proposition is more modest: when exposure is purposeful, repeated and supported, it can give students experiences

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from which awareness, interest, perceived relevance and self-efficacy may grow. These processes can, in turn, contribute to more informed career aspirations.

This paper aims to develop a conceptual framework for progressive vocational education across the Middle and Secondary Stages. The framework integrates vocational exposure, skill awareness, interest and exploration, perceived relevance, deeper skill engagement, career awareness, career self-efficacy and career aspiration. It also identifies contextual conditions that may influence the progression. The paper adds a stage-wise conceptualisation that can be empirically tested in future research.

2. Conceptualising Progressive Vocational Education

Vocational education is commonly associated with the acquisition of knowledge and skills related to occupations and work. In school education, however, vocational learning cannot be reduced to occupational training alone. At earlier stages, learners may not possess the developmental readiness or information required to select a particular occupation. The educational purpose at that point is broader: to help learners understand the world of work, experience practical activities, recognise different forms of contribution and develop a positive orientation towards skills and work.

For the purposes of this paper, four related concepts are distinguished. First, skill exposure refers to opportunities through which learners encounter practical activities, occupations, tools, materials, technologies, services, crafts, entrepreneurship or other forms of work. Second, skill awareness refers to an understanding of the knowledge, abilities and behaviours associated with different forms of work. Third, vocational education refers to more structured learning through which practical and occupationally relevant competencies are developed. Fourth, career aspiration refers to the educational and occupational futures that learners begin to imagine and value for themselves. These concepts should not be treated as interchangeable. A student may be exposed to a vocational activity without developing sustained interest in it. A student may become aware of an occupation without possessing the confidence to pursue it. Similarly, career aspiration may develop without direct vocational exposure because of family, media, community or academic influences. The

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framework proposed in this paper therefore uses a developmental logic rather than a deterministic sequence.

Progressive vocational education is defined here as a stage-appropriate process in which learners move from broad exposure to different forms of work and skills toward increasingly informed exploration, deeper engagement, career awareness, self-efficacy and aspiration. The emphasis is on progression rather than premature specialisation. This distinction is particularly relevant to school education, where vocational learning should support educational breadth while gradually creating opportunities for depth.

The idea is consistent with the implementation direction of NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023. The Ministry of Education's documentation on vocational exposure at the upper-primary level states that Grades 6–8 activities are intended to expose children to skill requirements and career opportunities while developing cooperation, creativity and other soft skills (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2021). NCERT's implementation handbook for the Middle Stage similarly describes broad understanding of different forms of work and the development of basic capacities for work as important aims of vocational education (NCERT, 2025).

3. Middle and Secondary Stages as a Developmental Continuum

The Middle and Secondary Stages are best treated as connected phases of learning. In Grades 6–8, the priority should be breadth: students need chances to encounter different forms of work and to discover interests without being pushed towards a fixed occupation. In Grades 9–12, the same learning can become more purposeful, with deeper skill development, career information and opportunities to connect interests with educational or occupational pathways.

This distinction creates an important principle for vocational curriculum design: the intensity and purpose of vocational learning should change as students progress through school. At the Middle Stage, the primary question is 'What kinds of work and skills exist, and what interests me?' At the Secondary Stage, the questions become more specific: 'What skills do I want to develop?', 'How are these skills connected to occupations or further education?', and 'What pathway could I pursue?'

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NEP 2020 provides a policy basis for this progression. It recommends exposure to vocational education from the Middle Stage and describes experiential learning, internships and bagless periods as mechanisms for connecting students with practical work. It also emphasises flexibility, critical thinking and attention to life aspirations in the Secondary Stage (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). NCF-SE 2023 translates this broad direction into curricular principles, including practical engagement with different forms of work and development of capacities that can support personal, community and economic participation (NCERT, 2023).

There is also a status question that should not be overlooked. When vocational learning is offered only to students who are perceived as less academically inclined, it can reinforce the very hierarchy that policy seeks to challenge. A broader model—where practical and vocational learning is part of ordinary schooling—allows students to see skills as a legitimate part of education rather than as a fallback. It also gives students whose strengths are not always visible through conventional academic tasks a different way to demonstrate competence.

The pathway should not be read as a rigid staircase. Students revisit interests, change their minds and sometimes discover a field only after entering the Secondary Stage. Deciding that a particular activity is not suitable is also a useful outcome of exploration. For this reason, the framework describes a likely developmental direction rather than a compulsory sequence through which every student must pass.

4. Theoretical Foundations

The framework is primarily informed by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and supported by broader career-development perspectives. SCCT explains career development through interactions among personal beliefs, behavioural processes and contextual factors. Self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations and goals influence interests and career-related actions, while social supports and barriers affect how these processes operate (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013). This theoretical logic is particularly appropriate for a school-based vocational framework because exposure to practical activities can function as a learning experience through which students develop competence beliefs and expectations about possible futures.

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Within the proposed framework, skill exposure represents a set of learning experiences. When these experiences are meaningful, successful and appropriately supported, they may contribute to awareness and self-efficacy. Students also form expectations about whether particular skills are useful, respected, enjoyable or connected to future opportunities. These outcome expectations can influence interest and exploration. Career exploration then creates additional information and experiences that can strengthen or modify aspirations.

The relevance of SCCT to school-level career development is supported by empirical research. Kleine et al. (2021) found that career-related self-efficacy and outcome expectations are linked to students' career exploration, with exploratory goals playing an important role in the relationship. Research with middle-school students also shows that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goal commitment and parental support are relevant to career exploration behaviours (Şen-Baz, 2026). These findings support the inclusion of self-efficacy and contextual support in the present model.

A second theoretical foundation is provided by developmental perspectives on career development. Career development is not a single decision but a process that unfolds through changing interests, experiences, identities and roles. Super's life-span, life-space perspective conceptualises career development as a developmental process in which individuals progressively construct and revise their vocational self-concepts (Super, 1990). From this perspective, early school experiences can contribute to the formation of interests and self-understandings that later influence educational and occupational choices.

Career Construction Theory also offers a useful complementary perspective because it emphasises meaning-making and the construction of career narratives (Savickas, 2005). For school students, however, the present framework does not require them to construct a fixed occupational identity at an early age. Instead, early vocational experiences can provide experiences from which students gradually develop narratives about what they enjoy, what they can do and what kinds of work they value.

Together, these theoretical perspectives support the central proposition of this paper: career aspiration is more plausibly understood as an outcome of accumulated learning experiences, self-beliefs, exploration and contextual support than as a direct result of one vocational intervention.

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5. Review of Related Literature

5.1 Early Skill Exposure and Vocational Awareness

Early exposure to work-related activities has received increasing attention because children and adolescents begin forming ideas about occupations well before entering the labour market. Exposure can occur through school activities, family occupations, community practices, role models, workplace visits, project-based learning and structured career programmes. Such experiences expand the range of occupations that students can imagine and can help connect abstract academic learning with practical applications.

In the Indian context, the rationale for early vocational exposure is explicitly articulated in policy. The Ministry of Education has stated that Grades 6–8 pre-vocational education should expose students to skill requirements and work areas and help them understand job and career opportunities (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2021). This provides a direct policy basis for considering early exposure as an initial component of career development rather than an optional add-on.

5.2 Experiential Learning and Exploration

Exposure becomes more meaningful when students actively participate rather than merely receive information. Hands-on activities allow learners to observe processes, solve practical problems, make decisions and experience success or difficulty. Such experiences can generate information about personal interests and abilities. The literature on middle-school career interventions indicates that interventions combining career information with active exploration can improve aspects of career decision-making, self-efficacy and future orientation (Wang & Wang, 2025).

Experiential learning is therefore positioned in the proposed framework as the mechanism through which exposure can become exploration. Simply displaying information about occupations may increase awareness, but practical engagement provides richer information about what an activity involves and how the learner responds to it.

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5.3 Career Exploration

Career exploration involves searching for information about oneself and the environment in relation to future career possibilities. It can include self-exploration, occupational exploration, conversations with adults, workplace experiences and investigation of education pathways. A major meta-analysis found that students' career exploration is connected with several antecedent and outcome variables and highlighted the importance of career-related self-efficacy (Kleine et al., 2021).

Recent evidence also shows that middle-school students engage in career exploration and that social-cognitive variables and parental support are relevant to such behaviour (Şen-Baz, 2026). These findings reinforce the argument that career development should not begin only when students reach the final years of school.

5.4 Perceived Relevance and Career Awareness

A key transition in the proposed framework is the movement from exploration to perceived relevance. Students are more likely to invest in a skill when they can see how it connects to real life, further education, occupations, entrepreneurship or community needs. Perceived relevance is therefore not merely an attitude; it represents a cognitive link between learning and possible future pathways.

Career awareness includes knowledge of occupations, educational requirements, skill demands, progression opportunities and the realities of work. It should not be confused with selecting one career. At school level, awareness can help students compare alternatives and develop informed preferences while retaining flexibility.

5.5 Career Self-Efficacy

Career self-efficacy refers to confidence in one's ability to perform tasks associated with career exploration, planning or development. It is a central concept in SCCT. Evidence suggests that career self-efficacy is strongly related to career exploration among students (Kleine et al., 2021). Middle-school interventions have also reported improvements in career planning and exploration efficacy and vocational development efficacy (Turner & Lapan, 2005).

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For vocational education, self-efficacy can develop through successful practical experiences, feedback, modelling and opportunities to solve increasingly complex problems. This is why the proposed framework places self-efficacy between career awareness and aspiration rather than treating aspiration as a direct response to exposure.

5.6 Career Aspiration

Career aspiration represents the future-oriented goals and expectations that students develop concerning education, occupations and work. Aspirations can be broad at younger ages and become more differentiated as students acquire information and experience. They are shaped by individual interests and abilities as well as family expectations, social norms, perceived opportunity structures and available role models.

The purpose of early vocational education should therefore not be to produce early occupational commitment. Its role is to enlarge the field of possibilities, support informed exploration and help students develop the confidence and information needed to form realistic yet aspirational goals.

5.7 Contextual Influences

Career development is embedded in social contexts. Parents can provide information, encouragement or constraints; teachers can create opportunities for exploration; peers can influence perceptions of desirable occupations; and community or industry partners can provide authentic exposure. School resources also influence whether vocational learning remains theoretical or becomes experiential.

Recent research with middle-school students specifically identifies parental support as a relevant factor in career development, while SCCT places contextual supports and barriers at the centre of career processes (Şen-Baz, 2026; Lent et al., 1994). The framework treats contextual factors as conditions surrounding the developmental pathway rather than as secondary variables.

6. Research Method

This paper uses an integrative conceptual review rather than primary empirical data. The review brings together three bodies of evidence: career-development theory and research; literature on vocational and career exploration among school-age learners; and Indian policy and curriculum

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documents on vocational education. The purpose of combining these sources is not to claim that they provide identical evidence, but to identify concepts that can reasonably be connected and then build a framework that can be tested later.The literature was organised around the main elements of the proposed pathway: skill exposure, skill awareness, interest and exploration, perceived relevance, deeper skill engagement, career awareness, career self-efficacy and career aspiration. The review then examined how these concepts are explained by Social Cognitive Career Theory and developmental approaches to career development. Indian policy documents were used to map these concepts onto the Middle and Secondary Stages.

The analysis was interpretive and theory-building. Recurring concepts were compared, relationships suggested in prior research were examined, and the resulting constructs were arranged into a stage-wise model. Contextual factors such as teacher support, parental support, career guidance, peer influence and community or industry exposure were retained where the literature and theory suggested that they could change how students move through the pathway. No primary sample, questionnaire or statistical test is reported because the paper's purpose is to develop a conceptual framework. The proposed relationships are expressed as propositions rather than hypotheses. The framework should consequently be viewed as a researchable model, not as evidence that one stage necessarily causes the next.

The review process involved four broad sources of evidence. First, foundational career-development theories were examined, particularly Social Cognitive Career Theory, life-span career development and Career Construction Theory. Second, peer-reviewed empirical and review literature on career exploration, self-efficacy, middle-school career interventions and vocational development was considered. Third, Indian policy and curriculum documents, including NEP 2020, NCF-SE 2023 and official vocational-education implementation materials, were used to establish the Indian educational context. Fourth, recent policy and research literature was used to identify contemporary implementation and research directions.

The literature was organised thematically around seven conceptual domains: skill exposure, skill awareness, interest and exploration, perceived relevance, deeper skill engagement, career awareness and career self-efficacy/career aspiration. Relationships among these domains were then

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interpreted using SCCT and developmental career perspectives. Contextual influences were incorporated where they were theoretically relevant to the transition between stages.

The analytical procedure was conceptual rather than statistical. It involved identifying recurring constructs, comparing their theoretical relationships, mapping them onto the Middle and Secondary Stages, and synthesising them into an integrated developmental sequence. The resulting framework is a set of theoretically informed propositions that can be tested in future empirical research.

Because this is a conceptual paper, sample size, questionnaire instruments and inferential statistical techniques are not applicable. The paper's unit of analysis is the conceptual relationship among stages, educational experiences, career-development mechanisms and contextual conditions. Future empirical studies can operationalise the proposed constructs and test the relationships using longitudinal, quasi-experimental or mixed-method designs.

7. Proposed Developmental Framework

The framework consists of two connected developmental phases. The first phase is the Foundation of Exploration in the Middle Stage. The second is the Deepening and Direction phase in the Secondary Stage. The two phases are connected through experiential learning, perceived relevance and contextual support.

7.1 Middle Stage: Foundation of Exploration

The Middle Stage is conceptualised as the period in which learners encounter diverse forms of work and skill. The primary objective is broad exposure rather than occupational specialisation. Skill exposure can include practical projects, local crafts, agriculture-related activities, digital and technological tasks, service activities, entrepreneurship, design, health and community work, depending on curriculum and local context.

Exposure should be diverse enough to allow comparison. A student who encounters only one vocational domain may mistake familiarity for preference. Broad exposure increases the probability that students will discover interests that are not visible through conventional classroom subjects.

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The next construct is skill awareness. Students should understand what different forms of work require: practical competencies, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity, digital capability, responsibility and occupational knowledge. This stage can also challenge the misconception that vocational work is simply manual work. Modern occupations frequently combine technical, interpersonal, digital and entrepreneurial skills.

Skill awareness can lead to interest and exploration. Students may begin to identify activities that they enjoy, skills they would like to improve or occupations they would like to know more about. Exploration at this stage should be open-ended and supported rather than evaluative or selective.

7.2 Transition Mechanism: Perceived Relevance

The transition from early exposure to later career development requires students to understand why skills matter. Perceived relevance provides this bridge. It can emerge when students see how a skill connects to everyday life, local economic activity, further education, employment, entrepreneurship or social contribution.

For example, a digital activity can be linked not only to computer use but also to design, communication, data, media, entrepreneurship and emerging occupations. Similarly, a craft activity can be connected to cultural enterprise, product development, tourism, e-commerce and entrepreneurship. Such connections help learners understand that skills can have multiple applications.

7.3 Secondary Stage: Deepening and Direction

In the Secondary Stage, the focus can progressively shift from broad exposure toward deeper engagement. Students can select areas of interest, develop more structured competencies, interact with practitioners, investigate education and training pathways and obtain information about occupational requirements.

Career exploration becomes more purposeful at this stage. Students can compare occupations, investigate pathways, reflect on strengths and interests and evaluate perceived opportunities and constraints. Career guidance becomes particularly important because students need reliable information rather than relying only on family expectations, social media or stereotypes.

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Career awareness is the outcome of informed exploration. It includes understanding what an occupation involves, what qualifications or skills may be needed, how careers progress and what alternative pathways exist. Awareness should preserve flexibility rather than narrow choices prematurely.

7.4 Career Self-Efficacy as a Developmental Mechanism

Career self-efficacy is positioned as a key mechanism in the framework. Exposure alone may not increase aspiration if students perceive themselves as incapable of developing the required competencies. Repeated opportunities for successful practice, feedback, mentoring and progressive challenge can strengthen confidence.

This is consistent with SCCT, in which self-efficacy influences interests, goals and actions. It is also consistent with research showing a strong relationship between career self-efficacy and student career exploration (Kleine et al., 2021). Thus, the framework proposes that deeper vocational engagement can support self-efficacy, which in turn can strengthen the translation of career awareness into aspiration.

7.5 Career Aspiration as an Evolving Outcome

Career aspiration is positioned at the end of the conceptual pathway, but not as a final fixed state. Aspirations can change as students gain new information and experiences. The framework uses career aspiration to represent the increasing clarity, confidence and intentionality with which students imagine future educational and occupational pathways.

The proposed relationship is probabilistic rather than deterministic. A student may have high exposure but low aspiration because of family constraints, limited opportunity or low self-efficacy. Conversely, a student may develop strong aspiration through family, community or personal interests despite limited school exposure. The value of the framework is therefore not that it claims a universal causal sequence, but that it provides a structured model for understanding how school-based vocational experiences may contribute to career development.

8. Propositions

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Proposition 1: Broad and developmentally appropriate skill exposure during the Middle Stage may enhance students' awareness of diverse forms of work, skills and occupational possibilities.

Proposition 2: Experiential and hands-on vocational learning may strengthen students' interest and willingness to explore different skill and career domains.

Proposition 3: Perceived relevance of vocational learning to real-life, educational, occupational and entrepreneurial opportunities may strengthen the transition from skill awareness to career awareness.

Proposition 4: Progressive opportunities to practise and master skills may contribute to the development of career self-efficacy.

Proposition 5: Career exploration and career awareness may contribute to the development of more informed and differentiated career aspirations during the Secondary Stage.

Proposition 6: Career self-efficacy may strengthen the relationship between career exploration and career aspiration by increasing students' confidence in their capacity to pursue identified pathways.

Proposition 7: Teacher support, parental support, peer influence, career guidance, community and industry exposure, and school resources may strengthen or constrain the progression from skill exposure to career aspiration.

Proposition 8: A progressive, stage-appropriate vocational pathway linking Middle Stage exposure with Secondary Stage deeper engagement is likely to provide a more coherent basis for career development than isolated vocational activities delivered without continuity.

8A. Conceptual Contribution

The contribution of the framework lies in its integration rather than in claiming that any individual construct is new. Skill exposure, career exploration and self-efficacy have all been studied. What this paper adds is a stage-wise explanation of how these elements can be connected within school-based vocational education: broad exposure in the Middle Stage can create the conditions for awareness and exploration; the Secondary Stage can deepen those experiences through structured engagement and career information; and self-efficacy can help translate awareness into aspiration.

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This makes the framework suitable for later empirical testing and for discussion of how vocational education is managed across grades.

8B. Conceptual Outcomes

The synthesis leads to three conceptual outcomes. First, vocational education is best viewed as a continuum rather than a single intervention. Second, the developmental mechanism is not exposure alone but the combination of exposure, reflection, exploration, perceived relevance and growing self-efficacy. Third, the effectiveness of this pathway depends on continuity and context: the same activity can have very different value when it is isolated from later learning, career information or supportive guidance. These outcomes form the basis of the propositions presented in the next section and the management implications discussed thereafter.

9. Discussion

The framework contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it introduces a developmental sequence into the discussion of school vocational education. Much vocational education discourse focuses on what should be taught, while much career-development research focuses on individual outcomes. The framework connects the two by asking how the design of educational experiences can progressively support career development.

Second, the framework connects Indian curricular policy with established career-development theory. NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 provide a strong policy rationale for early vocational exposure, but policy documents alone do not explain the psychological and educational mechanisms through which exposure may influence later aspirations. SCCT provides a mechanism-oriented explanation involving self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interests, goals and contextual supports. Developmental career perspectives add the idea that career development evolves over time.

Third, the framework emphasises continuity across school stages. A common implementation risk is that vocational exposure becomes a collection of short activities without progression. If Grade 6 exposure is not connected to Grade 7 exploration, Grade 8 reflection, and later Secondary Stage

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skill development and career guidance, its developmental potential may be reduced. The framework calls for curriculum mapping across grades rather than isolated interventions.

The framework also has an important equity implication. Early exposure can broaden the range of careers students consider, but only if exposure is sufficiently diverse and not restricted by gender, socioeconomic background, geography or social expectations. A narrow set of locally available occupations may unintentionally reproduce existing occupational divisions. Progressive vocational education should therefore combine local relevance with exposure to wider educational and occupational possibilities.

Another implication concerns the status of vocational education. If practical and vocational learning is introduced as a normal component of education for all learners, it may help reduce the conceptual separation between 'academic' and 'vocational' pathways. The objective is not to make every student vocationally specialised, but to ensure that all students understand the value of skills and the diversity of pathways through which people learn, work and contribute.

From a management perspective, implementing the framework requires coordination. School leaders need to align curriculum, timetable, teacher capacity, resources, external partnerships and career guidance. Vocational learning may require collaboration with artisans, entrepreneurs, industries, community organisations, training institutions and local professionals. Such collaboration should be planned as part of a developmental pathway rather than as occasional exposure events.

From a career-guidance perspective, the framework suggests that guidance should begin before students face major subject or career decisions. At the Middle Stage, guidance can focus on awareness and reflection. At the Secondary Stage, it can increasingly include pathway information, skill requirements, educational options, financial considerations, labour-market information and individual planning. This progression can help students make decisions with greater information and self-understanding.

The framework should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. Career aspiration is influenced by many factors beyond school vocational education. Family resources, cultural expectations, social inequalities, academic achievement, labour-market conditions and access to information may shape

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outcomes. Therefore, future empirical testing should examine whether the proposed pathway operates differently across social groups and educational contexts.

10. Implications for School Management and Educational Practice

The first implication is the need for a stage-wise vocational curriculum map. Schools can identify what students should encounter, understand, explore and develop at each stage. Such a map can prevent repetition and create continuity.

Second, schools should design Middle Stage vocational learning around breadth and experience. Students should encounter multiple domains and be encouraged to reflect on what they learned, what they enjoyed and what they would like to explore further. Reflection is important because experience alone does not guarantee learning.

Third, Secondary Stage vocational education should provide opportunities for depth. Where feasible, students can undertake longer projects, practical assignments, supervised workplace exposure, interaction with professionals, entrepreneurship activities and structured career exploration. These activities can help students connect skills with actual pathways.

Fourth, schools should strengthen career communication. Students and parents need accessible information about vocational pathways, qualifications, progression routes and employment or entrepreneurship opportunities. Communication should avoid presenting vocational education as a fallback option and instead explain the diversity and contemporary relevance of skilled work.

Fifth, teacher capacity is central. Teachers facilitating vocational exposure require both practical knowledge and the ability to guide reflection and career exploration. Professional development can therefore include experiential pedagogy, career guidance, local labour-market awareness and partnership management.

Finally, school management should establish mechanisms for monitoring progression. Instead of measuring vocational education only through participation numbers, schools could track indicators such as exposure breadth, skill awareness, student interest, perceived relevance, career awareness and self-efficacy. Such indicators could later be developed into a validated framework for evaluating progressive vocational education.

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11. Limitations and Future Research

This paper is conceptual and therefore does not empirically test the proposed relationships. The framework should be treated as a theoretical model for future investigation rather than as evidence of causal effects. The proposed sequence may also operate differently across regions, school types, socioeconomic groups and vocational domains.

Future research can develop validated scales for the major constructs and test the framework longitudinally. A longitudinal design would be particularly appropriate because the framework concerns progression across stages. Researchers could follow students from Grade 6 or 7 through Grade 10 or 12 and examine whether exposure predicts changes in awareness, exploration, self-efficacy and aspiration.

Quasi-experimental studies could compare schools implementing structured progressive vocational pathways with schools providing conventional or isolated vocational activities. Mixed-method research could combine student measures with interviews of teachers, parents and school leaders to understand contextual mechanisms.

Future studies should also examine equity. Gender, socioeconomic status, rural–urban context, disability, parental education, school resources and access to career information may influence how students experience vocational education. Research should therefore avoid assuming that one developmental model operates identically for all learners.

Finally, future research can investigate the role of digital platforms, artificial intelligence, virtual workplace experiences and online career information. These tools may expand access to occupational knowledge, but they also raise questions about information quality, digital inequality and the credibility of career recommendations.

12. Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is simple: school-based vocational education can do more than teach isolated skills. If it is sequenced carefully, it can give students a chance to encounter different forms of work, discover interests, understand why skills matter, develop confidence and gradually make sense of possible futures. The Middle Stage is particularly suited to broad exposure and

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exploration, while the Secondary Stage can build greater depth, pathway awareness and purposeful career exploration.The framework also makes clear what early exposure cannot do. It cannot guarantee a particular career choice, and it cannot compensate for weak guidance, limited resources, social constraints or unequal access to opportunities. Career aspiration is shaped by the interaction of school experiences with family, community, peer and wider economic contexts. This is why the framework places contextual support around the developmental pathway rather than treating exposure as a standalone solution.For schools and education managers, the implication is to think in terms of continuity. A practical activity in Grade 6 should not be the end of vocational learning; it can become the starting point for reflection, further exploration and later skill development. Such continuity would give greater meaning to the policy intention behind vocational exposure and provide a clearer basis for evaluating whether school-based skill education is helping students understand and imagine their futures.The framework is ultimately a starting point for empirical work. Longitudinal research could test whether students who receive structured and progressive exposure show changes in skill awareness, exploration, self-efficacy and career aspiration over time. Comparative and mixed-method studies could also examine how the pathway differs across school types, regions and social groups. Such evidence would help determine which elements of the proposed model matter most and under what conditions.

The framework is grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory and developmental perspectives on career development and is aligned with the direction of NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023. It recognises that exposure alone is insufficient. Students need meaningful experiences, opportunities to explore, information about pathways, confidence in their abilities and supportive social environments. Teacher support, parental support, career guidance, peers, community and industry connections and school resources can influence the strength and direction of the process.

The key proposition is therefore not that early vocational exposure determines a student's career. Rather, carefully designed and progressively sequenced exposure can create the conditions through which students become more aware of skills, explore possibilities, recognise relevance, develop confidence and form increasingly informed aspirations. The framework offers a basis for future

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empirical research and offers schools and education managers a way of thinking about vocational education as a continuous developmental pathway from early exploration to later career orientation.

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