Journal of Educational Sciences *(JES)*

Original Article

Fall & Winter, 2026, 33(2), 1-20.
DOI: 10.22055/EDUS.2025.50321.3794

ISSN (E): 2588-672x
https://education.scu.ac.ir/

A Model of Skill-based Schools and its Connection to the Labor Market: A Grounded Theory Study

Samane Rahmatinia[1], Sakineh Jafari[2]

1. Ph.D. Student, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran.
2. Associate Professor, Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran.

Article Info

Received: 07 Sep 2025
Revised: 04 Dec 2025
Accepted: 21 Dec 2025
Published: 23 Aug 2026

Corresponding Author:
Sakineh Jafari

Email:
sjafari.105@semnan.ac.ir

Keywords:
Skills-Based Schools; Labor Market; Vocational Education; Grounded Theory; Workforce Development

Abstract

The development of skills-based schools has become a strategic priority for strengthening the relationship between education and the labor market in response to rapidly changing economic and technological demands. However, insufficient alignment between vocational education and labor market requirements continues to limit graduates' employability and workforce readiness. This study aimed to develop a grounded theoretical model explaining the factors that influence the effectiveness of skills-based schools and their connection to the labor market. A qualitative research design based on Strauss and Corbin's systematic grounded theory methodology was employed. Participants consisted of 14 vocational education professionals from skills-based schools in Torbat Jam, selected through purposive criterion-based sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and theoretical sampling continued until data saturation was achieved. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured according to Guba and Lincoln's criteria. The findings identified the potentials and barriers of skills education as the core phenomenon. This phenomenon was influenced by causal conditions including competent educational leadership, adequate educational resources and facilities, enhancement of instructors' professional competencies, and responsiveness to labor market needs. Contextual conditions included public awareness, educational infrastructure, and alignment of educational programs with labor market demands, while intervening conditions comprised governmental and private-sector support, technological developments, and implementation challenges. Strategic actions focused on curriculum improvement, professional development of human resources, and preparing students for successful entry into the workforce. These processes ultimately contributed to the development of professional competencies, sustainable employment opportunities, and positive economic outcomes. The findings of this study present a conceptual model of the factors influencing the success of skill-based schools, which can contribute to improving the performance of these schools and promoting sustainable economic development.

How to Cite: Rahmatinia, S., & Jafari, S. (2026). A Model of Skill-based Schools and its Connection to the Labor Market: A Grounded Theory Study, *Journal of Educational Sciences (JES)*, *33*(2), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.22055/edus.2025.50321.3794 [Persian]

Authors retain the copyright and full publishing rights. Published by Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. This article is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY NC)

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The increasing complexity of labor markets, rapid technological advancement, and the transition toward knowledge-based economies have fundamentally transformed the expectations placed upon vocational education systems. Skills-based schools are expected not only to provide students with technical competencies but also to prepare them for sustainable employment, lifelong learning, and continuous adaptation to changing occupational demands. Consequently, strengthening the relationship between vocational education and labor market requirements has become a central objective of educational policy in many countries. Despite substantial investments in vocational education, persistent gaps remain between graduates' competencies and employers' expectations, resulting in reduced employability and inefficient utilization of human resources. These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive models capable of explaining how institutional, organizational, educational, and environmental factors interact to influence the effectiveness of skills-based schools. Although previous studies have examined individual dimensions of vocational education, few have developed an integrated theoretical framework that explains the dynamic relationship between skills-based schools and labor market integration. Therefore, the present study aimed to develop a grounded theoretical model explaining the factors, processes, and outcomes associated with strengthening the connection between skills-based schools and the labor market.

Method

This study employed Strauss and Corbin's systematic grounded theory methodology to generate a theoretical model grounded in participants' experiences. Participants consisted of 14 professionals involved in vocational education in skills-based schools in Torbat Jam, selected through purposive criterion-based sampling. Theoretical sampling continued until conceptual saturation was achieved. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that explored participants' experiences regarding vocational education, curriculum implementation, institutional challenges, workforce preparation, and labor market responsiveness. Interview transcripts were analyzed using the iterative procedures of open, axial, and selective coding. Constant comparative analysis was applied throughout the analytical process to refine categories, establish conceptual relationships, and develop an integrated explanatory model. The credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings were ensured using Guba and Lincoln's trustworthiness criteria through member checking, peer review, prolonged engagement with the data, and continuous comparison of emerging concepts.

Results

The analysis generated a grounded theoretical model centered on the core phenomenon of the opportunities and barriers associated with skills-based education. The model demonstrated that this phenomenon is shaped by several interrelated dimensions. Causal conditions included effective educational leadership, adequate educational resources and infrastructure, enhancement of instructors' professional competencies, and institutional responsiveness to labor market demands. Contextual conditions comprised public awareness of vocational education, supportive educational infrastructure, and alignment between educational programs and labor market requirements. Intervening conditions included governmental policies, private-sector participation, technological advancement, and implementation challenges affecting educational effectiveness. Strategic actions identified by participants focused on optimizing vocational curricula, strengthening instructors' professional development, expanding industry partnerships, improving

workplace-based learning opportunities, and preparing students for successful workforce entry through competency-based education. These strategies collectively contributed to the development of occupational competencies, improved graduate employability, sustainable employment, enhanced institutional effectiveness, and broader economic development. The resulting model illustrates the dynamic relationships among organizational, educational, economic, and policy-related factors influencing the success of skills-based schools.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of skills-based schools depends on a complex interaction of institutional, educational, organizational, and socioeconomic factors rather than on curriculum reform alone. The grounded theoretical model highlights the importance of aligning educational leadership, curriculum design, instructor competencies, educational infrastructure, and policy support with evolving labor market demands. The results further suggest that successful vocational education requires sustained collaboration among schools, industry, governmental organizations, and local communities to ensure that graduates acquire competencies that remain relevant in rapidly changing occupational environments. By conceptualizing the relationship between skills-based schools and labor market integration as an interconnected educational ecosystem, this study extends existing vocational education literature beyond fragmented analyses of individual factors. The proposed model offers both theoretical and practical contributions by providing a systematic explanation of how multiple conditions interact to influence workforce readiness and sustainable employment outcomes. The findings can guide policymakers, vocational education administrators, curriculum developers, and educational planners in designing evidence-based policies that strengthen the responsiveness of vocational education to labor market needs. Future studies are recommended to validate the proposed model across different vocational disciplines, geographical regions, and educational contexts and to examine its applicability through quantitative and mixed-methods research.

Author Contributions: In the present study, the second author, as the supervisor, was responsible for supervising the overall research process, providing scientific and methodological guidance, and reviewing and finalizing the revisions of the manuscript. The first author was responsible for developing the research plan, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and drafting the manuscript. The conclusions drawn from the findings, further elaboration and interpretation of the results, and discussions were conducted collaboratively by both authors through mutual discussion and exchange of ideas.

Acknowledgments: The authors sincerely thank all participants whose valuable cooperation made this research possible.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to this article.

Funding: This research received no financial support from any institution or organization. All expenses related to the implementation of this study were covered by the researchers.

Data Availability Statement: The supporting data for this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI Use Statement: During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools solely to improve the readability and language quality of the text. All outputs generated by these tools were carefully reviewed, revised, and edited by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and final content of the manuscript.

Ethical Considerations: This study involved human participants. Before participation, all participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and their voluntary informed consent was obtained. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants' information were maintained throughout the research process.