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Middle school students' experiences and perceptions of educational decision making

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This descriptive case study investigated student perceptions and experience of choosing option subjects in a stand-alone middle school environment. The focus was on students making subject-choice decisions in preparation for their following year of school. A review of recent literature relevant to adolescent educational decision making was undertaken and a gap in research using student voice in the middle school years was identified.

Students in Years 8, 9 and 10 were surveyed to gain an overview of subject choice experiences at the school, and more in depth insights were shared in focus group interviews. Parents/caregivers of interviewed students, and school staff were surveyed to triangulate data from students. Reviews of relevant school and government documents contextualised the students' subject choice environment.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software to identify response trends and relationships between variables. Qualitative data were analysed using a priori codes derived from research literature and emerging in initial data analysis. Findings were consistent with established research indicating both individual and school structural factors influence subject-choice decision making. New issues emerged related to the provision of advice and support for students making subject choices and developing future study plans. Implications for supporting students in subject-choice decision making and how parents/caregivers, school staff and school systems can be assisted to better respond to student needs in a middle school setting are delineated.

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