

NURTURING ADOLESCENT IDENTITY: HUMANISTIC COUNSELING PRACTICES AMONG VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This article examines the implementation of the humanistic counseling approach in Vocational High Schools (SMK) as a strategy to support adolescents in developing an authentic sense of identity. Through a qualitative study employing in-depth interviews with students and guidance and counseling (BK) teachers, the findings reveal that counselors' attitudes—particularly unconditional positive regard, empathy, and genuineness—play a crucial role in establishing a safe and reflective counseling relationship. Counselors who present themselves as authentic, honest, and equal partners foster trust and facilitate deeper self-reflection among students. These findings reaffirm the relevance of the humanistic approach in supporting vocational students who often experience identity crises due to social pressures and uncertainty about their future. The study also highlights the importance of corrective emotional experiences in the counseling process and recommends further research with broader contexts and diverse methodological designs to enhance generalizability. This article contributes significantly to the development of humanistic counseling theory and practice that emphasizes personal functioning and adolescent authenticity.

Keywords: *humanistic counseling, counselor genuineness, adolescent identity, vocational high school students*

Introduction

Adolescence is a transitional stage characterized by identity exploration, the development of personal values, and the formation of social and career-related identities. During this period, individuals begin to question who they are and who they aspire to become in the future. Erikson (1968) identifies identity formation as the central developmental task of adolescence, emphasizing that successful navigation of this crisis lays the groundwork for subsequent psychosocial maturity. Adolescents who fail to establish a healthy sense of identity are more likely to experience role confusion, diminished self-worth, and instability in making critical life decisions.

In contrast to general high schools, students enrolled in vocational high schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan/SMK) face early career-oriented pressures. The SMK curriculum is designed to prepare students for immediate entry into the workforce, with most learning activities directed toward acquiring technical competencies. While this offers certain competitive advantages, it also restricts opportunities for personal exploration, which is essential for identity development. As a result, SMK students often make life-defining decisions including career choices before fully understanding their potentials, interests, and personal values. This condition increases the likelihood of identity confusion and non-authentic commitments.

Negative stereotypes surrounding SMK students in society further exacerbate these challenges. Public discourse often positions vocational graduates as “low-skilled labor” with limited academic competitiveness. Research by Riswana, Fitria, and Puspita (2023) shows that many SMK students fall into the identity status of “foreclosure,” in which career commitments are made without sufficient exploration. Such commitments are typically shaped by external influences such as parental expectations, teacher pressure, or societal norms rather than a comprehensive understanding of oneself. Consequently, students develop fragile identities that are vulnerable to external pressures and life challenges.

Identity-related challenges among SMK students are also associated with self-esteem and career maturity. A quantitative study by Marita and Izzati (2023) reported a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and career maturity, demonstrating that students with higher self-esteem tend to have stronger confidence in their career choices and make more informed decisions. Conversely, students with low self-esteem are prone to doubt, be easily swayed by external factors, and experience heightened anxiety about the future. Similar findings are reported by Aisyah et al. (2025), who found that poor future orientation is associated with increased career anxiety among SMK students.

Beyond personal factors, the educational environment plays a substantial role in adolescents' identity formation. Supportive school climates, empathetic teachers, and responsive counseling services are critical in providing safe spaces for students to explore and affirm their identities. Unfortunately, research by Rais (2022) indicates that many SMK students perceive insufficient emotional support within their school environments. The absence of teachers who serve as facilitators of personal development often leads students to feel alienated, hindering their ability to understand themselves. This situation underscores the urgent need to strengthen humanistic-based counseling services that appreciate individual uniqueness and potential.

One approach relevant to addressing these needs is humanistic counseling, particularly Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) developed by Carl Rogers. This approach emphasizes the importance of a warm, empathetic, authentic, and nonjudgmental counselor–client relationship. Rather than imposing solutions, counselors create a psychologically safe environment that enables clients to discover their own direction and meaning in life. Rofiqoh et al. (2025) highlight that the fundamental principles of PCT align closely with the developmental needs of adolescents exploring their identities, as the approach validates subjective experiences and encourages deep personal exploration.

The application of humanistic counseling in SMK contexts has demonstrated promising outcomes. Research by Salsabilla (2024) found that individual counseling rooted in humanistic principles significantly enhanced students' self-esteem. Through empathetic and non-directive sessions, students felt more confident in accepting themselves and began planning their futures more realistically. Beyond individual counseling, group counseling also serves as a strategic alternative for strengthening identity development among vocational students. Romiaty, Ihsanti, and Nonsihai (2024) documented that group counseling based on PCT significantly improved students' learning motivation. Their findings underscore that supportive group dynamics facilitate self-reflection, bolster confidence, and reinforce personal values and life goals.

The significance of this study lies in its theoretical and practical contributions, particularly within the context of vocational education and school counseling services in Indonesia. Theoretically, this research advances the understanding of humanistic counseling within vocational school settings a domain that has long been dominated by functionalist and technocratic approaches. Although humanistic principles have been recognized in psychological and counseling theories (Rogers, 1961), their practical

application in specific educational contexts such as SMK remains limited. Recent studies have shown that the application of humanistic counseling including empathy, respect for individual uniqueness, and unconditional acceptance can create a psychological climate conducive to adolescent identity formation (Syawalsa & Itryah, 2024; Rahayu, Mudjiran, & Karneli, 2023).

Practically, this study emphasizes the strengthened role of school counselors in SMK, who often face complex student problems that go beyond academic issues and extend into emotional and existential concerns. Traditional counseling services typically administrative or “add-on services” are no longer sufficient to address deep-seated identity struggles (Romiaty, Ihsanti, & Nonsihai, 2024). This study therefore serves as both a conceptual and practical foundation for counselors to design psychosocially meaningful interventions that honor students’ human potential and facilitate responsible self-exploration (Geldard, Geldard, & Foo, 2021).

Local context also becomes an important aspect of this study. SMK Anak Bangsa Praya Tengah, Lombok, represents the challenges of vocational education in rural Indonesia, where students face limited access to information and resources, along with social burdens stemming from stigmatization of vocational schooling (Suryadi & Sumantri, 2021). This context offers valuable insights into identity development under conditions shaped by economic demands, pressure to enter the workforce early, insufficient psychosocial support, and strong cultural influences. Thus, the findings may inform policymakers at both local and national levels in designing contextual, inclusive, and equitable counseling strategies (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022).

Furthermore, this study contributes to rethinking paradigms around adolescent identity. Rather than viewing adolescents as “problematic,” the humanistic perspective positions them as individuals with innate potential for growth when supported by empathetic environments (Corey, 2020). Humanistic counseling reinforces the belief that identity development is not about advising adolescents on who they should be, but rather creating a safe relational space where they can freely explore and articulate who they are without judgment (Rogers, 1961; Rais, 2022).

By integrating local values with humanistic principles, this study argues that effective counseling is not solely measured through short-term outcomes, but also in long-term growth rooted in self-understanding, personal integrity, and meaningful decision-making (Winkel & Hastuti, 2021). Overall, this research contributes to shaping a more contextual, transformative, and human-centered counseling discourse particularly for SMK students who are often marginalized within educational and psychosocial intervention frameworks.

Although humanistic counseling has been widely discussed in psychological and educational literature, its application in Indonesian vocational school settings remains limited. Previous studies have tended to emphasize behavioral or cognitive approaches (Prayitno, 2020), with insufficient attention to more personal, existential, and contextual methods that support holistic identity formation. Moreover, most counseling studies in SMK focus on general topics such as learning motivation, anxiety reduction, or technical career guidance (Romiaty et al., 2024). Exploration of identity formation though occasionally discussed tends to be descriptive and rarely evaluates the efficacy of counseling interventions (Rahayu et al., 2023). This leaves a significant gap: the lack of systematically tested humanistic counseling models for identity development among SMK adolescents.

Additionally, local contexts such as Lombok Tengah in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) receive little attention in counseling research. Adolescents in rural regions face unique identity challenges shaped by cultural pressures, limited information access, and

vocational stigma conditions different from those in urban or academically oriented schools (Suryadi & Sumantri, 2021). Thus, there is a research gap in bridging humanistic counseling with local socio-cultural realities. This study, conducted at SMK Anak Bangsa Praya Tengah, becomes crucial in addressing this gap by integrating humanistic principles with local contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in two aspects. First, it examines the effectiveness of both individual and group counseling based on humanistic approaches particularly person-centered and existential perspectives in supporting SMK students' identity development, a topic rarely explored empirically in Indonesia. Second, it integrates a humanistic approach with the lived experiences of rural vocational students, ensuring that counseling practices are not merely theoretical models adapted from Western frameworks but are contextually relevant and culturally responsive (Geldard, Geldard, & Foo, 2021).

This study has two main objectives: (1) to examine the effectiveness of humanistic counseling in helping SMK students nurture, strengthen, and build positive identity structures; and (2) to provide an in-depth account of students' subjective experiences throughout the humanistic counseling process at SMK Anak Bangsa.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the complex realities surrounding adolescent identity crises among students at SMK Anak Bangsa Praya Tengah, Lombok. The case study design was selected to enable an in-depth and holistic understanding of the counseling process and the meanings embedded in students' lived experiences rather than merely presenting frequencies or outcomes. This design is appropriate for uncovering contextualized processes and interpretive dimensions behind a phenomenon (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2005). The main focus of the study was to understand how humanistic counseling was implemented within the school setting and how it influenced students experiencing developmental identity crises.

Participants

The study involved 35 eleventh-grade students at SMK Anak Bangsa who exhibited indicators of identity crisis based on preliminary observations and recommendations from guidance and counseling (BK) teachers. The indicators used to identify potential participants included confusion about life goals, low self-confidence, social withdrawal from peer groups, and perceived inconsistency between personal values and social expectations. Initial identification was conducted through classroom observations, school environment monitoring, and consultations with BK teachers familiar with students' emotional and behavioral patterns.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a method suitable for qualitative research aimed at selecting individuals with characteristics relevant to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015). In addition to student participants, BK teachers involved directly in counseling sessions were also included as supporting informants to deepen the understanding of counseling practices and student changes from a professional perspective.

Data Collection

Data were collected comprehensively using multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and richness. These techniques included semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, document analysis, counseling notes, students' reflective journals, and counselor reflection logs.

1. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students using an open-ended interview guide designed to explore students' perceptions of the counseling they received, their self-understanding, and influential life experiences related to identity formation.

2. Observations

Non-participant observations were carried out in both formal settings (classrooms, counseling rooms) and informal environments (peer interactions) to capture students' social dynamics and emotional expressions.

3. Documentation Analysis

Documents analyzed included BK program plans, counseling activity logs, written reflections by counselors, and relevant school documentation. These sources supported data triangulation and enriched contextual understanding.

This multi-method data collection strategy provided layered insights into the identity crises experienced by the students and the humanistic interventions applied.

Procedures

The research procedure consisted of several stages:

1. Preliminary Field Access

This involved introducing the study to school authorities, conducting initial interviews with BK teachers, and performing general observations to identify potential participants.

2. Main Data Collection

Intensive interviews and observations were carried out. Each student participated in two interview sessions lasting 45–60 minutes, which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Real-time observations were recorded in field notes.

3. Concurrent Analysis and Data Tracking

Data analysis began during the data collection phase to allow early identification of emerging themes and guide deeper probing in subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three stages: (1) data reduction, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing and verification.

- Data Reduction involved sorting, categorizing, and coding interview transcripts and observational notes into thematic clusters such as “identity confusion,” “empathetic intervention,” “self-perception shifts,” and “improved social relationships.”
- Data Display was conducted by organizing themes into matrices, narrative summaries, and representative quotations.
- Conclusion Drawing and Verification were carried out inductively while examining interconnections across data sources and verifying interpretations through cross-checking documentation and participant feedback.

Trustworthiness and Validation

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed:

- Source triangulation (comparing student narratives, counselor accounts, and documentation),
- Method triangulation (interviews, observations, documents),
- Member checking, whereby preliminary interpretations were returned to participants for confirmation,

- Peer debriefing with colleagues in the counseling and guidance field. These strategies ensured credibility, confirmability, and dependability of the findings.

Scope and Limitations

The study was conducted in a single vocational school, which limits the generalizability of the findings to wider populations. However, the study offers high transferability for similar SMK contexts. Time constraints and potential subjective bias from participants and researchers also posed limitations. To mitigate these issues, reflective procedures and multilayered validation were implemented throughout the research process.

Result and Discussion

Counselor Empathy as the Key to Acceptance and Emotional Healing

One of the central findings of this study is the critical role of counselor empathy in creating a supportive and restorative counseling atmosphere. The humanistic approach employed by guidance and counseling (BK) teachers at SMK Anak Bangsa positions empathy as the foundational element in building an effective counseling relationship. The empathy demonstrated by the counselors namely their ability to perceive and understand the students' inner world from the students' own perspective enabled students to feel heard, accepted, and accompanied as they navigated their identity crises.

This dynamic is reflected in the experience of R, an eleventh-grade student in the Hospitality program, who initially withdrew from social interactions because he felt misunderstood by both his family and school environment. He shared:

"I thought no one understood me. But during counseling, the BK teacher just stayed quiet and listened until I finished. I expected her to get angry or lecture me like other teachers, but she didn't. It felt like such a relief—it was the first time I could talk without fear."

The counselor's empathic stance created space for R to express his emotions and internal conflicts without feeling judged. This illustrates how empathy can facilitate emotional release and reduce the psychological burden students carry. Similarly, A, an eleventh-grade Culinary Arts student, described how the counselor's calm and nonjudgmental manner made her feel respected:

"The BK teacher never immediately said 'you're wrong.' She listened first, then asked, 'How do you feel about it?' I felt respected as a person, not just a student who must obey."

Such respect, emerging from empathic engagement, fostered emotional trust between students and counselors. This trust became an important initial step for students in exploring their identity struggles and rethinking their perspectives about the future. S, another participant, expressed that empathy enabled her to open up:

"Usually I stay quiet when teachers talk to me because I'm scared of being blamed. But in the counseling room, it's different. I know the BK teacher understands that I'm stressed. That's why I could talk about my family too."

The students' accounts were consistent with the reflections of the BK teacher, Mrs. Mardiah, who emphasized that empathy is the first principle guiding her interactions with students:

"I don't immediately give solutions when students come in. My first task is to be present and listen. They need to feel understood, not judged. Sometimes they just need space to feel that their emotions are valid."

She also explained that this approach helps her build more meaningful relationships:

“I learned to suspend judgment. Empathy is not just pity; it’s the effort to see the world through their eyes. That’s when they usually start to open up, and the counseling process can go deeper.”

These narratives reinforce empathy as a core humanistic condition that transforms counseling from an instructive interaction into a supportive, relational one. For adolescents experiencing identity crises, being understood and not judged is a fundamental emotional need.

The case of student R demonstrates how empathic behaviors such as active listening, attentive silence, and nonjudgmental responses reduce emotional barriers and increase students’ willingness to disclose personal struggles. The sense of relief R described reflects a psychological release often triggered when individuals are finally provided with a safe, accepting space after prolonged emotional suppression. A’s testimony further demonstrates that empathic counseling is not only about listening but also about facilitating personal reflection without pressure or didactic advice, aligning with humanistic principles that emphasize non-directiveness and client autonomy.

S’s account highlights the relational impact of empathy, particularly for students with emotional trauma or negative experiences with authority figures. Her statement that “the BK teacher understands that I’m stressed” indicates that emotional validation acts as a bridge between counselor and student, enabling trust and deeper disclosure.

Overall, empathy emerged as a central mechanism in supporting adolescents experiencing identity struggles. Within the humanistic framework, empathy is not merely the ability to understand another’s feelings but a relational foundation that helps clients feel genuinely accepted and heard. This study confirms that when counselors demonstrate authentic empathy, students become more willing to articulate their internal conflicts, including uncertainties about the future, self-worth, and social pressures.

These findings align with the work of Cooper et al. (2025), who emphasize that counselor empathy is significantly correlated with successful psychological interventions for adolescents, particularly in managing emotional distress and identity uncertainty. Empathy also functions as an “emotional bridge,” creating psychological safety that allows students to explore their experiences without fear of judgment. Within Carl Rogers’ humanistic framework, empathy alongside unconditional positive regard and congruence constitutes one of the three core conditions necessary for psychological growth (StatPearls, 2023).

When students feel deeply understood, they begin constructing new, more adaptive narratives about themselves. This is especially important in vocational school settings, where students often feel constrained by societal labels or limited future pathways.

Moreover, empathy is not only a therapeutic tool but also a contributor to broader socio-emotional development. A meta-analysis by Li et al. (2024) found that empathy significantly mediates the development of prosocial behavior among adolescents. This suggests that empathic counseling experiences help students not only clarify their identity but also improve social competence. At SMK Anak Bangsa, students who experienced consistent empathetic support from counselors demonstrated improved communication skills, better social conflict management, and more positive peer relationships.

Interestingly, empathy is not exclusively an innate personal quality but can be deliberately cultivated. Research by Bilač et al. (2024) shows that cognitive social training programs significantly enhance empathy and improve relational quality among adolescents. This finding underscores the need for empathy training for BK teachers and school counselors, particularly in vocational education contexts.

In essence, empathy in the humanistic approach is not merely a counseling technique but a stance of respect and affirmation of the student's humanity. When vocational students face intense social pressures, career-related stereotypes, and limited family support, counselor empathy becomes a psychological sanctuary that helps them remain connected to their potential. Consequently, the success of guidance and counseling services in fostering adolescent identity development depends largely on the counselor's capacity to consistently demonstrate authentic and sustained empathy within the professional relationship.

Unconditional Positive Regard as a Catalyst for Openness and Self-Exploration

Unconditional positive regard is a central humanistic principle that fosters a warm, pressure-free counseling atmosphere. At SMK Anak Bangsa, BK teachers consistently demonstrated nonjudgmental acceptance toward students—regardless of their background, values, or decisions—thereby creating a psychologically safe space for students to express themselves and reveal long-suppressed internal conflicts. This experience was described by A, an eleventh-grade Culinary Arts student, who had long concealed her dislike of her major out of fear that teachers or parents would judge her as ungrateful. She began to open up only after sensing that the counselor would not evaluate her negatively.

“At first I was scared to say I didn’t like my major. But the BK teacher said, ‘That feeling is valid.’ Since then, I’m no longer ashamed to talk about what I really feel.”

This statement illustrates how unconditional positive regard creates a secure psychological environment that encourages students to be honest with themselves. Within a nonjudgmental counseling atmosphere, personal values previously suppressed by social or familial pressure can surface naturally. A similar experience was expressed by R, an eleventh-grade Hospitality student, who had long suppressed his aspiration to study design because his parents considered it unrealistic. During counseling, he felt free to express his dream.

“I told the BK teacher that I really wanted to enter the creative world, not hospitality. I thought she would say it was strange, but instead she encouraged me to explore it. That made me excited again.”

The counselor's emotional support offered without expecting the student to conform to adult standards of “rightness” helped students recognize and acknowledge their own preferences and personal values. This recognition then encouraged them to make more authentic decisions. Another student, D, from the Culinary Arts program, described how she had always pretended to be “strong” to avoid being labeled weak by teachers or peers. Through counseling, she began to understand that vulnerability is not a flaw.

“The BK teacher never said I had to be strong. She said it’s okay to feel sad. I just realized it’s not wrong to have a weak side too.”

This reflects how unconditional positive regard helps students recognize their own humanity an aspect often suppressed by masculine norms or competitive school cultures. Within Carl Rogers' humanistic framework, unconditional positive regard is an essential condition for establishing a safe, supportive, and humanizing counseling relationship. At SMK Anak Bangsa, this principle effectively created the psychological conditions needed for students to become more open and willing to acknowledge their authentic identities.

A's narrative demonstrates that the counselor's acceptance served as a primary trigger for emotional honesty. The phrase “That feeling is valid” functioned as powerful emotional affirmation for a student who had long feared being judged. This illustrates

how unconditional positive regard reduces fear of rejection often the greatest barrier to adolescent disclosure in counseling.

Unconditional positive regard, as conceptualized by Rogers, is a transformative force within the counseling relationship. When BK teachers at SMK Anak Bangsa consistently accepted students without judgment regarding their backgrounds, choices, or emotions students gained the freedom to articulate their identities and inner struggles. This is particularly relevant during adolescence, a period marked by identity exploration that is often complicated by parental expectations, peer norms, and social pressure (Scharf & Mayseless, 2020). Through unconditional acceptance, students felt no need to censor their emotions, allowing identity exploration to unfold more healthily and reflectively.

The counselor's emotional validation also served as a key mechanism for helping students acknowledge previously suppressed feelings. When a counselor affirms that a student's emotions are "valid," the statement functions not only as empathy but also as recognition that the student's subjective experience is worthy of respect. This aligns with Murphy et al. (2023), who found that emotional validation significantly enhances self-acceptance and reduces internalized pressure among adolescents. Validation reduces shame and guilt associated with having emotions or aspirations that diverge from adult expectations.

Furthermore, the counselor's acceptance of unconventional interests—such as the student's dream of pursuing arts and design—became a form of corrective emotional experience. Many students received unconditional support in counseling that they had never received at home or in their broader social environment. This is vital for adolescents forming both personal and vocational identities. Research by Duffy et al. (2021) shows that counseling relationships grounded in unconditional support significantly improve career identity clarity and strengthen autonomous decision-making.

Another important theme is the recognition of vulnerability as an inherent aspect of human experience. In the masculinized culture typical of vocational education, expressions of fear, sadness, or weakness are often stigmatized. Through unconditional acceptance, counselors enabled male students to reconstruct their understanding of emotional strength. In psychological terms, acknowledging one's emotions is not a sign of weakness but rather an indicator of emotional maturity. This finding is consistent with Gatt et al. (2022), who argue that supportive, nonjudgmental environments enhance emotional resilience among adolescent boys.

When practiced consistently, unconditional positive regard not only strengthens the counseling working alliance but also promotes fundamental shifts in how students view themselves. Counselors who do not require students to appear "strong" or conform to rigid social expectations create space for more authentic identity reconstruction. Unconditional positive regard is not merely a communication technique but a stance of affirming the student's humanity one that encourages courage to embrace the self fully. This reaffirms the core humanistic principle that meaningful psychological change occurs only when individuals feel wholly accepted, understood, and valued as unique persons (Rogers, 1961; StatPearls, 2023).

Counselor Genuineness in Building Trust and Facilitating Student Self-Reflection

Genuineness defined as the counselor's authenticity, honesty, and congruence within the counseling relationship—is a key humanistic principle that shapes the quality of counselor–student interactions. Rather than adopting a formal or distant professional role, the counselors at SMK Anak Bangsa positioned themselves as open, sincere individuals who interacted with students on an equal, human-to-human basis. This authenticity

proved to have a significant impact on building mutual trust and encouraging students to engage in deeper and more honest self-reflection.

This was evident in the experience of N, an eleventh-grade Hospitality student, who expressed that the counselor's simple, non-preaching approach made him feel comfortable:

"The BK teacher didn't act overly wise. Sometimes she shared that she was confused too when she was in school. That made me feel she's just a regular human being, not a teacher who only lectures."

This statement illustrates that when counselors demonstrate authenticity sharing personal experiences in a proportional manner and not hiding their human side students perceive the relationship as more equal and genuine. In such an environment, students do not feel judged; instead, they feel accompanied in their journey toward identity exploration. Similarly, O, a Culinary Arts student, described how the counselor's acknowledgement of her own limitations made it easier for him to open up:

"When I told her I was confused about my future, the BK teacher said she didn't always know what to do either when she was young. But she said it's important to be honest with yourself. That made me think a lot after the session."

This demonstrates that counselor honesty goes beyond giving advice; acknowledging uncertainty and past struggles becomes a reflective mirror for students. Through such transparency, students begin to recognize that confusion is a natural part of identity development. Another student, D, shared a similar experience. She felt safe disclosing sensitive matters because the counselor was not "pretending to be nice," but instead showed honest emotional responses:

"When I cried, the BK teacher sometimes looked sad too. But she didn't force me to stop crying or tell me to be strong. She just said, 'That's normal.' I felt that she genuinely cared, not just doing her job."

The counselor's genuine emotional responses created an authentic atmosphere that was far removed from the administrative formality often found in school-based services. This environment allowed students to access their own emotions and, in many cases, triggered deeper reflection on what they truly want and need in life. Students demonstrated positive developments such as increased clarity of goals, higher motivation, and greater awareness of their strengths and aspirations. These findings are consistent with previous research affirming the effectiveness of humanistic approaches in helping students resolve inner conflicts (Corey, 2013).

To understand how this genuineness was cultivated, the researcher interviewed the BK teacher, Mrs. Mardiah. She emphasized:

"I learned not to wear a mask during counseling. If I don't know the answer, I say so honestly. The students trust us more when we don't pretend to know everything."

She also noted that honest emotional sharing can serve as a bridge to trust:

"Sometimes I share a little about my teenage years, which were also confusing. Not to preach, but to show they're not alone. That makes them feel safe and appreciated."

Counselor genuineness emerged as a crucial factor in establishing a strong and reflective counseling relationship. When counselors demonstrate authentic, non-authoritarian attitudes, share personal experiences proportionally, and present themselves as fellow human beings rather than distant professionals, students perceive the interaction not merely as a formal obligation but as an authentic emotional dialogue. This finding aligns with a meta-study by Cooper et al. (2025), which suggests that therapist

genuineness significantly enhances the quality of the therapeutic alliance and improves counseling outcomes for adolescents.

In the context of adolescent development, counselor genuineness often exerts a deeper impact than technical intervention strategies. A qualitative study by Schnellbacher and Leijssen (2009) found that for many clients, the therapist's authentic presence particularly through appropriate self-disclosure can be one of the most critical therapeutic processes for building trust and facilitating personal change. In the cases of students N, R, and D, the counselor's refusal to pretend to "know everything," combined with her willingness to acknowledge uncertainty and share past doubts, created a relational environment that felt safe and supportive of self-reflection.

The adolescent psychotherapy literature further emphasizes that therapist transparency and authenticity are central to improving client engagement and strengthening counseling relationships. Focus group studies involving clinicians in child and adolescent settings show that young clients explicitly value genuineness; counselors who appear ordinary, human, and emotionally open are perceived as more trustworthy and approachable, making students feel respected and less afraid of being judged (Schlimme & von Heymann, 2021).

The concept of genuineness also aligns with Rogers' client-centered theory, in which congruence is identified as one of the three core therapeutic conditions. Counselor honesty expressed in acknowledging uncertainty and allowing natural emotional responses to emerge is a tangible expression of congruence that enables students to present themselves without masks or performance burdens. This condition is particularly essential during adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration and emotional vulnerability.

Empirical evidence further demonstrates that for many adolescents, counselor genuineness serves as a reflective tool that invites deeper introspection. When students perceive that their counselor is not merely following a professional script but sharing genuine human experiences, they are more inclined to clarify internal conflicts and articulate authentic values and aspirations. This process fosters corrective emotional experiences in which students recognize that confusion and uncertainty are not signs of inadequacy but rather normal aspects of identity development.

In summary, counselor genuineness builds trust while opening space for honest self-reflection. Such practice not only reduces student resistance to counseling but also strengthens students' personal narratives in an autonomous and authentic manner—conditions that are essential for the development of a healthy adolescent identity. This finding reinforces the relevance of the humanistic approach in vocational education, where students often face external pressures and social stigma related to their identity and career choices.

This study has several limitations. First, because it employed a qualitative case study design, the findings are contextual and cannot be generalized to the broader population of vocational school students. The research was conducted in a single institution SMK Anak Bangsa and focused exclusively on eleventh-grade students who exhibited signs of identity crisis. As such, the counseling dynamics and the effectiveness of the humanistic approach identified in this study may not fully represent conditions in other schools with different cultural, social, or policy contexts.

Second, the dual role of the BK teacher as both a key informant and the intervention provider introduces the possibility of subjective bias, both in the presentation of data and in the interpretation of students' experiences. The close involvement of the counselor may have influenced how students responded during interviews or counseling sessions.

Third, the limited duration of the study constrained the depth of analysis related to students' psychological changes. This is especially relevant for assessing the long-term

impact of the humanistic approach on identity development, which is a dynamic process requiring extended observation.

Given these limitations, future research is recommended to involve multiple schools and extend the duration of the study to obtain a more comprehensive and longitudinal understanding of the effectiveness of the humanistic counseling approach in vocational settings. Comparative research across counseling approaches such as humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, or eclectic models could also be conducted to evaluate the relative advantages of each approach in addressing identity crises.

Additionally, it is recommended that future studies employ broader triangulation methods, such as involving parents, peers, or other school personnel as supplementary informants, to enhance data validity. Quantitative research using standardized instruments may also be developed to objectively measure psychosocial changes, such as self-efficacy, identity clarity, or self-reflection scores before and after counseling interventions. Through more diverse and in-depth methodological approaches, future studies are expected to contribute more substantially to the development of guidance and counseling theory and practice in secondary education.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the humanistic counseling approach in Vocational High Schools (SMK) plays a vital role in supporting adolescent identity development. Counselor genuineness, empathy, unconditional positive regard, and respect for students' personal experiences collectively foster a safe and egalitarian counseling relationship. Within such an environment, students feel valued as whole individuals and are encouraged to reflect on their personal values and life directions. The study demonstrates that humanistic counseling practices enable students to confront identity crises constructively and enhance their confidence in making personal, academic, and career-related decisions.

This research is significant because it highlights the urgent need for counseling approaches that are more human-centered, especially amid the complex psychosocial pressures faced by vocational school adolescents. Unlike directive or normative approaches, the humanistic model positions students as active agents in their own healing and developmental processes. The relevance of this study also lies in its contextual alignment with the lived realities of Indonesian vocational students, who often encounter identity dilemmas without access to safe and supportive spaces for emotional expression. The findings strengthen the position of the humanistic approach as a foundational counseling praxis with long-term impact in secondary education.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on the importance of authentic, client-centered counseling relationships as emphasized in classical Rogersian theory. Through empirical confirmation in the SMK context, this research adds cultural and contextual dimensions that enrich the understanding of the effectiveness of the humanistic approach. Therefore, the findings of this study serve as a valuable reference for developing counseling service models that are responsive to the developmental dynamics of adolescents in schools.

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