An Investigation of How Organisational Structures in New Zealand Secondary Schools Impact on Student Subject Selection and Their Access to Academic Qualification Pathways

Emma Jones

2024

A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Educational Leadership)

Faculty of Culture and Society
AUT - Auckland University of Technology

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Dr Ruth Boyask, for your unwavering patience and academic support as I completed this thesis.

I acknowledge AUTEC for providing ethics approval for this research on 28/11/2023, reference number 23/272.

Thank you, Teach NZ, for granting me the time to complete my master's study. Thank you to the Board and my supportive Senior Leadership Team for enabling me to take study leave. Special thanks to Dr Paul Bennett who has been a source of inspiration, a great coach, and my cheerleader throughout this degree.

Thank you to the principals for allowing me to access your schools and to the research participants for sharing your time and invaluable insight.

My final and greatest thank you goes to my whānau - my team, and my reason '*why*'. Thank you, Eddie, for enduring my moments of self-doubt and always believing in me. To Tui and Māui for being the most incredible young people. If completing this study makes you half as proud of me as I am of you, it's been worth it!

Ehara toa i te toa takitahi, engari, he toa takitini.

My strength is not the strength of one, it is the strength of many.

Abstract

The debate on curriculum content and its relevance to employment and life skills continues among stakeholders. While the Ministry of Education expects schools to offer diverse subjects, the New Zealand Curriculum provides only guidance, not mandates, for which subjects schools should include within their curriculum programmes. Understanding students' experiences and decision-making factors in subject selection as well as the impact that the organisational structures governing the process have on their ability to make choices, are crucial for supporting their diverse needs and ensuring equitable and excellent education outcomes.

This research examines how organisational structures in secondary schools influence student subject selection processes and impact academic pathways. It considers structures as formed by ideological and habitual practices, initiated by senior and middle leadership. The study focuses on how these organisational structures support or limit student choices, their equity in accommodating individual and social differences, and how leadership practices related to these structures influence subject selection processes. Embracing a conceptual research methodology, this study is centred on the experiences and perspectives of leaders and students. The qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews at three secondary schools in Auckland, New Zealand. The expert opinions of the participants were considered alongside a review of the literature and the researcher’s critical analysis of the findings to build a deeper understanding of the thesis topic.

Analysis of the research data exposed that targeted support and guidance are useful for enabling students to make informed subject choices. However, several obstacles can hinder equitable outcomes and limit access to future educational opportunities. Addressing these challenges requires subject selection processes that combine organisational structure with flexibility, providing consistency while catering to diverse student needs. A flexible structure considers each student’s circumstances before decisions are made regarding access to subjects and provides students with the option to explore a range of subjects before finalising their timetables. Having well-defined academic pathways and explicit information on subject requirements gives students clear direction which, when balanced with adaptability, enables schools to better support students in making decisions aligned with their interests and goals, thereby enhancing equitable academic opportunities.

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Emma Jones

Date: 25 October 2024

List of Abbreviations

AP	Assistant Principal
DP	Deputy Principal
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
HOD	Head of Department
HOF	Head of Faculty
HOLA	Head of Learning Area
MOE	Ministry of Education
NELP	National Education and Learning Priorities
NZC	New Zealand Curriculum
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission
UE	University Entrance

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter One: Introduction

It is commonplace for secondary schools in New Zealand to offer senior students a range of subjects to choose from and not restrict them to studying only what the Ministry of Education recognises as the core subjects of English, mathematics and science (MoE, 2024e). Providing senior students with the opportunity to choose and study specialised subjects encourages them to take ownership of choosing an educational pathway they find engaging and that prepares them for their transition beyond school (Hipkins & Bolstad, 2005; Iannelli & Duta, 2018). International research studies on students' subject selection indicate significant differences in the processes through which young individuals make decisions regarding their educational pathways and that comparable schools differ considerably as to the types of subjects that are offered to students (Hipkins & Bolstad, 2005; Smyth & Hannan, 2006). The New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2024e) serves as a guiding document for schools in shaping and evaluating these curriculum programmes, yet it does not impose standardised constraints on how schools decide which subjects they offer. At the age of 16, compulsory schooling ceases, and this is when students are first faced with the choice of continuing to study formal qualifications within the secondary school environment or transitioning to tertiary education, an apprenticeship or full employment.

New Zealand secondary schools can offer students a variety of subjects within the domains of “English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, mathematics and statistics, science, social sciences, and technology” (MoE, 2024e, as cited in the NZC, p. 16). The debate as to what curriculum programme will best prepare young people for the workplace and see them develop essential life skills has continued over decades. Philosopher and educator, Dewey (1916) suggests that no subject is inherently superior to another challenging the traditional hierarchy of subjects in education. His ideas and knowledge of a holistic approach to education are relevant to modern-day concerns of how to be student-centred and how schools support student subject selection. Noddings (2013) builds on Dewey's ideas by arguing that educators should prioritise students' passions over steering them toward traditionally valued subjects. She emphasises that allowing students to follow their interests makes them more likely to excel and find personal fulfilment. This perspective aligns with modern calls for more personalised, student-driven learning in education. However, research has flagged a cautionary message for schools offering multiple pathways for students claiming that educators must be careful not to send students on a journey to nowhere by offering alternative less academic pathway options (Adler & Isaacs, 1983; Moulton et al., 2018). Having the choice of a wide range of academic subjects can inspire and

engage senior students to excel in their learning and has the potential to keep multiple doors open for them to transition into a meaningful pathway of their choice such as university or tertiary study, an apprenticeship or employment.

The issue is not that schools offer different curriculum programmes for senior students to choose from, but rather the way schools implement student choice that requires improvement (Noddings, 2013). As stated in The New Zealand Curriculum, the Treaty of Waitangi principle requires schools and educators to implement "a curriculum that acknowledges our nation's bicultural foundations" (NZC, 2023, p. 1) therefore the cultural perspectives, values, and practices of both Māori and Pākehā students' should be recognised and integrated by school leaders when determining which subjects will comprise the curriculum programme and when implementing the subject selection process. Gaining insight into the subjects offered in New Zealand secondary schools, exploring how middle and senior leaders influence these programmes and determining the process for student subject selection are key aspects of this research. This research indicates whether the schools have offered their students appropriate courses and sought to minimise some barriers that can prevent access to them.

Hipkins and Vaughan's (2019) New Zealand based research suggests that schools should respond "flexibly to the learning needs of every student, helping them to make progress and experience success in their learning and achievements regardless of their prospective future pathway" (p. 6). However, the school system is perhaps more flexible in theory than in reality as schools may still impose constraints on student choices or limit the extent to which personalised learning can occur (Brady, 2006; Patrick et al., 2011). My experience as a dean and curriculum leader in the secondary school setting led me to agree that enabling all students to follow their desired programme, one which includes all their option choices, is a challenge that cannot be mastered by school leaders. Students selecting their subjects for the upcoming year would find themselves denied entry into a course for an array of reasons. Commonly students would be told that they cannot pursue a subject the following year because their previous academic achievement was not good enough or the timetable could not be manipulated to make their choice of subjects fit together or the class is oversubscribed or the class will not happen due to lack of interest or there is no specialist teacher to run the programme. My own educational experience of working in secondary schools is reflected in a three-year study of secondary schools in England which reported that student subject choices are not "completely open but steered by what is on offer, previous achievement and conversations with teachers, family and friends…" (Thomson et al., 2020, p. 1). Their findings also revealed that the "way school structures are designed" can

result in some students missing out on their “basic educational entitlement” (Thomson et al., 2020, p. 6).

When contemplating the concept of 'structures,' we usually mean how various parts or pieces fit together in something complicated, thus structuring something means to “construct or arrange according to a plan” (Oxford Languages, 2024). This research study identifies ‘structures’ as having to do with the overall organisation and functioning of a typical secondary school in New Zealand informed by the researcher’s experience as an educational leader in secondary schools for the past 25 years both in England and New Zealand. When considering the ‘structures’ as referring to the organisation and functioning of a secondary school, this research includes looking into the purpose of the school, the subjects offered, the timetable design and, the system of leadership driving the school. Research from other countries has identified that ‘structures’ can create issues of inflexibility in the area of student subject choices (Brady, 2006; Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019; Illanelli & Duta, 2018; Patrick et al., 2011; Zohar & Hipkins, 2018), therefore the quest within this research study is to investigate how organisational structures are impacting on student subject selection processes in New Zealand secondary schools and students access to academic qualification pathways.

Rationale for the Research

For more than 25 years I have worked in secondary schools as a teacher, head of department, pastoral dean, and deputy principal. I understand the intricacies of managing a school that prioritises equitable service to all students while fostering a culture of respect and compassion among the staff through my experiences of holding both middle and senior leadership positions. Catering for the needs of ‘all’ is a daily challenge for senior leaders and school boards as they are tasked with adhering to the purpose set by the Ministry of Education to deliver “equitable and excellent outcomes” for all students (MoE, 2024a, p. 1). In my experience, secondary schools can consider themselves to be successful when their senior students (Year 12 or Year 13) are ready to graduate into their chosen pathway, whether that be continuing with further study at a university or tertiary institution, entering an apprenticeship or employment.

When I was in the role of pastoral dean for six years at a large Auckland secondary school, I worked closely with senior students as they prepared to leave school. One part of my role was to assist the students with selecting their subjects for the forthcoming year. Often, my observations were that students struggled to opt into the subjects that they deemed to be essential for their

final year of study because of numerous constraints imposed on them by the systems operating within the school. The barriers students faced included the head of the department denying approval to study a course due to their previous academic performance, assumed academic ability, or perceived behaviour or attitude. Additionally, some students were unable to enrol in certain courses due to limited available spaces. Finally, the structure of the timetable sometimes prevented students from combining certain subjects in their schedules. I also observed the internal barriers that students constructed as they thought about what subjects they should pick. Often these choices were made as they rated certain subjects as being more interesting, useful or likely to lead to their success (Jackson, 1979) but they also made choices based on what their friends were doing or who the teacher of a particular class would be. Anecdotally, from the conversations I have had with students, I would say that students were guided by an internal bias, either going towards subjects in which they had been made to feel competent by the teacher or shying away from subjects if they felt that the teacher did not believe in their ability to do well in that subject. Students are influenced by a complex interaction of psychological and social factors when choosing subjects (Hipkins & Bolstad, 2005), thus teachers assisting in the student subject selection process should be cognisant of what might be going on “beneath the surface for young people as they navigate their pathways…” (Vaughan, 2005, p. 39). The feedback I have received from working with students in secondary schools over time is that the subjects chosen can both positively and negatively impact the success of their transition out of secondary school into a meaningful pathway.

When working as a pastoral middle leader I empathised with the students as they navigated the subject selection process. I would frequently find myself frustrated with the organisational structures the school had in place that would restrict freedom of choice for some students. Yet, when wearing my other hat as a curriculum leader, I could be the person who guided a student away from a particular programme or course within my subject domain. I may have been integral to setting the course entry prerequisites, choosing to believe that my guidance and decision-making were best for the student without necessarily peeling back the layers to discover what students needed. Then, as my own two children reached their final years at school, I saw things from a different perspective again. One of my children lacked confidence in their ability to excel academically so selected subjects below their academic capabilities. Being able to choose this alternative pathway was deemed as a safe route for them but restricted their option of transitioning from school to university and possibly lowered their motivation to study hard. My other child only decided that they wanted a university pathway once in Year 13 and although the combination of subjects chosen was satisfactory to gain University Entrance, the pressure was on them to meet

the external requirements of the university they had chosen. Again, this student had possibly been encouraged to study some subjects that the heads of department had deemed to be more suitable for them based on their preconceived ideas about the student and without knowing their aspirations. These experiences led me to reflect on whether the actions we as middle and senior leaders in schools take are always necessary and whether they serve our students well enough. At this stage in my educational leadership journey, the words of Illich, the author of the book *Deschooling Society* have led me to question if some of the 'things' we do in schools are necessary or beneficial to student outcomes. Whilst he argues that until alternative approaches to the "ritual of schooling are adopted neither individual learning or social equity can be enhanced" (1995, p. 55), through my senior leader's lens I can see that some of the rituals in schools are engrained and therefore being free of them may be challenging. But if we are deeply committed to being student-centred in our practice then there is space for small changes to be made.

There has been some research into the determinants affecting students' senior subject selection, including personal, socio-economic, and environmental factors. Some of this research also acknowledges that school organisational structures feature in decision-making. However, there has been limited research conducted on this topic in New Zealand, and much of it is not recent. There is also limited research specifically investigating what school leaders do either consciously or subconsciously, that facilitates or hinders students' subject choice.

As a researcher and educational leader, I hold the position that all students should have equitable access to the subjects and programmes of study that they need to prepare them for a meaningful life after school. As educators, we should encourage all students to aspire to fulfil their academic potential and guide students along a path to success without judgement. As an educational leader, my view aligns with The Ministry of Education's vision that all New Zealand secondary schools should be delivering "equitable and excellent outcomes" for all students "irrespective of their … ethnicity, belief, … social or cultural background …" (MoE, 2024a, p. 1). Leaders have the responsibility to reflect frequently and make necessary adjustments to ensure that these outcomes can be met. This research study delves into the actions of those responsible (middle and senior leaders) for the process of student subject selection and reveals how these educational leadership practices are experienced by the Year 13 students.

Research Aim and Questions

This thesis is an investigation of how organisational structures at New Zealand secondary schools impact how student subject selection occurs. The research was driven by three key research questions:

1. How are these structures enabling or constraining student choice and future study pathways?
2. To what extent are these structures equitable across individual and social differences between students?
3. How do leadership practices determine the structures guiding student subject selection?

Three secondary schools located in Auckland, New Zealand were selected as the data collection sites for this study. Two of the schools were in East Auckland and one school was in South Auckland. The schools had an Equity Index of between 400 and 550[1] identifying that the schools serve students who may face moderate to significant socioeconomic challenges, such as restricted family income, parental unemployment, and access to housing, all of which could affect their access to educational opportunities. Two of the schools had a similar ethnic makeup whereas contrastingly, one school had a significantly higher proportion of Māori and Pacific students and fewer European/Pākehā students and students of Asian descent than the other two schools. The schools' rolls ranged between approximately 1400 and 2000 students. All three schools were co-educational state schools. The researcher did not have a connection to any of the secondary schools and they were chosen using purposive sampling. Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with two middle or senior leaders who had some responsibility for the student subject selection process at their schools and with three Year 13 students at each school.

[1] The Equity Index is the Ministry of Education's way to identify and respond to socioeconomic barriers in schools.

An Outline of the Study

Chapter One: Introduction

As can be seen above, this chapter introduces the research study in the field of educational leadership coupled with an explanation of a rationale that justifies the relevance of the study from the researcher's perspective as an experienced school leader. An outline of the research aims, and research questions were provided as well as an overview of the setting for this study and how the research was conducted.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter is a review of the literature relevant to this study. The researcher has chosen to review four bodies of literature and research deemed relevant to the research aim and research questions. The scope of the literature review starts broadly with organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools. Literature about educational outcomes and equitable access to educational outcomes is then considered. The chapter concludes with a review of literature and research on student subject selection.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology and research methods used to complete this research study. An explanation for approaching the research through a constructionist ontological lens is given as well as the reasons for the researcher taking a phenomenological epistemological position. The qualitative methodology for data collection is explained, including how the semi-structured interviews were conducted. The chapter concludes by documenting the ethical considerations and discussing issues of reliability and validity associated with the study.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

Chapter Four presents an analysis of the data from semi-structured interviews with senior and middle leaders and Year 13 students. It is divided into four sections: the first introduces the participants and their identification in the findings; the second and third sections present the interview results from leaders and students, grouped by key themes; and the last section summarises the findings. Detailed information about the schools is covered in the methodology chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion of the Findings

In this chapter, the focus is on the discussion and analysis of the data presented in the previous chapter. The opinions and experiences shared by the research participants are considered against the literature reviewed in Chapter Two as the researcher prepares to conclude how the structures in New Zealand secondary schools impact students' experiences of subject selection and their access to academic qualifications.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

This closing chapter presents the researcher's key conclusions drawn from the analysis and discussion of the research findings. The key conclusions are contextualised as the researcher makes recommendations for educational leaders to consider when devising processes for student subject selection as well as highlighting recommended avenues for future research. The limitations of the study are addressed.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature that relates to the objectives of the study and research questions. With this study investigating the reasoning behind subject selection practices in New Zealand schools, Oakes's (1992) findings are used as a foundation. Her investigation showed that curriculum leaders make assumptions about students' abilities, aspirations, and educational needs that influence course offerings and student placement policies. By exploring how these processes are conducted, this research aims to determine the extent to which a school's subject selection process is influenced by the perceptions of educators regarding the suitability of various educational pathways for students. Examining the subject selection processes in place at schools may uncover how the organisational structures of secondary schools in New Zealand shape students' subject choices and their access to academic qualifications. It may also be possible to gain insight into the factors driving these organisational decisions.

Positioned within the broader field of educational leadership, this study is grounded in four key areas of literature: organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools, influences on educational outcomes, equitable access to educational outcomes, and influences on student subject selection. The review of literature will be structured around these central themes.

Organisational Structures in New Zealand Secondary Schools

The organisational structure of secondary schools encompasses a range of features - the ringing of the bells every hour to dictate the change of class, a daily timetable, subject departments, a hierarchical leadership structure, and a rewards and punishment system to name a few. As it is necessary to understand both the features within these structures, how and why they are formed and, how they occur in secondary schools, this section of the literature review is presented in two parts: the purpose of organisational structure in secondary schools and the organisational structure and practice of school leadership.

The Purpose of Organisational Structure in Secondary Schools

The Ministry of Education stipulates that secondary schools are for children between the ages of 13 and 19 years old (Years 9-13). From age 16 schooling is optional however it is at this stage that "young people gain National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) and transition tofurther education, training or a career" (MoE, 2024k, p. 1). The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is New Zealand's main academic qualification (NZQA, 2024) although some

secondary schools offer alternative academic qualifications such as Cambridge International Education and the International Baccalaureate.

It is expected that secondary schools will offer a range of different subjects for students to study throughout their senior schooling years (MoE, 2024e) and The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) document serves as a guide for schools in their decision making regarding the “design and review” of the curriculum offered (2024, p. 6). Previous research has revealed that “schools with similar characteristics can vary significantly in their provision of particular subjects” (Smyth & Hannan, 2006, p. 305). Providing a versatile curriculum allows students to explore specialised subjects and foster a sense of ownership for their learning as they prepare to transition out of school (Hipkins & Bolstad, 2005; Iannelli & Duta, 2018). In New Zealand, most school leavers transition to tertiary study, with 36% entering foundational levels, 40% achieving UE, and 29% going directly into the workforce (*Transitions from Secondary School Research Report*, TEC, 2024). According to these figures, most senior schools in New Zealand offer curricula that support the Ministry of Education's goal of preparing pupils for the transition from school to postsecondary education, training, or the workforce (MoE, 2024a).

A school’s organisational structure is influenced by culture and determined by traditions embedded in the regular practices of teachers (Deed & Lesko, 2015; French et al., 2020; OECD, 2013; Saltmarsh et al., 2015). The traditional structure of schools is necessary to provide the “environment for systematic, formalised learning and teaching” (Christie, 1998, p. 286). Organisational structures play a key role in shaping behaviour, clarifying responsibilities, reducing stress, and empowering individuals to feel and perform more effectively (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001, p. 297). A contrasting thought is that these ideological traditional routines are an attempt at “achieving an orderly and compliant population for the purposes of social governance” (Saltmarsh et al., 2015, p. 319). Such ideologies are determined by those in leadership positions and are based on the leaders’ own beliefs and experiences and are not necessarily appropriate for all students' needs to be met. These regular routines which include the timetable structure, the formation of year groups and the curriculum design can either work to suppress or aid those who are a part of them as they form social constructs that have the potential to oversimplify the intricate nature of the human learning experience (Biesta, 2010; Wright et al., 2021).

The reviewed literature highlights a concern as to whether traditional school organisation serves more as a form of social control, for teachers and students alike, and is less about best practice for education.

The Organisational Structure and Practice of School Leadership

Educational or school leadership has been defined as “the act of influencing others in educational settings to achieve goals and this necessitates actions” (Connolly et al., 2019, p. 505). A survey on how leadership affects student achievement revealed that the two core functions of school leadership are to set direction and exercise influence (Seashore Louis et al., 2010). But it is stated that the term ‘educational leadership’ has two meanings - the first describes the hierarchical leadership positions within a school and the second, refers to the action of leading (Connolly et al., 2019; Raelin, 2016). This research study is concerned with the latter - the action of leading, and how the leadership practices of middle and senior leaders determine the structures within which schools are organised and function and the impact these have on Year 13 students when selecting subjects.

The leadership seen in almost all secondary schools is that the principal tops a hierarchical structure and in the case of large schools, is supported by an associate principal. The team then flows into positions of deputy principals and in some cases assistant principals - the number dependent on the size of the school’s roll. These positions comprise the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Underneath the SLT are middle leaders (MoE, 2024i). The Ministry of Education’s document, *Leading from the Middle*, states that middle leaders are a disparate group of teachers who “work with and support classroom teachers and students, providing pedagogical and pastoral leadership and fulfilling various administrative functions” (2012, p. 7). Traditional middle leadership roles in New Zealand secondary schools might be dean, year level manager, head of department or head of faculty but the list goes on. Occupying the pivotal role between the senior leaders and the teachers, middle leaders serve as conduits for implementing school policies with their crucial contribution extending across organisational, administrative, pastoral, and pedagogical leadership (Fitzgerald, 2009; Highfield & Woods, 2023).

Schooling frameworks continue to be characterised by the segregation of subjects, students, and learning into distinct but manageable compartments (Youngs, 2014). In many cases, secondary schools are organised into subject departments reflecting the eight learning areas outlined in the curriculum (NZC, 2024). This appears to be normal practice in schools across the Western world regardless of the multitude of differences in roll size, vision statements and governance (Highfield & Woods, 2023; Siskin, 2014). The distribution of leadership along subject lines is commonplace in

schools due to the range of specialisms in a secondary school. The principal cannot be expected to be the expert in all contexts but must practise shared leadership across a range of departments within the school. Spillane (2006) explains such distributed leadership practice as “the practice of leadership stretched over multiple leaders, followers, and the situation” (as cited in Wright, 2008, p. 2). Within the ‘typical’ New Zealand secondary school, leadership is distributed with the SLT and the middle leaders, comprising department heads, collaborating in some manner to determine the process for student subject selection. How distributed leadership practice determines how the structures at New Zealand secondary schools impact how student subject selection occurs is relevant to this study.

In secondary schools in New Zealand, those leading these subject department areas are commonly known as heads of department or HODs (Highfield & Woods, 2023). Middle leaders are tasked with adopting a dual approach of being accountable and responsible to both higher and lower levels thus two key tensions exist. Middle leaders must mediate between the school hierarchy and the teachers with whom they work the closest, whilst trying to put students’ needs first (Bennett et al., 2007). Furthermore, empirical research on middle leadership practices in New Zealand secondary schools emphasised that the division of schools into subject departments may foster a pronounced sense of territorialism (Bennett et al., 2007). This condition is not conducive to collegiality among department leaders across different curriculum areas, giving rise to robust departmental subcultures within a school, akin to what has been described as ‘mini empires’ (Highfield & Woods, 2023; James & Hopkins, 2003). Distributing leadership in this way may lead to competitiveness between subject departments as they assert themselves in the wider school context resulting in teachers making decisions to protect their interests at the expense of student learning and choice.

Middle leaders are responsible for formulating and implementing internal policies that steer the activities within schools (Skerritt et al., 2023). As they hold a pivotal role in shaping student achievement, research states that educators and leaders must uphold elevated expectations for every student, offering them varied opportunities for learning and accomplishment (University of Auckland *Starpath* report, 2018). Moreover, the *Starpath* report underscores the significance of establishing efficient systems and processes related to NCEA and University Entrance qualifications to guarantee optimal student outcomes. With middle leaders occupying such prominent roles, their leadership practices will likely be significant in determining the structures guiding the student subject selection process in their schools.

Therefore, school leaders adopting an awareness that “policies can be enacted in different ways because of different personal and professional orientations” (Maguire et al., 2015, as cited in Skerritt et al. 2023, p. 572) is important for working towards equity.

When distributed leadership is actioned in a large organisational setting such as a secondary school, many discrepancies can arise and there is the possibility of inconsistencies emerging thus “distributed leadership is sometimes bad leadership” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 102). This may be because individuals have differing agendas from those in formal leadership roles and might stray away from the school’s vision. Leaders need the capacity to guide beyond their values or perspectives to embrace a range of viewpoints in their approach to situations (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Transforming leadership practices related to subject selection in schools depends on understanding the specific way events and processes unfold in each school. Educational leadership practices are driven by what benefits the educator and are based on their perception of what is best for the student and society (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). As Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015) suggest, to understand why said ‘structures’ are set in secondary schools, an understanding of current praxis is required. Thus, it seems apparent that the potential to change current leadership practices around the subject selection processes in schools relies on being able to “attend to how the happeningness” takes place at a particular school (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015, p. 345). Attending to the happeningness is to focus on the unique dynamics, circumstances, and interactions that occur within the school environment. To effectively change how subject selection is handled, school leaders must first recognise and analyse how decisions and actions take shape in the specific context of their school. Conceptualising leadership practice within the theory of practice architectures enables deeper investigation of the “preconditions for the conduct of practices” (Kemmis et al., 2014, as cited in Wilkinson, 2021, p. 30). Practice architectures explain that praxis consists of three main aspects: what people say (cultural-discursive arrangements), what people do (material-economic arrangements), and how people interact (social-political arrangements). These humanistic elements work together to organise and shape the structures and processes within a school (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). Through the practice architectures lens, it may be possible to find out whether the programme of subjects and course contents, the makeup of the timetable and the course/subject entry prerequisites are devised by school leaders to enable all students to choose their pathway freely or whether organisational factors dictate these structures ahead of placing the student truly at the centre of the decision-making (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015).

The literature reviewed in this subsection emphasises the need for a comprehensive awareness of the strengths and limitations associated with distributed leadership practice. The organisational structure of schools can pose obstacles to effectively distributing leadership and potentially impact negatively on student outcomes. Thus, school leaders must maintain an awareness of the practices occurring within their school and review said practices to ensure that students' educational outcomes are not compromised due to organisational and structural constraints. In terms of the aims of this study, school leaders are shown in the research to have significant influences on school practices and thus are responsible for the procedures relating to student subject selection. The complexities of leadership structures within secondary schools and the magnitude of the task that educational leaders have to set direction and exercise influence, whilst caring for the needs of staff and students within the school community are highlighted. How these leadership practices determine the structures guiding student subject selection is pertinent to the aims of this study.

Influences on Educational Outcomes

Understanding influences on student outcomes is embedded in this study's objectives as this research investigates whether organisational structures are enabling or constraining student choice and future study pathways.

Traditional modes of teaching and learning, whereby the teacher maintains authority and control over the learning process, with limited opportunities for interactive or experiential learning and student voice (Kumar, 2010), are reflected in a school's organisational structure. In such a modality, student choice can be limited, deeper learning opportunities restricted and students' intrinsic motivation for learning and achievement dampened. It has been argued that these pedagogies are no longer adequate in providing today's students with the skills required for living in the 21st century (Alterator & Deed, 2018; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Shernoff et al., 2014; Wall, 2019). Yet, Illich (1995) has suggested that organisational routines are rituals entrenched in a framework that is rarely challenged. The OECD (2013) advises school leaders to reconsider the organisational practices shaping schools, especially those tied to traditional learning methods. Instead, they recommend embracing flexible approaches to school organisational structures, including creative implementations of curriculum, and learning schedules. Flexible approaches are more likely to "ensure access and participation by all students without lowering expectations of standards" (Morrison & Kedian, 2017, p. 3).

School leadership impacts educational outcomes by influencing three key variables: school culture, academic structures and processes, and people (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Leithwood (2016) claims that “school leadership is the second most important influence on student achievement” (as cited in Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020, p. 92). Research has shown that HODs can positively impact educational outcomes to a greater extent than principals (Highfield & Woods, 2023; Leithwood, 2016) and the department within which students are taught has a greater impact on student academic achievement than the school they attended in general (Highfield, 2010). It has also been found that the opinions of curriculum leaders were favoured over the pastoral dean when making decisions relating to student educational outcomes (Youngs, 2014). Similarly, previous research has revealed that some educators notice a separation between pastoral and academic guidance for students when in fact there is an understanding that they arefundamentally interconnected (Best, 1999; Clark, 2008; Fraser, 2014; Swinson, 2010).

Researchers also note that school leadership is influenced by the personal backgrounds of leaders, including their values, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Gonzalez Thompson (1984) defines beliefs as being “manifestations of unconsciously held views or expressions of verbal commitments to abstract ideas” (p. 112). A survey of middle leaders revealed that ingrained cultural values were exemplified by "effort-based beliefs” that surfaced asa pivotal aspect shaping the pedagogical beliefs of middle leaders (Pan & Chen, 2024, p. 1). However, a gap in research exploring how middle leaders' pedagogical beliefs influence their actions has been highlighted (Dogan et al., 2020; Golafshani, 2002; Pan & Chen, 2024).

The delegation of leadership can yield positive effects on organisational development and change and “the challenge for schools is to find ways of removing those organisational structures and systems that restrict organisational learning” (Harris, 2008, p. 184) thus is in support of distributed leadership as discussed previously in this chapter.

Equitable Access to Educational Outcomes

The educational leadership issue for secondary school leaders is how can they ensure that equitable student achievement outcomes are more than prioritised. In New Zealand, the Ministryof Education aims to “shape an education system that delivers equitable and excellent outcomes"for all (2024, p. 1). The expectation is that teachers will provide equitable learning opportunities for all young people “irrespective of their … ethnicity, belief, … social or cultural background …”

(MoE, 2024a, p. 1). The aim of *The Education and Training Act 2020* is that all learners receive “a high-quality, culturally responsive, seamless and inclusive education” (MoE, 2024c, p. 1). Irrespective of these aims, New Zealand based researchers, Berryman and Eley (2017) have shown that education visions for ‘all students’ are “challenged when children come from Indigenous, poor, or other diverse groups” (p. 100).

To assist with prioritising equitable student outcomes, educational leaders can draw on New Zealand based policies - *Ka Hikitia* and the *Action Plan for Pacific Education*. The *Action Plan for Pacific Education* envelopes a focus area for change as being to “confront systemic racism and discrimination in education” (MoE, 2024b, p. 1). *Ka Hikitia* is a framework for action to “achieve system shifts in education and support Māori learners … to achieve excellent and equitable outcomes" (MoE, 2024d, p. 1). In response to policies such as *Ka Hikitia*, Berryman and Eley (2017) conducted a study which placed the student at the centre instead of the ‘leader-teacher’. They interviewed 150 senior Māori students about their school experiences in 2015 and then compared these to data gathered from Year 9 and 10 students in 2001. Although it is not possible to make direct comparisons of the data collected before the implementation of the *Ka Hikitia* strategy and after, due to the sampling and methodology being quite different in the two studies, the findings revealed that Māori students still speak of “a disjuncture between the promise of equity and excellence within our education system and their lived realities” (p. 105). The schools had identified these students “as having enjoyed and achieved education success as Māori” (p. 99) - a key goal of the *Ka Hikitia* strategy but the students self-reported that being Māori in secondary school could be a negative experience with plentiful barriers to overcome.

Students facing barriers to excellent and equitable educational outcomes contravene Objective 2: Barrier free access as identified in the *National Education and Learning Priorities - NELP* (see Figure 1). This document reiterates the importance of equitable outcomes for all students with three of the five priorities for teachers and leaders in New Zealand addressing the need for work to be done on ensuring that all students fulfil their potential.

When examining the barriers to implementing Indigenous policies in New Zealand secondary schools, Hynds et al.(2016) found that whilst culturally responsive leadership was being developed, some school leaders believed that Māori students should just “fit in with the mainstream approach” and authentic partnerships with whānau deemed unimportant (p. 543). Teachers discounting the need to recognise students’ colour or race is referred to by Jansen (1999) as the colour-blind approach (as cited in Anthiemoolam & Vermaak, 2021).

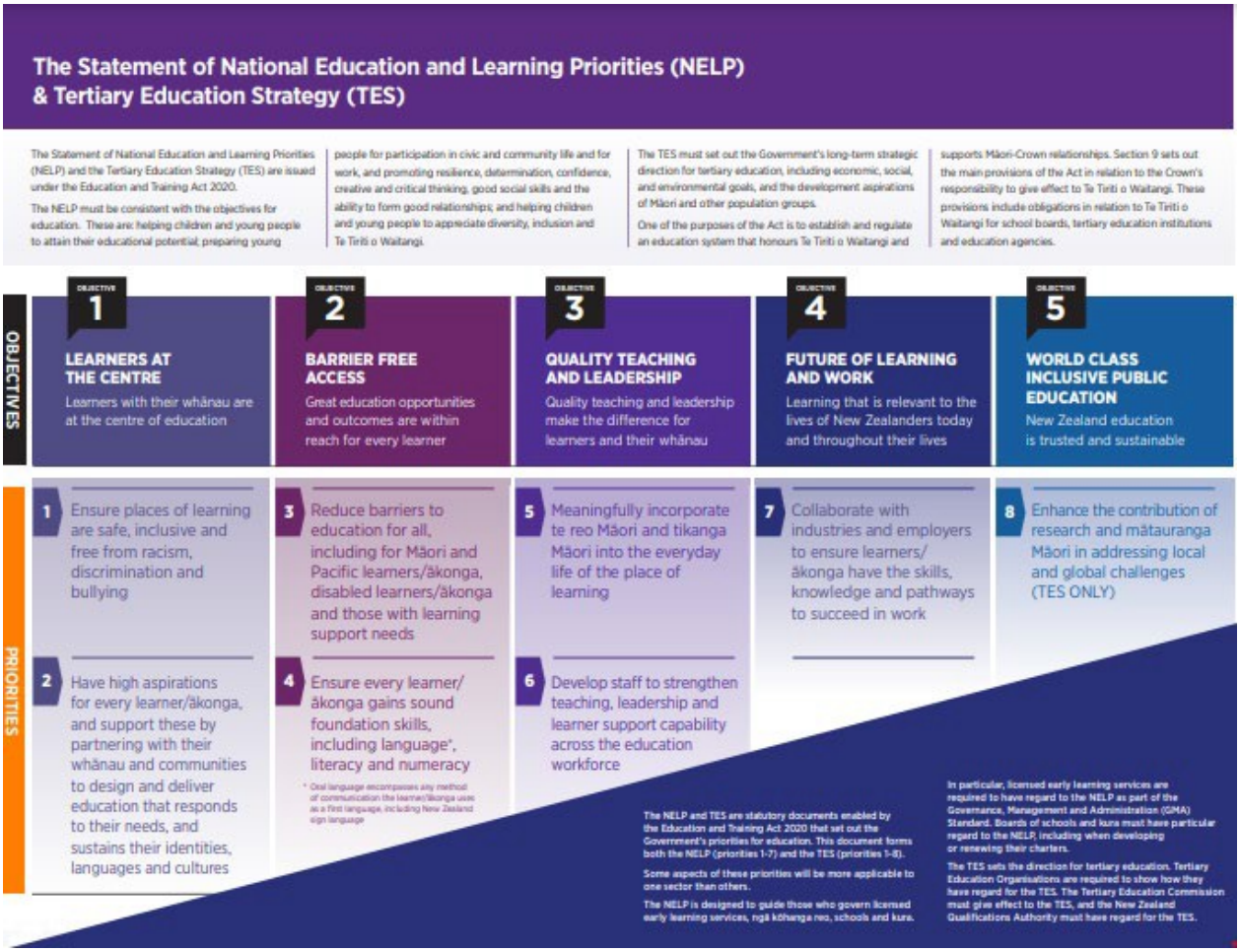

Figure 1 – The National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP)
(Source: Ministry of Education, 2024l)

Research studies highlight the detrimental effects that this could have on engaging with all students as multiple studies showed that respectful and reciprocal teacher-student relationships were fundamental to improved student achievement outcomes (Hunter et al., 2016; Kana & Aitken, 2007; Silins & Mulford, 2002). Seeking to explain why such 'colour-blindness' may exist, Jerdborg (2022) says that "professional identity enables or restricts the way practice is experienced" and teachers must address their "orientation and understandings of education and practice" (p. 287).

Despite policies designed to address the education gap, the academic achievement rate of Māori students has not changed in the past 40 years, remaining lower than that of students of European descent (Bishop et al., 2009). Bishop (2019) suggests that to address and understand the issue of inequitable educational outcomes, we need to focus on how teachers think about and conceptualise their roles and practices. The way teachers approach teaching, their beliefs, and the theories they use to guide their work are central to understanding and solving problems related to educational

inequality. Molla and Gale (2019) disclosed a similar finding and said that how well a school engages with equity-related policies can be affected by “the institutional ethos informing school practices” and the “personal dispositions of the school leaders” (p. 872). Leaders must therefore be tasked with developing intersections between team members that aid in removing the unconscious bias towards marginalised students that can exist. In terms of this study, culturally responsive practices, or lack of them, could influence the subject choices a student is allowed to make.

Data from the *New Zealand Teaching, School, and Principal Leadership Practices Survey* maintains that principals stated the need to challenge teacher beliefs and provide the necessary support (Wylie & Coblentz, 2022). Taylor and Robichaud (2004) argue that addressing these beliefs does not require eliminating differences among educators; rather, it demands giving voice to those differences (as cited in Crevani, 2018, p. 89). How leaders address this fragment of the educational leadership issue is undoubtedly key to seeing what Hargreaves and Shirley (2020) refer to as teachers having “…collective responsibility for all students’ success” (p. 92). As Sheppard (1996) noted, when teachers' beliefs and contributions are valued, they are more likely to align themselves with the broader goals of the school (as cited in Wright, 2008) and are likely useful for driving equitable practices within schools.

Teacher's unconscious bias formed by personal perspectives and assumptions will possibly play a significant role in shaping the success or failure of students from different backgrounds. Understanding the root cause of the achievement challenges faced by Māori students in schools is argued by Bishop (2019) to reside in the discursive positions adopted by teachers. Teachers and leaders confronting their own “discursive positioning” so that the “deeper structures of disparity and inequality” in schools are challenged (Alton-Lee, 2015, p. 4) are important to this thesis. The ability to look inward and challenge our assumptions was patented by Argyris and Schon (1974) and Cardno (2012) as double loop learning theory and whilst it is not “not easy to create organisations capable of double loop learning … it can be done.” (Argyris, 1977, p. 125). It is encouraging that people require only a minimal level of awareness about the ideologies influencing their thoughts and actions for changes in practice, such as being responsive to the diversity of all our ākonga, to take place (Argyris, 1977, p. 125). Leaders must prioritise common goals therefore they must be adept in examining their stocks of knowledge so that they can see things from another perspective to their own and commit to the actions associated with the strategic vision of the school and educational policy.

Ensuring that equitable student achievement outcomes are indisputably prioritised in New Zealand secondary schools is an ongoing educational issue that educators must address. As Berryman and

Eley (2017) point out “the good intentions of teachers and policymakers” to focus on achievement gaps has compounded the problem, instilling the idea that “some groups of studentsare just not as good as other groups”, further reinforcing assumptions that the student is the problem and not the system (p. 109). Educational leaders need to collaborate with teachers (and other leaders) to examine the assumptions that may exist within the team to “alter, adjust, adapt…” pedagogy and interactions to meet this goal (Dugan, 2017, p. 64). How such work is conducted will be determined by the leadership practices and the interactions created. In this way, the reviewed literature highlights that the assumptions of teachers and leaders may be a barrier to some students when selecting their subject choices.

Influences on Student Subject Selection

Students’ post-16 subject selection in secondary school matters since various courses and credentials can be linked to the choices for additional study that students have at the conclusionof Year 13 and, eventually, the career paths that are available to them (Dilnot, 2018; Hupkau et al. 2017). Educational leaders need to be aware of the experiences of students and the influences on students as they make their subject selections to be able to understand how to meet the learning needs of all equitably.

Students’ subject selection can be influenced by four key factors - the flexibility afforded by each school and school structures (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019), students’ individual traits and parents (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Dryler, 1998; Hansen, 1997; Van der Werfhorst et al., 2001), the attitudes and beliefs of secondary school teachers and leaders (Brandsma & Knuver, 1989, as cited in Van de Werfhorst, 2003; Brimer et al., 1977; Coleman, 1975; Mortimore et al., 1988; Postlethwaite, 1975; Shaycroft, 1967) and, the curriculum options (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019; Perry & Southwell, 2014). This section of the literature review will present the current research regarding each of these influences on student subject selection.

Influence of School Flexibility and School Structures

The concept of flexibility is how willing or able an individual school is to develop pathways that support individual students' needs, rather than a one size fits all model. Responding "flexibly to the learning needs of every student, helping them to make progress and experience success in their learning and achievements regardless of their prospective future pathway" (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019, p. 6) should be a priority for school leaders and teachers. However, previous research has suggested that the school system is perhaps more flexible in theory than in reality (Brady, 2006; Patrick et al., 2011). Organisational structures such as timetables, class size and the availability of resources can create issues of inflexibility in student subject choices (Brady, 2006; Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019; Illanelli & Duta, 2018; Patrick et al., 2011; Zohar & Hipkins, 2018).

The literature presents a tension between the need for organisational structures that allow schools to function effectively whilst catering to the individual needs of all students. For example, the setting of parameters around which the curriculum programme is designed, the timetable is organised and the processes that allow for subject selection to occur. Yet, these structures can cause a lack of flexibility which impacts the creation of an environment where the learning needs of all students can be met without exception.

Influence of Students' Individual Traits and Parents

Another influence on subject selection is a student's individual traits and the influence of their parents. According to Jonsson (1999), the behaviour exhibited by students when deciding which subjects they should pick is termed comparative advantage. He argues that students tend to choose subjects they perceive themselves to excel in because they are more inclined to derive greater enjoyment from their strongest subjects. Choosing subjects based on interest can be seen to be of merit as Dewey (1916) asserts that no subject is more academic than another and success in any subject is a worthy achievement.

As well as subject choice being influenced by the student's assessment of their ability, early studies of subject selection indicate that students also tend to select subjects that are linked to the characteristics and interests of their parents (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Dryler, 1998; Hansen, 1997; Van der Werfhorst et al., 2001). These studies highlight the powerful influence that the home environment has on students' decision-making at school. Previous research uncovered that students' subject pathways were affected by their parents' socioeconomic background (Ayalon, 1995; Dean et al., 2023; Politis et al., 2007). Boyask et al's. (2014) research revealed that student aspirations and achievement can be affected by where they live, reiterating the need for educational

leaders to have an awareness that all students are different thus a one-size fits all approach to the subjects offered in curriculum programme may not allow all students to fulfil their potential. Looking specifically at the subjects students select, one study revealed that secondary school students were more likely to pursue science and mathematics subject pathways if they came from “higher social classes" and had “more highly educated parents" (Politis et al., 2007, p. 42). Similarities were also seen in the results of other European research where students’ cultural and economic capital influenced their selection of subjects in the senior school, with greater uptake of arts and humanities subjects (Van de Werfhorst et al., 2003). Murcia et al. (2020) discovered that parents valued encouraging and guiding their children and recognised their role was to help the student keep as many future options open as possible as opposed to direct them into their own preferred pathway. Simmons's (2008) research also showed that students believed their parents have a crucial role in subject selection when they assist in the decision-making process as opposed to dictating specific academic or career choices.

The reviewed literature clearly shows there is a complex web of explicit and implicit influences on students when making their subject choices. On one hand, educators want to encourage students to take ownership of their learning and therefore the notion of giving students subject choices on their perception of their strengths can be seen as positive. However, there is also a suggestion that student judgement and perception may not necessarily be accurate and therefore disadvantageous to their learning journey. Further complexity is provided by parents and their beliefs that may or may not align with the student’s aspirations.

Influence of the Attitudes and Beliefs of Secondary School Teachers and Leaders

Early studies suggest that school effects have more of an impact on students’ attainment in some subjects than social class or academic ability (Brandsma & Knuver, 1989, as cited in Van de Werfhorst, 2003; Brimer et al., 1977; Coleman, 1975; Mortimore et al., 1988; Postlethwaite, 1975; Shaycroft, 1967). More recent studies have illustrated students’ subject choices, specifically the “academic selectivity of subjects chosen” were influenced by the school attended (Anders et al. 2018; Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019, p. 15).

One way teachers and leaders can influence students when choosing subjects is by offering specific subjects to some students and not others based on their aptitudes (Lee et al., 1997). Whilst it may seem logical to offer an advanced mathematics course to a student who has previously shown ability in the subject there has been some debate as to how student aptitude and ability is classified. Defining academic prowess in schools is subjective, and influenced by teachers’ beliefs, which can lead to inequalities when using it as a measure of academic potential (Terzi, 2020). Using standard

measures like tests, target grades or prerequisites to guide subject selection should be approached cautiously, as they may be influenced by teachers' biases and limit student opportunities (Ayalon, 1995; Williams et al., 2013). Previous performance in a subject may not be a true indication of academic capability and may contribute to decreasing students' self-efficacy towards learning thus limiting their potential achievement (Hallam & Ireson, 2003). A student may not realise their potential or interest in a subject until much later in their schooling journey so the task for educators is to keep learning pathways open to all students.

Educators do not necessarily agree on the mechanisms for measuring students' achievement or whether aptitude testing is robust enough to be used to direct students' future academic pathways. However, the evidence suggests that student ability is used by teachers as a guide or a gatekeeper for students' progression in certain academic subject pathways and to determine curriculum and programme design.

Influence of Curriculum Options

Teachers and school leaders make assumptions about what they perceive their student community is likely to want to study and pursue beyond school. Students' access to academic pathways can be determined by the (un)availability of curriculum options (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019; Perry & Southwell, 2014). Students' equitable access to attain academic qualifications at school may be hindered by the decision making of the school leaders as to what subjects should be available to 'perceived types' of students and schools' processes of channelling the students into certain pathways. Previous research findings might prompt educators to be cognisant of the fact that offering different programmes for senior students to choose from is not the issue but rather it is the school's implementation of offering students' choice that needs improvements (Noddings, 2013).

Allowing senior students to select subjects based on their interests and academic strengths to prepare them to transition from school to further education or employment seems logical. However, research by Lee et al. (1997) showed that students in schools that "offer them a narrow curriculum composed mostly of academic courses" learn the most (p. 99). Similarly, Adler and Isaacs (1983) flagged a cautionary message for schools offering multiple pathways for students claiming that educators must be careful not to send students on a journey to nowhere by offering alternative pathways. More recently, the results of a British study could not find any evidence to suggest that offering an alternative, less academic pathway is of value to any group of students (Moulton et al., 2018). These researchers may suggest that secondary schools should reduce the number of courses offered to students and drive all students in the direction of pursuing academic subjects as opposed to potentially less aspirational options. However, Noddings (2013) warns against directing

students into subjects that are not interesting to them, based on what educators may think is for the best and, subsequently denying them exposure to programmes in which they can excel.

It is generally accepted that educators must ensure "flexibility in the structures of schooling in order to facilitate all students to achieve their personal best" (Williams et al., 2013, p. 18). Research investigating the variances in the educational programs offered to students during their concluding year at secondary schools discovered that schools serving more affluent communities offered greater opportunities for students to access a larger range of academic subjects whereas schools with lower socioeconomic status were likely to offer more vocational courses (Dean et al., 2023; Perry & Southwell, 2014). Encouragingly though, Hipkins and Vaughan (2019) said that "whether high or low decile[2], most New Zealand secondary schools try to cater for all types of student pathways" (p. 15). The structure of the New Zealand qualifications system allows for variety, schools can offer an array of subjects catering for different interests and levels of achievement (NZQA, 2024).

Informal influences impacting students when choosing their subject pathway are evident, but clarification of whether teachers' or curriculum leaders' attitudes reinforce these outcomes is not clear. The commonalities in the findings suggest that teachers need to be aware of the socioeconomic barriers to enable them to encourage students to pursue academic pathways irrespective of their background and the external influences upon them if schools are committed to providing equitable access to subjects. Collectively, these research findings raise the question as to the relevance of channelling students into academic or non-academic pathways based on academic attainment. The impact that school structures and teacher attitudes may have on whether a student will pursue an academic university entrance pathway or at least a pathway that sees them fulfil both their academic and aspirational potential is highlighted.

Researchers have seldom endeavoured to consider and investigate the diverse array of formal and informal methods through which schools can either limit or enable specific subject choices (Battiston et al., 2020; Smyth & Hannan, 2006). Whilst the focus of this research is on how the organisational structures at New Zealand secondary schools impact how student subject selection occurs, the importance of educators having a greater awareness of what is going on "beneath the surface" for students (Vaughan, 2005, p. 39) is paramount. Thus, educational leaders need to be aware of the experiences of students and the influences on students as they make their subject selections to be

[2] The decile rating given to a school indicates the extent to which the students on the roll live in low socioeconomic communities. This has now been replaced by the Equity Index (MoE, 2024j).

able to utterly understand how to meet the learning needs of all, maximising the opportunity for equitable educational outcomes.

Conclusion - Literature Review

This chapter has reviewed the four topics of organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools; influences on educational outcomes; equitable access to educational outcomes and influences on student subject selection, which are all central to the aim and research questions that this study explores. When considering the existing literature, it is evident that there has been limited New Zealand research that looks specifically at how the student subject selection process occurs in secondary schools and more importantly, why it happens in that way. This gap in the existing research indicates the relevance of this study.

The reviewed studies show that the promise of equity and excellence in education remains just that for some. Despite the OECD (2013) advising schools that the organisational practices shaping schools are those tied to traditional learning methods which can limit students' learning opportunities, traditional structures continue to be favoured over more flexible approaches (Morrison & Kedian, 2017; Shernoff et al., 2014).

A review of the literature shows us that departmental policies and processes are often shaped by the individual backgrounds of leaders, encompassing their values, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Leaders should ensure that they are not making decisions to protect their interests (Hallinger & Heck, 2011).

Without knowing how and why things occur the way they do in schools we cannot address what Kemmis (2015) refers to as the happeningness in schools. A deep understanding of both a school's leadership structure and the practices that drive the leadership is needed to be able to effect any change (Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). This need for a deep understanding of praxis is because leadership in schools is complex, and middle leaders often experience pressure from above and below, to run successful departments delivering a programme that enables all students to achieve. This study explores the leadership practices determining the organisational structures that guide the student subject selection process in New Zealand secondary schools.

Middle leaders are responsible for formulating and implementing internal policies that steer the activities within schools (Skerritt et al., 2023) and professional identity plays a crucial role in either facilitating or constraining the way teaching is perceived and enacted (Jerdborg, 2022). Therefore, leaders and teachers must actively engage with their orientations and perceptions of education and

teaching practice to address the education gap that still exists particularly for Māori and Pacific students in New Zealand (Bishop et al., 2009).

Whilst the literature review has provided insight into educational issues in numerous countries, the limited number of New Zealand based studies supports the need to conduct new research in New Zealand secondary schools. Despite the Ministry of Education clearly stating its vision that schools and teachers will provide equitable teaching and learning opportunities for all young people “irrespective of their … ethnicity, belief, … social or cultural background …” (MoE, 2024a, p. 1) and *The Education and Training Act 2020* outlining that those in education are aiming to “give all learners a high-quality, culturally responsive, seamless and inclusive education” (MoE, 2024c, p. 1), the review of the literature indicates that there is still a disconnect between intention and outcome.

It is proposed that this qualitative research study provides insight into the actions of those responsible for the process of student subject selection and reveals how these educational leadership practices impact Year 13 students. By completing this research and discussing the findings against the existing reviewed literature, it is hoped that educational leaders might use this research study to engage in professional conversations about how to increase students’ access to “equitable and excellent outcomes" (MoE, 2024a, p. 1).

The next chapter will present the rationale and justification for adopting a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis for this research study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter aims to delineate the methodological framework supporting this research and the research methods used and, demonstrates how my positioning as a researcher influenced the choice and application of specific methods (Crotty, 1998). Presented within the research methodology section is a justification for adopting a phenomenological epistemological position, which is centred on understanding the essence of experiences from the perspective of the individual participants (leaders and students). Also included is a rationale for embracing a constructionist ontology emphasising that individuals' understanding of the world is shaped by their mental processes and the social context within which they experience things. The interpretivist paradigmatic stance, which focuses on exploring how people make sense of their world, interpret events, and construct reality, is also detailed. The research methods section describes the qualitative study, explaining the sampling methods and data collection process at each school. It also covers the thematic analysis used to analyse the data, along with a discussion of the reliability and validity of the data collection. Concluding the chapter is an examination of ethical considerations applicable to this research study.

Research Methodology

The framework guiding this research study was shaped by a synthesis of my personal experience as an educator, informed assumptions made as a researcher, established theory, and prior research (Cohen et al., 2011).

I adopted a constructionist ontological standpoint from which to embark on this research (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). Constructionism implies that meaning is constructed through people's "engagement with the realities of the world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 15) Constructionism is well-suited for this type of understanding because it suggests that meaning is created through people's interactions with their world. In the context of this research, constructionism allows for exploring how schools construct and interpret the idea of providing equitable services to students while balancing the need to create organisational structures. By focusing on how schools engage with these realities, the research can reveal the underlying priorities and decision-making processes that shape their practices, highlighting any disparities in how they serve different student populations. This approach helps illuminate how schools' policies and practices are socially constructed and influenced by their unique contexts and challenges. The research questions

underpinning this study seek to find out whether in some instances leaders devise and implement organisational structures to run a school that may not always serve the students in the way the school's vision intends. This study explores how middle and senior leaders reconstruct the processes and organisational structures that determine students' subject choice, potential achievement, and transitional options at the end of secondary schooling.

Through the constructionist ontological lens, I felt best placed to be able to challenge the suggestion proposed by objectivists that secondary schools are organised and functioning solely on pre-given rules and regulations that social actors (whom in this research study are the middle and senior leaders) have "no role in fashioning" (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). I assumed that the organisational structures existing in secondary schools are the product of the leadership practices that occur amongst school leaders which in turn determine the school's programme of subjects, the timetable design, and the setting of course/subject entry prerequisites. In support of my theory, the literature suggests that the way a school is organised is shaped by its culture and built on traditions that teachers follow regularly (Deed & Lesko, 2015; French et al., 2020; OECD, 2013; Saltmarsh et al., 2015). My experience as an educational leader has provided insight that the social order within a secondary school is in a "constant state of change" as staff share their knowledge and experiences, underpinned by their own beliefs and values, in a multitude of meetings (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). Policies and procedures are "continually being established, renewed, revised, revoked, [and] revised" - whether on a conscious or subconscious level (Strauss et al., 1973, as cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 33-34). Through this research, I wanted to be able to unpack why the student subject selection process was such in schools and understand how and why the process was fashioned the way it was. Using a constructionist ontological perspective, I anticipated uncovering that the organisational structures in secondary schools, such as the student subject selection process, are socially constructed through "social interaction" (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). This suggests that there is significant potential for changes in these practices.

Gaining insight into what drives those responsible for constructing the subject selection processes in schools was a strong motivator for me to conduct this research. Taking a phenomenological epistemological position provides the platform to be able to make sense of what drives leaders to construct the subject selection processes at their schools. Phenomenology recognises that our understanding of the world is rooted in our direct experiences (Cohen et al., 2011) and that everyone's viewpoint is different based on their own experiences, beliefs, and values. As a researcher, my epistemological stance is of significance as it indicates how I relate to what is

being researched (Creswell, 2007, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Researching through a phenomenological lens enables me to “explore the unique meanings of any human experience” (Given, 2008, p. 2) and acknowledge the existence of multiple realities within the context of my study.

Qualitative data collection in phenomenological research is served well within the context of open or semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). I chose to use semi-structured interviews as the means to investigate how the subject selection process was constructed at each school and the impact the structure had on the students navigating the process. As an experienced educator with many years of working in similar settings and engaging in professional conversation with leaders and students alike, I was confident that I would be well poised to make the interactions comfortable and positive experiences for the participants. The semi-structured interview format gave both structure and direction as I had formalised questions guiding the interview process but also the scope to ask additional questions to ensure that all participants could “express their experiences in detail” and ensure that the data gathered were as close to “reality” as possible (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 104). Through the interview process, I identified the beliefs held by secondary school leaders regarding the decision-making behind subject pathway opportunities for students. I also explored their perceptions of why these structures are organised in specific ways. Considering the impact of leaders' experiences in shaping the organisational structures governing student subject selection processes in their schools was crucial for me as a researcher as I transcribed and interpreted the data gathered from the interviews (Given, 2008). Interviewing the Year 13 students provided additional insight through their personal experience and individual perception of whether the ‘structures’ resulting from the leadership practices are enabling or constraining choice and future study pathways. The perceptions and experiences of the students will serve as indicators of their beliefs and feelings regarding the equity of the processes in place at their schools. Interviewing both those who construct the organisational structures and those who experience them should emphasise that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 24). Moreover, these varied perspectives prompt both the researcher and readers of the study to pay attention to the "perceptions and meanings that bring about our conscious awareness" (Husserl, 1913, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 10). A phenomenological epistemology creates the space for accentuating that the ‘structures’ and ‘processes’ in a secondary school are the result of human

experience and interaction and are not predetermined or governed by immovable rules and regulations.

To investigate whether the structures supporting the student subject selection process in schools enable or limit student choice and future pathways, it is useful to understand the subjective perspectives of the leaders to reveal the motivations, beliefs, and biases that influence decision-making in schools. For this reason, I chose the interpretivism research paradigm as the analytical lens through which I interpreted and understood the experiences as explained by the participants in the research study. A research paradigm can be described as a “basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17) and according to Scotland (2012), the interpretivist approach is one of three major educational research paradigms. Through the interpretative paradigmatic lens, it was predicted that this investigation would enable the discovery of why school leaders act as they do regarding setting parameters around the subject selection pathway students have available to them and illuminate whether the leadership practices occurring in schools enable or constrain students to select Level 3 NCEA subjects that fulfil their aspirations. I rejected the positivist paradigm as I felt that to fully understand how the structures in secondary schools were impacting how student subject selection occurs and the students' experiences of this, a more in-depth interpretation of what was occurring was needed. The positivist approach does not provide the researcher with the tools to “capture the full richness of the individuals and environments” (Gay et al., 2012, p. 5) due to the positivist preference to favour structured quantitative methods of data collection. As a researcher, I wanted to be able to use semi-structured interviews, working with respondents on a one-to-one basis so that the data collection process resembled a professional conversation more than an exercise in data collection.

Viewing the research questions through an interpretive lens enabled me to understand the phenomenon from an individual’s perspective alongside investigating interaction among individuals and the cultural and historical contexts people are situated (Scotland, 2012). Taking an approach within an interpretivist paradigm provides the opportunity for the researcher to work closely with the participants to ascertain an initial interpretation of how people create meaning to what they are experiencing. A key feature of the interpretivism paradigm is gathering authentic, insightful, and detailed data which I did by dedicating plentiful time to interviewing a small number of participants within a small sample of schools (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, as cited in Scotland, 2012). Being able to converse with both leaders and students in the semi-structured interview setting was deemed to be important within this study for enabling a rich and detailed narrative of what is occurring in their schools around the organisational structures, leadership practices and student

subject selection process to be shared. As a researcher, I wanted to gather data in a setting that meant both leaders and students could talk freely about their experiences of the process and share insight into their values and beliefs on this topic.

In reporting my findings, I am conscious that I am providing “an interpretation of others’ interpretations” (Bryman, 2012, p. 31). Using an interpretivist analytical lens, I was aware that I was tasked with trying to understand phenomena from the point of view of a particular group which could lead to misinterpretation or errors in the analysis of the transcripts. I needed to be sure that I was listening carefully to the answers given by the participants and not second-guessing what they might be trying to espouse. As a researcher I had my own biases stemming from my own experiences of the subject selection process in the schools within which I have worked therefore I needed to be mindful that I did not use this to shape my interpretation of what was being said to me. Hearing the reality of the experiences of each participant was a must. Also, I was conscious that when interviewing the students, I did not draw on my experience as a pastoral dean and suggest that the student participants had experiences like those of the students with whom I had worked previously. This was important because the research aim was to hear the students’ lived realities of what was occurring for them in their schools, and I did not want to skew their responses with my experiences. The key was to establish a trusting relationship with all participants and create a forum within which they felt comfortable to speak freely and not feel coerced into answering my questions in a way that they thought I wanted. I was aware that I could not let a power imbalance or my own experiences interfere with the interpretation of the participants’ responses. Drawing on the concept of reflexivity, I was conscious of understanding how my own “social background, personal context, and assumptions” could impact the interviewing process (Hesse-Biber, 2007, as cited in Palaganas et al., 2017, p. 427).

The opportunity to ask further questions to hear the participants’ thoughts on the phenomena was essential and adopting the semi-structured interview format allowed for the formalised questions to be expanded upon should the participants need further clarification or have additional answers to share. All interviewees were asked to check the transcriptions and certify that I had accurately recorded their interviews before I published the results to ensure I understood the essence of what the participants had expressed in the interviews. To aid with the transcription of the audio recording of the interviews I also used field notes so that I could record the participants' non-verbal communication as this may assist me with the interpretation of the response to the question.

The insight gained from collaborating with school leaders allowed me to interpret the meanings that direct their actions and not only explore how the organisational structures at these secondary schools impact how student subject selection occurs but also how the leadership practices determine the structures guiding student subject selection. A further dimension of this study is that by working with students to gain a differing perspective of the research questions I was able to truly grasp how these structures may be enabling or constraining student choice and future study pathways and to what extent these structures are deemed to be equitable across the individual and social differences between students. I believe that any limitations of this paradigmatic approach are also its strengths. Being able to work closely with a small group of participants enabled me to be respectful of the "differences between people" (Bryman, 2012, p.30) and attempt to understand why they act as they do and the 'structures' in their secondary schools function as they do, impacting on the 'processes' that are in place.

Research Methods

This research was a qualitative study of three secondary schools in Auckland, New Zealand within which I examined the student subject selection process for senior students moving from Year 12 to Year 13. The purpose of the investigation was to explore how organisational structures at New Zealand secondary schools impact how student subject selection occurs. The research was driven by three key research questions:

1. How are these structures enabling or constraining student choice and future study pathways?
2. To what extent are these structures equitable across individual and social differences between students?
3. How do leadership practices determine the structures guiding student subject selection?

As a researcher, I was interested in the experience the leaders (middle and senior leaders) and Year 13 students had with the student subject selection process at each school. Of particular interest was interpreting how these 'experiences' may have led to the construction of the student subject selection process, especially with regard to the middle and senior leaders' experiences and the leadership practices occurring at each school.

Research Design

The nature of the research questions in this study led me to collect data from people who have firsthand experience of the student subject selection process in their school. In agreement with Brinkman and Kvale (2015), interviews can be interactive "professional conversations" (p. 2) where knowledge is produced through "an exchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (p. 2). I identified two groups of people who would be well placed to provide insight in relation to the research questions - leaders and students. I purposely selected middle and senior leaders who have been involved in the construction of the subject selection process at their schools. I assumed that these leaders would have also been integral to shaping and implementing the school's strategic plan and overall vision. A further assumption is that they may have been privy to discussions at meetings, the viewpoints of colleagues, the values and beliefs that underpin the decision making and the logistical requirements within their schools. Therefore, interviewing these leaders could provide me with an in-depth insight into how and why their school's subject selection process was as it was.

Integral to this investigation was interviewing Year 13 students, who again had been purposely selected based on the criteria that they had experience of the subject selection process at their school. It was envisaged that by interviewing students I would be able to ascertain more deeply how these structures may be enabling or constraining student choice and future study pathways and to what extent the process is equitable across the individual and social differences between students. In schools, students are directly affected by the decision making and leadership practices that are occurring to shape and structure their school's way of doing things. The combination of understanding the processes in place at each school and the semi-structured interviews with the participants enabled me to thoroughly examine the key research questions.

Before the interviews in schools, I conducted a small pilot study with a group of middle and senior leaders and students at the school where I am deputy principal to ascertain whether the questions were structured in a way that when asked could measure what it was, I wanted to find out.

The data were collected via the interviews during Term 1. The participants were then able to review the interview transcripts before I analysed the data and reported the findings.

Conducting a thematic analysis of the data through the interpretive paradigm lens enabled me to interpret how the leadership practices in the different schools determine the organisational structures guiding the student subject selection process. I looked for the emerging themes about

how the structures enable or constrain student choice and future study pathways and to what extent these structures are equitable across individual and social differences between students.

School and Participant Sampling

It can be both ethically and methodologically challenging to conduct a research study in the school where one works because of potential conflicts of interest and biases. Methodologically, I felt that it might be difficult to remain objective and avoid bias because I am deeply embedded in the school having worked there for ten years in leadership positions. Staff and students may have felt obligated or coerced to participate in the study due to the senior leadership position I hold in the school. Some staff may have withheld information for fear that it may compromise their role within the school and students may have felt uncomfortable speaking with someone they know about their teachers, who are my colleagues or the processes they would know I had been a part of devising. To avoid the potential that my dual role of researcher and insider could have on the validity and impartiality of the research I felt that I would be better served investigating schools where I do not have a professional or emotional connection but that are comparable to mine. Therefore, for this research, the qualitative data were gathered from three Auckland secondary schools, not including the one where I currently work.

As the schools in the sample serve a similar locality to the school where I work, I predicted that the students' individual and social differences would be like those within the school I am working in. This was of relevance as part of my motivation to conduct this research was to understand how to develop the subject selection processes at my school. To ensure that I captured both the economic and ethnic diversity served by the schools in the area, I aimed to recruit schools for the study serving students from low, mid, and high socioeconomic backgrounds as well as from different ethnicities. The Equity Index, which is the Ministry of Education's "new way to identify and respond to socio-economic barriers in schools and kura" (MoE, 2024j, p. 1) was used to assist me in determining which schools I would approach to take part in the research study. Included in the sample was a school in South Auckland as the school I work in has many students enrolled who live out of the zone and choose our school in East Auckland instead of going to their local South Auckland schools. I am interested in reflecting on whether these students are catered for equitably, that is, are the students able to pursue their chosen pathway without bias or unnecessary restrictions regardless of which school they choose to attend. The schools were also selected as they are state schools delivering the NCEA curriculum. As an experienced educational leader in Auckland, I am aware that some other 'similar schools' to the one where I

work offer both NCEA and Cambridge qualifications and the students are streamed into these pathways based on academic ability. It was thought that investigating these schools would not give a clear indication of how the structures impact how the student subject selection process occurs as it is notably different at such schools. Additionally, through viewing the information available on each school's website I identified schools that appeared to have both similar and contrasting policies on the subject selection process.

In order to recruit participants I began by emailing the principal and associate principal at several schools and requested that they share my research proposal with other leaders responsible for the student subject selection process. It was expected that the leaders targeted by the principal would be either leaders of curriculum areas or senior leaders as these would be the people most involved in the leadership practices determining the structures of the student subject selection processes at the schools. I also sought student participants and thus requested that a dean or similar at each school assist me in selecting a sample of three Year 13 students who meet the following characteristics: i) a student who is following their desired programme, ii) a student who is satisfied with their subject selection but with some hesitation and iii) a student who is not studying their preferred programme. The purpose of interviewing students across this spread was to enrich my understanding of whether the subject selection process is enabling or hindering student choice and future study pathways and, what factors contribute to this. I selected schools based on proximity to one another and those who were first to respond to the invitation to participate in the research to assist me with keeping within a timeframe for collecting the data. Student participants were selected based on their availability to set up appointments for interviews within the data collection timeframe. The sample I worked with was purposively selected. Padilla-Diaz (2015) affirms that purposive sampling is "characterised by the incorporation of specific criteria met by the participants at the moment of selection" (p. 104). As a first-time researcher, I understood the necessity of making an ongoing series of deliberate choices about the research methodology I was using to be sure that consideration was given to the context and the position of the research.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The data were gathered through the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews. Through the interview process, I intended to understand the impact that the curriculum and senior leaders have on determining whether students can access specific subject pathways. Through thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the interviews, I was able to gain insight as to

SCHOOL	ROLL	EQUITY INDEX	ETHNICITY
SCHOOL A	1700+	408	Māori 6% Pacific 8% European/Pakeha 36% Asian 54%
SCHOOL B	1400+	535	Māori 40% Pacific 58% European/Pakeha 8% Asian 10%
SCHOOL C	2100+	431	Māori 10% Pacific 13% European/Pakeha 49% Asian 35%

Table 4.1: Overview of schools

whether the preconceived beliefs held by leaders allow for all students to have equitable access to academic qualification pathways.

Before conducting the school interviews, I carried out a small pilot study with a group of middle and senior leaders and students at the school where I work. Through asking these volunteers some of the questions I had devised for the actual data collection interviews I was able to seek feedback as to whether the questions needed rephrasing for clarity. The questions needed minimal alterations but I did find that it was necessary to include more questions that moved the conversation away from focusing on the process of subject selection and towards the influences on the process and the influence of the process on student decision making.

Each interview took approximately one hour to complete and was conducted at the schools. In one of the schools, it was requested that I interview with two senior leaders present as both felt that they had complimentary roles in the student subject selection process at their school. As they were interviewed together, I iterated the need for confidentiality and that what was said in the room was to remain in the room. As professionals, the interviewees seemed to respect the request and committed to not sharing what each other had said with other staff or students. With the interviewees' permission, I recorded audio of the interview and took written field notes to help me when I came to transcribe the findings at a later stage. Once I had transcribed the interview, I

shared the transcript of the interview with each interviewee so that they could confirm that the transcription was a fair representation of their views. In the case of the combined interview at one of the schools, the transcript was shared with both leaders, and they were requested to only focus and comment on their responses to the interview questions.

These interviews were shaped around answering the three research questions as described previously in this chapter. The semi-structured interview format entails the researcher having a predetermined list of specific questions to cover. However, the interviewee retains significant flexibility in how they choose to respond (Hoepfl, 1997). This approach allowed me to focus on the topic of student subject selection processes, while also providing flexibility to uncover the various factors that influence this process at each school. Whilst the interview questions provided a structured focus on the main research topic utilising the semi-structured method left room for exploring unique school-specific influences and viewpoints that might not have been initially anticipated. As Bryman (2012) explains, when conducting semi-structured interviews, questions may not strictly adhere to the sequence outlined in the interview schedule and questions initially omitted may arise as the interviewer responds to points raised by the interviewee. The interview schedules that were the foundation of each interview can be viewed in Appendix 1 and 2.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research typically generates substantial data due to its dependence on narrative forms such as field notes, interview transcripts, or documents (Bryman, 2012). Thus, as Cohen et al. (2011) would suggest, there is no straightforward formula for collecting qualitative data or interpreting it to derive meaning. The researcher must resist being “captivated by the richness of the data” and systematically conduct a “true analysis” of the data collected (Bryman, 2012, p. 565). In practice, most researchers will draw on several systems to analyse the data to create meaning from the data (Green & Thorogood, 2004). Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest using the thematic analysis method “for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes” (p. 4).

For this study, I adopted a general inductive approach as an overall framework to analyse the data gathered from all three participating schools (Thomas, 2006). I selected this method as being most suitable for this study as it provided a “systematic procedure for analysing qualitative data in which the analysis is likely to be guided by specific evaluation objectives” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). Thomas (2006) describes the main purposes of general inductive analysis as being:

1. to condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format.
2. to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and to ensure that these links are transparent (able to be demonstrated to others) and defensible (justifiable given the objectives of the research).
3. to develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the text data (p. 238).

Coding is used at the start of the qualitative data analysis process (Bryman, 2012). The coding process entails the researcher sorting the data into groupings based on either pre-existing categories (deductive) or tagging them with labels to identify patterns or themes occurring in the data through inductive methods where the category emerges from the data itself. Mathie and Carnozzi (2005) suggest "that coming up with these topics is like constructing an index for a book or labels for a filing system… you look at what is there and give it a name or label" (p. 5).

Analysis of the Interview Data

To analyse the data collected during the interviews, I based my process on the steps Cohen et al. (2011) suggest that researchers should follow to make sense of the data they gather which include:

i. Prepare and organise the data: transcribe and summary.
ii. Describing and presenting the data
iii. Analysing the data to make meaning. Sorting and categorising to look for patterns.
iv. Interpreting the data
v. Drawing conclusions
vi. Reporting the findings
vii. Ensuring accuracy, reliability, coherence, corroboration, and validity.

(Cohen et al., 2011, p. 644).

Shortly after the interviews concluded I carefully transcribed the audio recording initially by playing the audio file back and typing up the notes, referring to the field notes I took. The objective of transcribing the interview was to "account for a complete representation of the interview conversation in its entirety" to ensure that I was well prepared to begin the coding process (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022, p. 97). To check that my interpretation of the interviews was accurate, I shared the interview transcriptions with the relevant participants for authentication.

Keeping the research questions at the forefront of my mind I set about coding the participants' responses captured in each transcription. In the first instance, I analysed each set of data separately and then I analysed again to find thematic links between the data collected from each

school and then again to see if similar themes were emerging within each school or from the participant groups - leaders and students. I also looked for similarities in the themes across the schools.

Reliability and Validity

In research, reliability signifies a dependable and transparent approach while validity pertains to the precision of findings ensured through the implementation of specific procedures (Creswell, 2014). Cohen et al. (2011) assert that the researcher engaged in qualitative research will consistently consider both reliability and validity. That said, "qualitative research is interpretive" and it is assumed that many interpretations are possible (Miles & Huberman, 1994 as cited in Douglas Toma, 2011, p. 5) thus, it is unlikely that qualitative researchers can meet the standard of reliability and validity aspired to by quantitative researchers. Terms such as dependability and credibility have been offered as alternatives for ensuring that qualitative research has been designed and conducted rigorously (Guba, 1981; Schwandt et al., 2007). Dependability respects the evolving nature of qualitative research, as opposed to the uniform and consistent nature of quantitative research. Credibility focuses on the trustworthiness and believability of the findings from the perspective of the participants or readers.

The reliability (dependability) of a qualitative study centres around the consistency of the processes developed for concepts in the social sciences which Joppe (2000) summarises as:

> The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable
>
> (as cited in Golafshani, 2003, p. 598).

Seale (2004) espouses that "good-quality work results from doing a research project, learning from the things that did and did not work and then doing another, better one…" (p. 3) thus it may be appropriate to suggest that testing the reliability of qualitative data is not always transparent. Small and Calarco (2022) suggest that the iterative process is "one of the advantages of qualitative research" as the researcher instinctively designs, tests and revises their methodology until they are satisfied with the result (as cited in Martin, 2023, p. 1053). They also intimate that when determining whether a qualitative research study can be deemed reliable, some of the responsibility lies within the reader's awareness of "leaps of reasoning" (Small & Calarco, 2022,

p. 1049). By this, they mean that readers of qualitative research must be cognisant that there may be more than one interpretation compatible with the data and that the researcher will only present one of these in the analysis and findings sections. To remain grounded, qualitative researchers rely on their capacity to engage in both internal and external dialogues. Seale (2004) emphasises the importance of researchers being propelled by a sense of social responsibility while cautioning against allowing external dialogues such as societal pressures or outside opinions to overshadow their inner reflections and judgments. This balance is crucial for ensuring that internal logic effectively connects claims with evidence.

How valid (credible) the research can be is ascertained through an analysis of the credibility of the results. Credibility is confirmed when the people being studied agree with how the researcher has interpreted and described their experiences. This shows that the research accurately captures their perspectives and reality. In essence, the research achieves credibility when the researcher's presentation captures the reality of the participants, resonating with their perspectives as conveyed during the research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, as cited in Douglas Toma, 2011, p. 14). Lincoln and Guba (1985) expand the discussion on validating qualitative research suggesting that qualitative research should be assessed via the criterion of trustworthiness which incorporates credibility and dependability as well as transferability and confirmability. Transferability mirrors external validity, which focuses on the generalisability of research findings (Bryman, 2012). In qualitative research, it is up to the reader to decide whether the findings of the study apply to the context within which they are working (Bryman, 2012). Confirmability is concerned with whether the researcher has “allowed his or her values to intrude to a high degree” when interpreting the data and reporting the findings (Bryman, 2012, p. 49).

To ensure that my research study was reliable and valid I designed a logical and clear methodological approach to conducting the research. Underpinning my study were research questions which functioned as a compass to guide me through the research process. Using semi-structured interviews to gather data was suitable for the phenomenological approach embraced in my study. The indicative questions derived from my research questions served as the foundation for these interviews, but I also allowed myself to ask additional questions to elicit clarification and deeper understanding. After the initial two interviews with staff members, I reflected that some of the questions asked were not specific enough to gather the insights that were required by my research questions. As a first-time researcher, I used this as an opportunity to improve my interviewing technique and refine my questions to ensure that the next interviews would be more effective. As the interviewer I was mindful that the questions I asked the

participants might have been leading due to my awareness of the research nature and a desire for specific answers rooted in preconceived notions. Small and Calarco (2022) emphasise the importance of social researchers developing self-awareness, which is to understand the impact that their position may have on those being interviewed. In my case, I was mindful that I hold a senior leadership position as a deputy principal at another secondary school. I did not want my seniority to negatively influence the participants' responses therefore I incorporated reflexive research practices (Reich, 2017) and was open and honest about my intentions of the research to all participants. For example, the participants did not have to answer questions that they were not comfortable with.

When contacting schools to request participation in the study I ensured that I was honest about my intentions. I clearly explained my current role, both as an educator, senior leader and a master's student, and my intentions behind the research. This approach was replicated with each individual consenting participant too. All participants were made aware of the research process, including how data would be collected and analysed. I was hopeful that this transparency was indicative that I was a trustworthy researcher.

I was aware that the research conducted was with only a small sample of secondary schools in New Zealand and that a larger sample would have made the research findings more credible. Since the sample was purposively selected, it met the requirements for conducting a small-scale study within the Master of Education program and aligned with my needs as an educational leader. Furthermore, the three schools were chosen based on their demographic, academic, and socio-economic similarities, ensuring a relevant context for discussing and presenting the research findings.

As highlighted by Cohen et al. (2011), there is a potential for researchers to introduce bias into data interpretation, either through over-selection or under-representation of information. Small and Calarco (2022) stress the importance of the researcher having "cognitive empathy" as he seeks to understand the interviewees' worldviews and perspectives (p. 1049). Bearing this in mind, during the analysis and interpretation of the data, I took care to attentively listen to the viewpoints of leaders and students, discerning the nuances and themes that surfaced (confirmability). Reported results are deemed to be reliable when they are cognitively plausible (Small & Calarco, 2022). The cognitive plausibility of an account is reliant on the researcher's ability not to make assumptions or fabricate the details that emerge from interviews and observation (Duneier, 2011; Martin, 2023; Small & Calarco, 2022) therefore before reporting the findings, I shared the transcriptions of the interviews with the participants for them to approve that

what I had interpreted was a true representation of what they had shared with me in response to the questions I asked. Consulting with participants maintained objectivity and addressed reliability concerns in my reflective research approach. I strengthened data reliability by cross-referencing emerging themes and triangulating key phrases from interviews. According to Bryman (2012), validity involves determining “whether an indicator (or set of indicators) accurately measures the intended concept (p. 171). In the context of utilising interviews as the primary method for data collection, face validity becomes pertinent. Face validity involves seeking feedback from individuals outside the participant sample to confirm whether the interview questions effectively address the intended inquiry (Bryman, 2012). This was done via the pilot study.

The concepts discovered through my research can be transferred and applied to similar types of secondary schools offering the NCEA curriculum to senior students. Educational leaders may judge that my research findings are relevant to the schools within which they work.

Ethical Issues

Small (2001) stresses that it is the responsibility of the educational researcher to ensure that their research is ethical (as cited in Brooks et al., 2014). When proposing this research, I ensured that the research had merit within an educational research context by thoroughly considering previous studies and writing a coherent review of the literature. Through this process, I was well placed to justify the potential benefit of the research.

As a postgraduate student at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), I consulted the guidelines and procedures as set out by AUTEC (AUT, 2023) and gained ethics approval before commencing this research. As I considered that conducting the research in the school where I work could pose ethical challenges such as difficulties maintaining professional boundaries and avoiding undue influence over colleagues or students, as well as protecting the privacy and autonomy of participants, I chose to conduct the research at three schools that I was not connected to. To ensure that I received informed consent from all participants in the study I provided the principal and associate principal at the schools with an information sheet, clearly outlining the intention of my research. Once I was granted permission to access the school to conduct the interviews with leaders and students, all potential participants were also provided with an information sheet. These documents delineated the essential components of the research, encompassing its purpose, research identification, participant agreement, procedures, potential risks and benefits, privacy considerations, time costs, and a declaration emphasising voluntary

participation. As a deputy principal, I was cognisant that I needed to ensure that I did not use my position of perceived ‘power’ to influence potential participants to consent to take part or influence their responses during the interviewing process. Principals and deans were informed not to coerce leaders or students to agree to participate in the study just because I held a senior position at another secondary school. All participants needed to choose freely to be a part of the study (Brooks et al., 2014). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and made aware that they did not have to answer all questions that were asked during the interviews. All participants consented to participate by signing an agreement letter (Mutch, 2005). Given that the participants were thoroughly briefed about the study, I felt assured in my ability to minimise any potential harm or instances of deception.

The interviews were conducted at the participant’s school in a private room. To assist with making the participant feel respected, comfortable, and nourished I made sure that the interview times suited the interviewee and provided refreshments to be consumed during the interview (Brooks et al., 2014). As I was interviewing legal minors, I adhered to the tikanga and values of the school with which they were familiar. I endeavoured to uphold The Treaty of Waitangi principles of “partnership, participation and protection” (Hudson et al., 2010, p. 1) alongside respecting and displaying the values of whakamana, manaakitanga, pono and whanaungatanga as set by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa NZ (2023). At one school, two senior leaders requested that they be interviewed together as both participants had a significant role in the student subject selection process at the school. To ensure confidentiality, both were briefed that comments made in the interview should not be shared with colleagues to which they agreed.

Following the completion of the interviews, I carefully transcribed the voice recordings and made sense of my notes through the process of coding and thematic analysis. Each participant was shown the summarised transcript from the interview and only when they declared that they agreed with what I had transcribed did I proceed to reporting the findings of the study. All participants and school names remained anonymous in the presentation of the research to respect their privacy and to ensure that no harm came to the staff, students and community associated with each school. All information collected through the research process has been safely stored under the direction of my supervisor and the requirements of AUTEC (AUT Ethics Committee).

Conclusion - Research Methodology

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the study's methodological approach and research methods. Through qualitative research I was able to use a phenomenological epistemological lens to “explore the unique meanings” (Given, 2008, p. 2) of what the leaders and students were telling me about the process of subject selection at their schools. A constructionist ontology helped me to “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 6). By taking an interpretivist approach to this research I was able to explore how leadership decisions and school organisational structures influence students’ subject choices and future opportunities. My positioning as a researcher reflects the study's commitment to understanding the lived experiences and constructed realities of the participants.

Qualitative research methods are underpinned by “the belief that knowledge is constructed by people” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 23), therefore selecting semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method is justified. This data collection method highlights alignment with the research objectives and philosophical underpinnings. Through the semi-structured interviews with leaders and students, I could interpret how the research participants have made meaning of the world around them about how the organisational structures at their schools have led to the development of the student subject selection process and their experience of it.

In explaining the research methods used in this study, the rationale for purposively selecting three schools is presented. This small sample of participating schools and, leaders and students met my needs as both a master’s student completing a research thesis and a practising senior leader seeking to continually improve my educational understanding and leadership practice.

Detailed attention was given to the data analysis process, ensuring transparency and rigour in the treatment of the collected information. The chapter also addressed the crucial aspects of reliability and validity, outlining the measures taken to enhance the study's credibility and trustworthiness. Ethical considerations were carefully examined, underscoring the researcher's commitment to conducting the study with integrity and respect for participants.

As we move forward, the subsequent chapter will present the findings that emerged from this carefully constructed methodological framework. These results will offer insights into the research questions, informed by the rigorous approach outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

This chapter presents and summarises the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with leaders and Year 13 students. This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part provides a concise introduction of the participants, including an explanation of how they will be recognised in the reporting of the findings. Full details of the schools from which the data was gathered are found in the methodology chapter. The second part presents the findings from the interviews with the leaders under the topics of a structured subject selection process; balancing uniformity and fairness; limiting factors and pressures affecting students when making their subject selection; and the ways structures and leadership practices influence the students' experience of the subject selection process. The third section presents the findings from the interviews with the students under the topic of the students' experience of the subject selection process and includes the elements that enable and constrain student choice and future study pathways. The final part presents a summary of the findings.

Part One: Research Participants

Three secondary schools, serving students from low, mid, and high socioeconomic backgrounds, located in the South-East Auckland region were involved in this research. Each school is identified by the letter A, B or C. The participants have been allocated pseudonyms to protect their identities. The schools and participants for the study were selected using purposive sampling as referred to in detail in Chapter Three.

The findings in Parts Two and Three are under topic headings resulting from the interview questions and the thematic grouping of the participants' responses.

PSEUDONYM	ROLE	ETHNICITY
SCHOOL A		
Ms A	Middle leader - Head of Department (HOD)	-
Mr B Mr C	Senior leader - Deputy Principal (DP) Senior leader - Deputy Principal (DP)	-
Ava	Student *i) a student who is following their desired programme*	Asian
Eve	Student *ii) a student who is satisfied with their subject selection but with some hesitation*	European/ Pākehā
Ben	Student *iii) a student who is not studying their desired programme*	Asian
SCHOOL B		
Ms D	Senior leader - Assistant Principal (AP)	-
Mr E	Senior leader - Deputy Principal (DP)	-
Lani	Student *i) a student who is following their desired programme*	Pacific
Nia	Student *ii) a student who is satisfied with their subject selection but with some hesitation*	Pacific
Hana	Student *iii) a student who is not studying their desired programme*	Pacific
SCHOOL C		
Ms F	Middle leader - Head of Faculty (HOF)	-
Ms G	Middle leader - Head of Department (HOD)	-
Kim	Student *i) a student who is following their desired programme*	Asian
Sam	Student *ii) a student who is satisfied with their subject selection but with some hesitation*	European/ Pākehā
Joe	Student *iii) a student who is not studying their desired programme*	European/ Pākehā

Table 4.2: Overview of participants

Part Two: Leader Semi-Structured Interview Findings

A Structured Subject Selection Process

The process for subject selection was generic to all schools. The process begins in Year 12, Term 3 with students being introduced to the task of selecting Year 13 subjects during an assembly. The students enter their subject choices using an online digital platform. Just before Term 1 starts, the students attend course confirmation day. Course confirmation is considered an important part of the process so students can confirm their subject selection or fix an incomplete timetable due to not meeting the entry requirements where required, subjects clashing or course unavailability. Following this, students at all schools were granted a period of up to three weeks to make any further changes to their selected subjects. In Schools A and B, two members of the SLT took responsibility for the process whereas in School C, a middle leader - the HOD Careers was responsible. All leaders said that a structured process for subject selection was essential to guide the students to choose the right subjects and plan their future study pathways.

Leaders at two of the schools reflected that despite having a structured process for subject selection, many students made changes to their subject choices during the first few weeks of the school year. Mr E from School B described the number of students changing subjects as *'extreme'* and said there were *'… way too many changes. We almost did a whole new timetable'.* Similarly, a leader from School C expressed concern that they have hundreds of timetables change every year, asking *'why does that happen? Maybe it suggests that it's not working as well as we think'* (Ms G).

Balancing Uniformity and Fairness

Other leaders echoed a similar sentiment to Mr B who said that the '*mechanics of the process are the same, but the experience can be different depending on what the student needs'*.

The leaders' responses could be summarised into three themes categorising how they perceived their school's process enabled student choice and assisted all students to pursue their future study pathways: flexibility and responsiveness in course offerings; support and guidance for students; and initiatives for underrepresented groups.

Flexibility and Responsiveness in Course Offerings

The leaders felt that their schools offered a broad range of subjects. The leaders identified that except for some students in specialist units or those needing ESOL support or UE Literacy credits, there are no compulsory subjects in Year 13 meaning students potentially have the freedom to choose subjects that align with their interests and future.

Mr C spoke of School C's responsiveness to accommodate students' choices, sharing that we have *'introduced new courses in response to student demand …'.* He said *'a lot of our courses are differentiated to cater for different range of students'*. Contrastingly, Ms A questioned whether the same school is *'delivering the option choices for the student body we have'*.

Mr E explained that they present students with pathway choice as they can be part of '*units with specialised timetables'* in Māori, Samoan and services and trades. However, he acknowledged that due to limited conversations with students regarding subject choice and future study pathways, the school leaders are '*not necessarily being challenged around the kind of different subjects that we're offering'*.

All leaders shared that they use Te Kura online learning[3], STAR[4] and Gateway programmes[5] to enhance the schools' subject offerings. In all schools, it was common practice for students to take such programmes in the holidays or use their study line which comprises non-timetabled periods given to Year 13 students for independent learning.

To accommodate student choice, Mr E explained that while students at his school are recommended to take a study line, those who prefer a full six-subject timetable are given the option and likewise, students who can benefit from taking just four subjects and have two study lines will be catered for, indicating a flexible approach tailored to individual needs. Of the three schools, School B has the largest Māori and Pacific student population and has a higher equity index[6] classification. The leaders at this school recognise that due to potential socioeconomic barriers, their students may need an adapted timetable structure to excel academically. In Schools

[3] Te Kura is a state-funded distance education provider in New Zealand.
[4] STAR is the Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resource which aids schools in providing students with learning experiences aligned with the Vocational Pathways.
[5] Gateway is designed to support school students' transition into the workforce by offering them workplace learning while at secondary school.
[6] The Equity Index is the Ministry of Education's way to identify and respond to socioeconomic barriers in schools.

A and C, some students utilised their study line for an extra subject but a reduction in the number of subjects taken was not commonplace.

School C leaders were proud to share that the school is *'pretty accommodating'* (Ms G) in meeting student needs and that the timetable is constructed and adjusted based on selection data to minimise clashes, enabling students to take their preferred combination of subjects. Ms G and Ms F explained that HOFs can negotiate with the principal to add more classes if there is sufficient demand, ensuring that student needs are met.

The leaders at Schools B and C believed that not strictly enforcing prerequisites or the absence of prerequisites is beneficial to students being able to access courses and subject pathways. Ms F said that prerequisites had been useful in the past to help guide the *'students into the right courses'* but acknowledged that the absence of strict prerequisites allows students to explore a wider range of subjects based on their interests rather than prior achievement. Ms F said, '*It's about talking to the student encouraging them into the right course for them based on their academics'.*

Mr E referred to School B's open access to courses as a *'free for all'* meaning that students choose subjects regardless of whether they can do well or if it is suitable for helping with their future pathway.

School A was the only school with a strict prerequisite policy and the leaders had different opinions on whether this system enabled or constrained student choice. Mr C supported using prerequisites but he stressed that they should not be used as the gatekeeper for entry into courses, explaining:

> *We've had lengthy debates at the HOLAs meetings about the prerequisites and I keep stressing that they're not intended to be punitive, that they're intended to support students to learn at the level that they're actually capable of, rather than showing them into a course where they have no hope of success.*

The other leaders from the same school claimed that the strict prerequisite policy was a potential constraint on student choice. The following comments were made:

> *We have prerequisites on the subjects and that's the issue. That's the barrier we're trying to address in terms of having more Māori students access maths and science courses in Year 12 and Year 13* (Mr B).
>
> *They've got a limited choice of options to take if they're not meeting prerequisites (*Ms A).

All school leaders shared that another way they assisted with students being able to study their subjects of choice was to create composite classes of different year levels to prevent classes from being cancelled due to low enrolment numbers.

Support and Guidance for Students

Whilst the approaches to supporting and guiding students were different, all leaders recognised that supporting students when making their choices was a necessary element to ensure that students had a positive experience of the subject selection process and fulfilled their academic potential.

The data shows that School C embeds a comprehensive career guidance and monitoring programme. Ms G said that in addition to interviewing all students before the subject selection process begins, the *'careers advisors … see every single student in Year 12 after subject selection closes …'* to review what the students have chosen and to look for any anomalies that might be there. The careers advisor ensures students understand their choices and advises on proactive engagement with HOFs should they need to adjust their choices to better fit their future study pathway aspirations. Another way that the careers advisors support students in making the right choices and remaining on track with their future study pathway is by checking the Year 13 students' timetables at the start of the year to ensure they have University Entrance (UE) Literacy, indicating proactive monitoring of academic requirements.

Ms G emphasised that *'conversation is key'* to help students make informed decisions when selecting Year 13 subjects. She reiterated that:

> *I think that we do a really thorough process here and I think that the kids feel really supported with their subject selections; they're always being talked to about their pathway and what they might want to do.*

The leaders at School A also identified the significance of the Careers Education Programme and the HOLAs in guiding student choice and future study pathways. The main difference from School C is that in the senior school, the tutor teachers, not careers advisors, mentor the students. Mr B stated that *'a lot of work is done in our mentoring sessions in terms of supporting students through the process of option selection'*.

School B leaders acknowledged that although the school's support structure is not formalised, students could access teachers, HOFs and the SLT for advice on which subjects they should choose. Ms D described the students connecting with teachers for guidance as *'very organic'*.

Both leaders felt that the students in the Māori and Samoan units were well supported by the pastoral deans.

HOLAs and HOFs at all schools provide a course book which includes information about what subject courses involve, expected learning outcomes, relevance, and future benefits.

The leaders at all schools identified that whilst parents are encouraged to support and guide students as they make their subject choices they simply *'don't have the resources to meet with all families'* (Ms G) therefore the parents are not as involved as they would like to be. Ms A said that parental involvement in the process was deemed as *'probably minimal'* at her school.

Students Underrepresented in Subjects

School A leaders' responses inferred that there is an underrepresentation of groups of students in some subject areas, potentially resulting from the impact of the prerequisite policy.

Mr B shared his experiences of navigating the subject selection process with Māori and Pacific students saying:

> *I think about times when I've had to advocate for some Māori students to be accepted in a maths course they really wanted or needed to do for their pathway*.

Similarly, Ms A expressed concern about a group of male Māori and Pacific students at her school who returned for Year 13 to play sport. She commented:

> *With the timetable [prerequisites] constraints … we've got a whole lot of students who have come back … we are not providing a programme that's suitable for them.*

She claims that the school's process is both '*complex'* and *'harsh'* for some students. She explained that students can be in tears because they have*:*

> *… discovered that they've not actually taken the right thing, or they've been to see a HOLA to try and beg their way into that subject and you've got a really good reason behind it, and they've just gone, no.*

Ms A expressed that for these students, the school is not *'engaging [them] early enough that [STEM[7]] is a potential pathway'*. Her assumption is, *'I guess they get put in the naughty box early*

[7] STEM refers to subjects in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

on and become disengaged in their learning'. She said that teachers *'need to look at the whole student'.*

Mr B explained that the school has been working proactively to support these students and that *'there's access to a range of advocates or supports to support each of those different cohorts within the school'*. He shared that the school is connecting with special programmes and initiatives such as Pūhoro - Massey University, KATTI[8], Future Focus, Apollo Programme for Māori and Pacific students - University of Auckland and PILOT[9], all of which are aimed at supporting marginalised students. He said that an aspirational aim of the school is to *'have more of our Pasifika and Māori students achieving highly in science and maths*. Mr B recognised *'that there's always room for improvement'*.

At the same school, Mr C said, '*I think we try our level best to overcome the barriers…'.* However, he did not seem to share the same level of concern as Mr B and Ms A and said that in some cases the students are responsible for limiting their future study pathways, commenting, *'whether everyone still avails themselves of all the opportunities that are offered by the school, that's another question'.*

Similarly, although the leaders at School C felt that in general, their school processes are attentive to ensuring equity in the subject selection process, they did express concern that some students do not get the same equitable access to curriculum programmes as others. Ms F shared that despite the open-door policy and wide range of learning programmes available, there is a tendency for *'particular demographics to be pigeon-holed into taking easy subjects'*. She stressed that teachers need to encourage all students to explore all subject areas, in particular UE subjects. She said, *'I think about students who are over-represented in our courses e.g., boys in engineering or automotive'*. She explained that to address disparities, Māori and Pacific students are part of her faculty review. Each year she monitors the number of Māori and Pacific students selecting courses in her department and their results to see where the gaps and disparities may be. Like School A, this school engages with externally provided programmes to address inequities that may be seen in some subjects. The school also has a Māori and Pacific liaison who *'works*

[8] Kei a Tātou te Ihi (KATTI) supports Māori secondary school students in Auckland with Careers and Transition Education in order to encourage students to complete schooling to Year 13 and also to promote Tertiary study options.
[9] PILOT - Pacific Island Leaders of Tomorrow.

with those students around what they want to do' (Ms F). Ms G said that addressing potential inequities is '*… something we are working on. I don't think we've got the silver bullet for that yet'.*

The leaders at School B did not comment that any groups of students were underrepresented in certain subjects at their school. The provision of specialist learning units catering for students' diverse interests and needs was celebrated by the leaders as a way the school is providing equitable access to learning programmes. However, Mr E voiced that much of the current curriculum lacked cultural relevance for students, commenting:

> *Lack of Kaupapa in mainstream classes / Eurocentric curriculum - not catering to the culture and needs of Māori students results in students falling behind, losing interest, wagging but some teachers accept this as they have a negative opinion of certain groups of students*.

He also felt that the structure of the timetable with subjects assigned to lines *'can prevent equitability'* as students' subject choices can be restricted. He recognises that the SLT needs to look at the structure of the timetable and subject selection process to address inequities.

Limiting Factors and Pressures Affecting Students When Making Their Subject Selection

The leaders' responses to what things might constrain student choice or pressure students to make specific subject selections could be grouped into three broad themes: timetable and resource restrictions: limitations on guidance and subject/pathway information; and parental influence and expectations.

Timetable and Resource Restrictions

The data showed that leaders attributed the greatest restrictions to come from prerequisites, curriculum pathway maps, the timetable structure and teachers.

- Prerequisites and Curriculum Pathway Maps. Some of the leaders at School A were concerned that the strict prerequisite policy at their school prevented students from pursuing their desired subject pathway. Whilst the school offers multiple pathways, differentiated to cater for students' learning needs, two leaders felt strongly that the multiplicity of courses in some subject domains was counterproductive for some students. Ms A explained that students will sometimes find themselves being told that because they chose a particular subject course in Year 11 or Year 12, *'there's no Level 3 pathway for you'* and she felt that *'the course variations close pathways … and result in roadblocks for some'*.

Mr B reinforced this, saying:

> *Complex pathway maps can create roadblocks - it's quite complicated because you've got so much variety, which is great, but then it's quite specific and can limit where they can go. Sometimes it does create barriers the more specific and narrow you are*.

As a result of students not being able to continue with a particular subject pathway, Mr C expressed concern that students '*are picking up subjects for the first time in Year 13'* saying that this made it more challenging for the student to be successful. His preference is that students study a subject from Year 11 through to Year 13.

In contrast, the leaders at School C highlighted that the absence of a prerequisite policy in their school also has the potential to negatively impact students. Whilst open entry into courses was seen as favourable, Ms G said that it does *'require a bit of management'* so that students do not *'end up in the wrong pathway'*. The main issues identified were that students may pick *'the easy option'* (Ms F) rather than being streamed into a more academically appropriate course or they pick up a subject for the first time in Year 13 and find it a *'huge undertaking'* (Ms G). The leaders' comments suggest that open entry and lack of prerequisites can lead to misaligned course selections, with students often taking on more than they can handle or opting for easier subjects that do not align with their academic needs.

Similar to the comments regarding curriculum pathway maps made by leaders at School A, Ms G explained that some School C Year 12 technology students who decide to return for Year 13, can find that there is no pathway for them, expressing that *'they're hitting a bit of a roadblock and they're picking up subjects that they've never done before and so that's not a very good transition out for them'*. Also, as technology class numbers need to be capped due to the availability of specialist teaching workshops and equipment, students sometimes face not being granted a place in a course.

- Timetable Structure. The leaders at all three schools highlighted that the timetable structure can constrain student choice and future study pathways.

School B leader Mr E reflected that for a long time, the subject options available for students to choose from had been *'determined by the structure of the timetable'*. Both leaders at this school spoke at length about the current timetable structure hindering student choice due to the way it was set up with subjects predetermined in lines. Ms D explained that when subjects are in the same line as another subject, it *'sometimes restricts what they [students] can and can't do'*.

Mr E reflected that without gathering feedback from students about the subject selection process and not all students purposefully making choices based on their future study pathways, it was not possible to know whether the timetable offered all the subjects that students wanted or needed to study.

Although it is common practice at School C to set the subjects into lines once the student subject selection process is complete, the leaders expressed that student choice can still be hindered by the timetable structure. Ms G explained that the main timetable constraint comes from instances where there may only be one class of a particular subject *'so there's some students who have some subjects that are pretty much fixed into four lines'* which will likely lead to clashes with the subjects selected. It was also explained that in some years, courses will collapse if not enough students select them.

- Teachers. All leaders recognised that student choice was affected by the availability of teachers as sometimes subjects could not be offered if there were no specialist teachers

The leaders at both Schools A and B recognised that students' subject choices can be influenced by which teacher is teaching a subject. Ms A commented:

> *They will choose an option because they love a teacher and they're not really that interested in it and it's not going to be that helpful for them, but they want to be with that teacher*.
>
> *Some students will not choose an option because they had a bad experience with the teacher*.

This was echoed by the leaders at School B. Ms D explained:

> *The biggest thing I've found from students is that it's teachers, so I'm either going to pick a subject or not pick a subject based on the teacher. That's massive here. Quite often it's the first thing they say, who's taking that?*

She continued to explain that she found it:

> *… disheartening when students really want to take the subject, but they know who the teacher is and then they say no, it's OK, I'll choose something else.*

This was reiterated by Mr E who explained that students are *'prepared to change their entire timetable and even drop a subject …'* to get a teacher that they want.

Ms D expressed that *'it's just been so hard trying to get the ideal teacher into the school'*, acknowledging that teacher recruitment is especially challenging at this time.

Mr E said that the beliefs held by some teachers can also constrain student choice by espousing to students that some subjects are of more value than others. His comment was:

> *I'd say some of our teachers would be part of the pressuring … there's one HOF that always references the more academic subjects*.

This comment implies that students are encouraged to pick some subjects over others because the curriculum leader believes that their subject is of more value to the student's future pathway.

Limited Guidance and Subject/Pathway Information

Whilst School C has a robust careers education and guidance programme, both leaders recognised that the process requires continuous improvement and better communication. Ms F explained that the HOF provides information in the course book, but Ms G said:

> *I don't feel they're [students] going in informed. I don't think they're reading what's in the course book. They're not going and talking to the teacher*.

Similarly, School A leader Ms A expressed concern that the quality of the careers education programme their school can offer varies as it is dependent on which teachers are involved. She felt that teachers are *'doing a complete disservice to … students'* if they do not expose them to the programme properly, potentially inhibiting their ability to make the right subject choices which could impact their future study pathway. She also questioned whether, within the current structure, the tutor has been able to take *'the time to sit down individually and talk through their options'.* Ms A felt that interviewing the Year 13 students in Terms 1 and 2 after subject selections had been made was not the best approach and said that *'it's the Year 12s and the Year 11s that … [the careers advisor] really wants to be talking to because they're setting up their path'*. She said that students' subject choice selection and future study pathway planning could be enhanced if they had more career education and guidance in their junior years at school.

The leaders at School B spoke frequently about the students receiving limited guidance and information when navigating the student subject selection process. The leaders recognised that this was an area they needed to grow within the school.

Mr E commented:

> *There's a lack of career pathway thinking that sits behind student subject selection.*
>
> *There's so much more … I would like us to be doing as a school around the informing side and how that's aligned to pathways.*

… supporting our students … with aspirations for university, we can definitely be better.

Parental Influence and Expectations

All leaders acknowledged that parental expectations and societal pressures influence student subject choices.

School C leaders commented:

> *Parental expectation has a huge impact on some of our students from particular demographics* (Ms F).
>
> *[Parents are] pushing for it [university] … and the student doesn't necessarily want to [go]* (Ms G).

School A leader Mr C, explained:

> *Parental expectations - you've heard about the Asian 5, that's alive and well in our school.*

He is referring to the common perception that some Asian parents have the traditional mindset of wanting their children to study three science subjects and maths and English as they believe this will enable them to have the best future study pathways open to them and better career opportunities (Teranishi, 2002).

The leaders at School B shared a similar story of parental expectations, particularly in Pacific families. He said, parents:

> *… put a lot of pressure on students to pick programmes that they value. In the difficult conversations with parents regarding their student's choice of subjects, nine times out of ten, particularly with our Pasifika parents, the parents' decision is the outcome*.
>
> *Pasifika whanau … [have] a traditional mindset of what … education is and what subjects their child needed to take*.

All leaders explained that they meet with the students and their parents when there is conflict over the subjects chosen but acknowledged that these are always difficult conversations and can be compromised by limited time resources. Ms A stated, *'sometimes we have happy outcomes, sometimes not so much'.*

One leader from School A suggested that students and parents need more accountability in the student subject selection process so that they don't find themselves making the wrong choices and not able to pursue their desired future study pathway. The comment made was:

> *I go to a lot of trouble trying to streamline the resources and make them as fit for purpose as possible and it appals me every year that I still get kids who are in courses that don't address their needs because they are too slack, or the parents are too slack, and that's frustrating, there's no need for it* (Mr C).

The Ways Structures and Leadership Practices Influence the Students' Experience of the Subject Selection Process

Each school displayed similarities in leadership structure and the roles of middle and senior leaders in the subject selection process. However, the findings showed there to be differences in the overall leadership practices influencing the structure of the subject selection process. The leaders' responses can be analysed across three key areas: distributed leadership practices, digital platforms, and gathering feedback.

Distributed Leadership Practices

Leaders described a hierarchical system of leadership comprising a senior leadership team and middle leaders, such as HOFs, HOLAs and HODs at their schools. The principal makes the final decision on curriculum design and pathways, the addition of new classes or resources, staffing, student subject selection and entry into subjects.

School C contrasted with the other two schools as they have a middle leader (HOD Careers) taking responsibility for the student subject selection process. Ms G said, '*we encourage them [HOFs and teachers] to actually have a one-to-one conversation'* with their students, helping, guiding and directing them. HOFs also review the class selection lists and can move students accordingly.

Ms G commented:

> *[HOFs can only move students within their faculty] redirect them to a different maths course that they think is more suitable … but they have to provide some reasoning*.

At Schools A and B, two members of the SLT have responsibility for the student subject selection process.

The data showed that at School A, the distribution of leadership in the student subject selection process is evident with the HOLAs coordinating with the DP Curriculum to evolve the curriculum every year and moderate the prerequisites for each subject. Mr C described SLT and HOLAs

working together as a *'Board of Studies …'.* The HOLAs also liaise with the DP Timetable to advise of students not meeting the subject course prerequisite requirements.

Mr C commented:

> *… student demand and needs change every year, and I'd like to think we're responsive to this.*
>
> *The HOLAs know that they have autonomy to override the prerequisites for any that they choose and similarly, we [SLT] can override.*

Other middle leaders involved in the student subject selection process are the whanau leaders who are responsible for overseeing each student's pastoral care and academic progress and, the HOD Careers. Mr B said, *'our whanau leaders are advocates for the students …'*. With less time allocation than School C, the careers education programme is delivered through a whole school approach. In Years 12 and 13 tutor teachers deliver the career education programme and mentor all students in their tutor group.

Ms A commented:

> *I think every student should have a conversation with somebody who can support them, help them, guide them in their decision-making process.*
>
> *I would love for the time to be given for either … [careers advisors] to be more involved in the process or time given to the tutors to be really involved in the process.*

At School B the data implies that owing to changes in the SLT, the leaders are reflecting on whether the current practices that structure the student subject selection process represent best practice. The leaders said that they want more transparency and conversation between the curriculum team and SLT, intimating that they want to see a more distributed leadership practice when it comes to the student subject selection process, with greater involvement of the curriculum leaders.

Mr E said:

> *I've been quite open at the table that I'd like the curriculum to inform timetable and timetable structure as opposed to the timetable dictating what we offer which has definitely been the case*.
>
> *I want … students and curriculum driving the timetable structure*.

Currently at School B, the DP and AP lead the entire process. There are no designated roles for middle leaders in the current structure, but the Māori and Pacific deans support the students in their units in choosing subjects and planning future study pathways. The support is informal so many students go to a person of choice to get advice.

Digital Platforms

All three schools are utilising a digital programme for student subject selection.

The School B leaders identified that access to digital resources can result in inequities for students navigating the subject selection process and making subject choices. Ms D explained that while bringing in the digital platform last year was seen to be advantageous as students would have greater autonomy to independently select their subjects, *'access to digital resources is always a problem'*. The leaders explained that because some students do not have digital technology access at home, many parents are unable to engage in the process. To ensure that all students have equitable access to the digital platform for selecting subjects during school time, iPads and laptops have been provided by the two senior leaders visiting every Year 12 class and supervising the subject selection occurring.

Likewise at School C, Ms G shared that the use of an online platform in the student subject selection process has raised concerns of inequity. She commented:

> *I'm very conscious that the digital platform doesn't work for all families and all students. That's potentially one of the main stumbling blocks for some students - they don't understand the process or don't have the access or they're just not able to manage that*.

Gathering Feedback

The leaders from all three schools recognised that there is no formal process for gathering feedback from students on the subject selection process. Mr E, a leader at School B was the most explicit in recognising that as their school does not run a structured careers education and mentoring programme for senior students and that they are not having conversations with students and hearing from them what they would like to prepare them for future study pathways.

At both School A and School C feedback is informally gathered from middle leaders and teachers during curriculum meetings and through SLT subject line management. These types of curriculum meetings and conversations were identified as an area for growth by the leaders at School B, as previously mentioned.

Part Three: Student Semi-Structured Interview Findings

Students' Experience of the Subject Selection Process

The data illustrated that all students had a comprehensive understanding of the subject selection process at their school. Sam from School C said that the process for subject selection is *'pretty simple actually'.*

The students recalled different personal experiences of subject selection, but their responses could be summarised into the things that helped them to navigate the subject selection process and the elements they felt hindered them from making their subject choices. Therefore, the data will be analysed in two groups: enabling factors and constraining factors. In each section, the themes that emerged will be presented and the participants' key thoughts discussed.

Elements that Enable Student Choice and Future Study Pathways

The student responses are presented under three main themes: flexibility to change subjects; peer influence; and knowledge of their university pathway.

- Flexibility to Change Subjects. The data showed that all students appreciated the opportunity to make subject changes during the course confirmation session and within the first couple of weeks of Term 1.

Ava from School A said that she liked that they had the opportunity to try a subject in the first few weeks of the school year and then if they decide that it's not right for them, they are *'allowed to talk to our whanau leader, the HOLA in charge and be able to change the subject'.* Also from the same school, Ben spoke about how two of his chosen subjects had clashed therefore he had to shuffle all his subjects and change from statistics to a general maths programme. He explained that this was essential for him to be able to stay on track for his future study pathway.

Nia, a student at School B responded similarly, saying that being allowed a further two weeks to trial her chosen subjects and make necessary adjustments without long-term commitment helped to ensure that she had the subjects she needed for her future study pathway. Another student from the same school, Lani said that *'it was pretty easy'* to change subjects at course confirmation.

Joe from School C explained that in the first few weeks, the careers advisor *'pulled me in to talk about course change'* once they realised that his chosen subjects would not result in him gaining

UE. However, Sam from the same school said he would like to see more flexibility in the subject change process to ensure all students are treated equitably. He said that he believed that *'everyone is special and we're all different. Things should be considered case by case*'.

- Peer Influence. School B students highly rated having friends in their classes as an influence on students' subject choice. The students commented:

> *Definitely pick up a subject if a friend is doing it…* (Lani).
>
> *Asking our friends … if they're going to take that same class … I know we all did that. … it's scary meeting new people … having someone you're familiar with is comforting* (Nia).
>
> *Having friends in our classes …* (Hana).

The leaders at this school were also very aware that the students prioritised their subject choices as being more favourable if a friend was also choosing it. Mr E commented that *'students will often want to change because … their mate's not in their class'.*

Likewise, a leader from School A, Ms A, said that students are *'wanting to do subjects because their friends are doing particular subjects'*.

Ava, a student from School A, explained that whilst she did not think that choosing subjects based on what your friends are taking was a good idea she said that it was an enabler for student choice, stating, *'Yeah, that's a big one'*. Another student Ben said that the influence of his peers encouraged him to take calculus and statistics.

In general, the students at School C placed less emphasis on the notion of students picking subjects because their friends are doing it than in the other two schools. However, peer influence on subject choices was still evident. Sam admitted that his choice of subjects had been influenced *'because his friends are doing it'*. Joe said that *'friends influenced the subjects two of my buddies picked, they wanted to be in every single class together*'.

- Knowledge of Their University Pathway. All students said that knowing that they wanted to go to university had influenced their Year 13 subject choices. Typical comments made:

> *In Year 12, I was talking with one of the Careers people and she was telling me what subjects would be best for law* (Lani).
>
> *I feel like for most of us from Year 12 to 13, it's based on what we want to do in the future* (Nia).
>
> *It is … important to choose subjects based on my future* (Hana).

My future career influenced my choices (Sam).

… take certain subjects based on what you've heard about what you need for university (Sam).

I had to choose all UE subjects (Joe).

I want to get into engineering, so calculus and physics is a requirement (Kim).

University visits to school are really helpful (Kim).

However, School A student responses inferred that they would have benefitted from more guidance around knowing what the university course requirements were when they were selecting their subjects in Year 12. Comments made:

> *The school … focuses on the Year 13s for open days … Year 12 would be a good time to go* (Ava).
>
> *A lot of students don't visit university open days until Year 13. So, although I had a brief look in Year 12, maybe I should've tried to make the decision in Year 12* (Eve).

Similarly, with the absence of structured career guidance and future pathway support, School B students acknowledged that they would seek future study pathway guidance from some teachers. Lani said she went to see one of the deputy principals and Hana said that she chose her English teacher because *'she's like a mum to me …'*. Although there is evidence of an informal support network for students to help them make subject choices, Nia said that:

> *Maybe the deans could do more of this work with us. Like … having that choice of us going to them to look for the subjects that we need to take to get them into university*.

The data from School C shows that students are receiving plentiful guidance from the careers department and their teachers about what subjects would be best for them to choose. Joe expressed that meeting with the career advisor *'was positive'.*

Typical comments made about the support provided by the careers advisors and teachers to enable them to choose subjects that align with their future study pathways were:

The careers department does a great job (Kim).

Teachers are available to answer your questions about subject selection (Sam).

All have careers advisor meetings … discuss what you want to do when you leave school (Joe).

Sam expressed concern that some of his *'friends don't know what they're doing'* and he felt that *'more career advice is needed particularly before Year 12'.*

Elements That Constrain Student Choice and Future Study Pathways

The student responses are presented under three main themes: timetable and resource restrictions; limited guidance and subject/pathway information; and parental influence and expectations.

- Timetable and Resource Restrictions. The timetable and resource restrictions discussed by the students were prerequisites, class unavailability and teachers.

School A is the only school with a strict prerequisite policy for entry into Year 13 subjects. The data showed that the students from this school felt that needing to meet prerequisites was a challenge they faced when making subject selections.

Ava spoke at length about the impact that needing to meet prerequisites for entry into subjects can have on student choice and potential future study pathways. She opened the discussion by stating, *'obviously what we submit for option selection … depends on prerequisites.'* She shared that the prerequisites had *'kind of put me off and made me kind of worry, kind of doubt myself'.* Ava shared her personal experience of being told that she could not choose biology because she was two credits short of meeting the prerequisite. She explained that because she had already passed Level 2 NCEA by the time the external exams arrived, she had decided to manage her workload and reduce the pressure on herself and opted to sit just one of the two external exams for the subject. Fortunately, she was confident enough to discuss this with the HOD biology and after some negotiation was *'allowed'* to choose the subject keeping her on track for her future study pathway. However, she said that other students '*end up taking subjects they don't necessarily want to do … because of the prerequisites*' and said she was aware of other students not meeting prerequisites who had *'tried to talk to the head of department'* to see if they could be let into the subject or for some, who once they realised they didn't meet the prerequisite *'... didn't even ask the HOD. They just decided to change their subjects'* even if this meant that they would not be able to pursue their future study pathway.

Eve said that because of the prerequisites *'some people don't get in and then they have to go talk to the teachers … try to convince them to get in or choose alternative subjects'.* Eve expressed empathetically that students not meeting the prerequisites *'find it hard to actually choose something that will lead them in the right pathway'*. She said that she was aware of a student who

was going to leave at the end of Term 1 because she was dissatisfied with her subject choices and did not feel that she would leave with worthwhile qualifications.

Ben said that he was aware that *'some people do stress about not having prerequisites'* but said that for himself and his friends in the accelerated learning class, *'we generally meet the prerequisites, so it's chill. We waltz in and there's no questions asked'*. He explained that for students not meeting the prerequisites they must *'essentially beg teachers to let them in or like, ask very nicely or butter them up to let them in'.*

The students' responses showed class unavailability resulting from subject clashes, size limits, or a subject not being offered negatively impacts student subject selection and future pathway planning.

School A and School B students shared their experiences of subject clashes. Typical comments made were:

> *I've known of other students who can't choose the subjects they want because they clash with other ones. So, it forces them to choose other subjects even if they didn't particularly want that one* (Eve).
>
> *I was originally planning to take … statistics … but due to a clash … I ended up taking … general maths* (Ben).
>
> *I know some people wanted to take two subjects, but they were in … the same line, so they couldn't. They had to pick one or the other* (Lani).
>
> *When subjects clash it's hard … dance and biology clashed so I had to take dance instead*
> *… they said there was nothing they could do about it …* (Nia).

School C students were less impacted by subject clashes due to the way their school's timetable is constructed after the subject selection process is over.

Nia from School B said she knew of students not being able to choose a subject because the class was full. She described that a student facing this situation may be put into *'a random class'* instead. She recognised that students who are unhappy with their subject choices may disengage from school, leading to absenteeism. She explained, '*I think kids wag their classes because they choose the wrong options'*.

Sam from School C also said he knew of students not being able to choose a subject because '*… the class is full*'.

Two students from different schools shared that they had not had enough subjects to choose from. Sam from School C said:

> *I wish there were more subjects to pick that would relate to my specialism [future university pathway].*
>
> *… the only teacher that teaches it [a specific subject] is no longer at the school*.

Hana from School B spoke passionately about her future aspirations of wanting to study fashion at university. She felt that the school's lack of a diverse range of subjects restricts students' ability to pursue their interests fully. She commented:

> *I was hoping the school would expand their range of subjects … maybe a sewing class or something … now I have to learn from YouTube. I have to teach myself before I go down there [to university]*.

All students referred to teachers as a resource that can positively or negatively impact the student subject selection process.

School B students openly shared that they would often drop or avoid subjects if they did not like the teacher. Two students also discussed how their teachers' opinions had constrained their subject choices at the end of Year 12. Lani explained that she was pressured by the science teachers to take biology. Nia said, '*I got told if I didn't take science, they'd be disappointed'*.

Similarly, Sam from School C explained that negative classroom environments created by teachers can put students at a disadvantage and commented:

> *If teachers are creating a bad environment, then kids should absolutely be able to change their class because it's a disadvantage. This is their education, especially in Years 11, 12, and 13. It matters a lot*.

At School A, Eve spoke of students who were not encouraged by teachers to strive academically, picking what they perceived to be easy subjects which are not UE approved and *'so then they can't get into any uni courses if they wanted to in the future'*. She felt that some students would become disengaged and consider leaving school when they do not see the value in continuing, particularly when their subject choices are restricted because of prerequisites, or they feel unsupported.

Contrastingly, Ben, another student from this school shared that because he was in the accelerated learning programme teachers had always encouraged him to aim high towards a future study pathway at university and study all UE approved subjects. He said that the students in the accelerated learning programme start planning their future study pathway in Year 11, positively impacting their self-esteem, academic choices and future study pathway.

- Limited Guidance and Subject/Pathway Information. Students from Schools A and B felt that the subject selection process and the planning of their future study pathways would benefit from enhanced guidance and more information from subject specialist teachers.

Ava from School A said she questions whether the tutor teachers know enough about future pathways to be able to effectively mentor senior students. She said that *'more focus on pathways and the importance of subject selection from the junior years'* was needed and that students *'need to visit university open days in Y12 - it's too late in Y13'.*

Ben felt that tutor teachers *'can only offer general advice'* and he found older students to be more helpful when considering his options.

Comparatively, School B students spoke of finding good support from some teachers or senior leaders, but they acknowledged that for some students this may not be the case, and they might feel that the support system is inadequate or inconsistent. Lani commented, '*I think some of them are a bit lost'*.

The students from School C were the most satisfied with the level of guidance and subject/pathway information given to them. They recognised the Careers Department as an integral part of the student subject selection process at the school and highly valued the guidance provided by the career advisors. However, Sam suggested that *'more career advice is needed particularly before Year 12'*.

- Parental Influence and Expectations. The students from Schools A and B spoke of how in some cultural contexts, parental expectations heavily influence subject choices, often adding stress and limiting autonomy. Students shared the following insights:

> *It's very much an Asian parent thing. I wasn't prepared to take the Asian 5 or anything, which is three sciences, maths and English. But yeah … they do expect me to a certain extent to pick stuff that will add towards my later careers* (Ben).
>
> *My parents were telling me that I had to choose maths because it obviously helps with university … I was pressured to choose maths, and I ended Samoan* (Hana).

Other student responses inferred that parents significantly influence subject choices, often steering students towards subjects perceived as more beneficial for future success. Comments made were:

> *I had to choose maths life skills because my parents wanted me to do it …* (Joe).

> *You get the classic of, you've got to be a lawyer, you've got to be a business exec … and some kids don't want to be a lawyer or a business exec … if your parents pressure you into that, it's not really good* (Sam).
>
> *In my case, my parents encouraged me to take sciences* (Eve).

Sam acknowledged that:

> *It's good to have career advisors that can help you along, even if the parents say different … [parents have] got to accept that you don't live through your kid. You'll let the kid choose*.

Part Four: Summary of Findings

School A

The leaders emphasised that having a structured subject selection process was a vital element for students to make the right subject choices for their future study pathways. Whilst the students were familiar with the process, their responses suggested that the inflexibility of the structures underpinning the process could be detrimental to them pursuing subjects of choice, impacting their future study pathways. Students were more concerned with feeling informed and supported in their decisions than with the process itself. Students stated that the strict prerequisite policy can hinder the option choices. They felt that the process of having to negotiate their way into a subject via the HOLA was too difficult for some students. Some of the leaders' responses indicated that they agreed that the prerequisite policy was difficult for students to navigate. Leaders and students deemed effective mentoring and guidance as crucial, however, current structures mean there is variability in career education quality. Leaders and students acknowledged the impact of parental influence on student choice and this impact was especially significant for students from some ethnicities. The underrepresentation of certain student groups due to prerequisites pointed to a need for more equitable practices. Overall, while School A's processes provide a framework for enabling student choice, improvements are needed to ensure all students can pursue their desired academic and career pathways.

School B

Significant changes in the senior leadership team have prompted a reflection on past practices and the adoption of a digital platform for subject selection, aiming for greater student independence. Flexibility in course offerings and informal support structures were seen as enablers for student choice but it was recognised by both leaders and students that more career guidance is needed to ensure all students fulfil their academic potential and embark on a future study pathway of their choice. Students' choices were constrained by barriers such as timetable clashes, teacher availability, and parental influence. Parental influence on subject choices was especially true for students from some ethnicities. Inequities due to limited digital access and the impact of timetable structures on some students were also noted. The students at this school placed high value on ensuring that they had friends in their classes, even if this was detrimental to them making better subject choices. They also said that having the right teacher was important and that they would not pick subjects if they did not like the teacher. This shows that the students at this school view being socially comfortable and having good relationships as essential to their learning and therefore the greatest influences on student subject selection. Despite the challenges, the leadership team is committed to a more transparent and student-driven selection process, ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities.

School C

The subject selection process, led by the Careers Department and facilitated through the digital platform, is thorough and supportive. Flexibility in course offerings, particularly the absence of prerequisites for Year 13 allows students to explore their interests. The students presented that they felt well supported with their decision making when selecting subjects and appreciated the extensive career education guidance they received throughout five years at the school. However, constraints such as timetable clashes, limited resources, and parental influence pose challenges. Despite proactive career guidance, inequities persist, particularly for students lacking digital access. The leaders acknowledged that students' ethnicity and demographic background can be a factor in subject selection and access to some subjects. The school's leadership is committed to creating an inclusive and flexible subject selection process, emphasising student support and open communication to navigate their educational pathways effectively.

Conclusion - Research Findings

The findings show that school leaders consider a structured subject selection process essential. To ensure uniformity and fairness, they value responsiveness to students' needs and flexibility in course offerings. Both leaders and students rate mentoring and career guidance highly for enhancing student choice and future study pathways. Students emphasised the importance of flexibility in changing subjects, peer influence, teacher preferences, and understanding university pathways in their selection process. However, timetable and resource limitations, inadequate guidance, and parental expectations were seen as constraints.

Leaders acknowledge potential inequities in the subject selection process and are working to address these, particularly in digital resources and the underrepresentation of certain student groups in some subjects. They believe in using both internal and external initiatives to reduce inequities. Despite these concerns, students feel the process is equitable.

While there are common leadership practices, each school has different leaders managing the process. Middle leaders are significant in subject selection and are expected to play a larger role with revised practices and structures, showing a preference for distributed leadership.

The next chapter will explore these conclusions in more detail and link them to the literature presented in Chapter Two.

Chapter Five: Discussion of the Findings

This chapter delves into the key findings on how the organisational structures within New Zealand secondary schools influence student subject selection, linking these insights back to the academic literature presented in Chapter Two. The core research questions shape the discussion: How do these structures either enable or limit student choices and future study opportunities? To what degree are these structures equitable, considering the diverse backgrounds and individual differences among students? How do leadership practices shape the organisational frameworks that guide students' subject selection? These questions will serve as the foundation for analysing the impact of school organisational structures on educational pathways.

Overall, analysis of the participants' perceptions suggests structured subject selection processes play a key role in current approaches, assisting student choice and guiding their future study pathways. Leaders' and students' responses highlight that the structure of these processes has the potential to both enable and constrain student choice and opportunity for future study pathways. Interpretation of the findings indicates that students seek a personalised approach to subject selection to meet their needs and ensure equitable access to the curriculum and potential future study pathways.

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the data: some types of support and guidance can be beneficial in assisting students to make meaningful subject choices; barriers can prevent equitable outcomes for students and access to future study pathways; and structured yet flexible subject selection processes. These will provide the subheadings for this chapter.

Some Types of Support and Guidance can be Beneficial in Assisting Students to Make Meaningful Subject Choices

Evaluation of the structure of the subject selection process at the three secondary schools identified that some types of support and guidance can be beneficial to enable students to make informed subject choices and assist students in planning future study pathways. At each school, the provision of support and guidance for students as they navigate subject selection varied in quality and quantity.

The students in this study reported that they may select a subject if they deem it to be useful for their future university studies and/or university entrance. The research findings of Hupkau et al. (2017) and Dilnot (2018) emphasise that the subjects and qualifications students choose after age 16 in secondary school are crucial, as they can influence the further study opportunities available at the end of Year 13 and the career pathways they can pursue. This previous research and the student data make a case for the importance of incorporating some form of support and guidance for students navigating the subject selection process to assist students in making informed and meaningful subject choices.

Students in this study were aware that they did not always make the right subject choices. Speaking freely of the external influences that had the potential to lead them to make the wrong subject choices they identified these to be whether their friends were picking a subject, whether they liked the subject and the teacher or not, and their parents' influence and expectations. These findings suggest that without a structure of relevant support and guidance in place at the school, students run the risk of allowing external influences to direct their subject selection as opposed to picking the subjects that will set them up for success and their future study pathways. The leaders were also conscious that students were not making the right decisions and some expressed concern that too many students requested to change the subject choices they had made during the period of subject selection when they returned to school in Term 1. Despite every school having a structured process for subject selection which at least included access to career advice and subject teachers' insight, the leaders at all three schools questioned whether the process was working well enough as the number of changes requested by students was so significant. One interpretation of these findings would be that students are not well enough informed about the importance of choosing subjects that will enable them to reach their highest academic potential and embark on future study pathways. How these external influences impact students' subject choices will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Students selecting subjects based on whether their friends were also choosing the subject came through from all participants as a significant influence on their choices but the students at School B rated this as the most influential factor in them choosing subjects or not. It is possible that if students were better informed about what subjects they require for future study pathways, then they would be less inclined to use what their friends are doing as a criterion for subject selection. When reviewing the literature before conducting this research, the influence of peers did not emerge as a factor impacting student subject selection that school leaders needed to be aware of. Yet, the findings of this study suggest that some students seek comfort in their learning

environment and that these students will prioritise feeling a sense of belonging amongst friends over challenging themselves to study the subjects which would be of most use to their future study pathway. One student summed this up beautifully, saying that *'it's scary meeting new people … [therefore] having someone you're familiar with is comforting'*. Of relevance is that at School B, students received the least structured programme of support and guidance when compared to the other two schools, and students and leaders recognise that more needs to be done to support students to aspire to go to university. One leader said*:*

> *there's so much more … I would like us to be doing as a school around the informing side and how that's aligned to pathways … [for] those with aspirations for university, we can definitely be better*.

Some students explained how it was important for them to feel safe and supported in their learning environment therefore this would influence their subject selection. They said they were more likely to pick subjects that they perceive themselves to be good at as they found more enjoyment and confidence in their strongest subjects regardless of whether the subject is academically challenging enough or beneficial to enter a future study pathway. This behaviour exhibited by students when deciding which subjects they should pick is termed by Jonsson (1999) as comparative advantage. According to one student, enjoyment of a subject is important, and she suggested that students would '*wag their classes because they choose the wrong options'* and were not enjoying their learning. Whether the students liked the teacher was attributed to be a factor influencing whether they enjoyed the subject and consequently whether they would select a subject. Some leaders were aware that if their students did not like the teacher of a subject then they would pick something else instead or the opposite was also true that they would continue with a subject because they wanted to remain with the teacher. In the previously reviewed literature, several studies highlighted the negative effects that not liking a teacher could have on student engagement, demonstrating that respectful and reciprocal teacher-student relationships are essential for improving student achievement outcomes (Silins & Mulford, 2002; Kana & Aitken, 2007; Hunter et al., 2016). Linking these findings to the reviewed literature it is possible to suggest that students will gravitate towards subjects where they feel supported by the teacher to do their best and can enjoy their learning. This was especially evident in the responses from the students at School B. Feeling safe and supported in their learning journey by their peers and their teachers were deemed to be significant influences for these students when making subject choices. As School B has a higher number of Māori and Pacific students and is in a lower socioeconomic community than the other two schools in the study, these findings raise the question of the need

for further research into whether students from certain cultures or demographics value these qualities higher in their learning environment than other students.

Mirroring the research findings from Davies and Guppy (1997), Hansen (1997), Dryler (1998) and Van der Werfhorst et al. (2003), the students and leaders in this study agreed that parental influence and expectations impacted student subject selection. As previous research also showed, this study's findings indicated that students' cultural and economic capital influenced their selection of subjects in the senior school (Ayalon, 1995; Dean et al., 2023; Politis et al., 2009; Van de Werfhorst et al., 2003). Students from Asian or Pacific backgrounds were those most likely to be guided by their parents to choose subjects based on what the parents deemed to be academically viable but in general students spoke of choosing subjects that their parents had advised them to do so that they could have better career prospects. The leaders from all three schools noted that conversations with parents about their student's subject choices were always difficult and there was an indication that the leaders limited parental involvement in the subject selection process. There was some suggestion that this was due to the logistics and time constraints of the process however, there was some inference that keeping parents at arm's length was easier for all involved in the process. Murcia et al's. (2020) research findings present a challenge to the organisational structures in place at the schools in this study where parental involvement is minimal as they found that parents valued the career opportunity conversations facilitated by schools for both their children and them. Their study also revealed that many parents believed it was important for their children to pursue careers where they would be happy and find genuine meaning. They generally agreed that future careers should allow their children to reach their potential while also providing enough challenge to maintain their interest long-term. Likewise, Simmons (2008) reported that students said their parents play a crucial role in subject selection and are most helpful not by dictating specific academic or career choices, but by assisting in the decision-making process.

This discussion of the influence of peers, teacher preference and parental expectations on student subject selection raises the question as to whether these would be such significant influences on student choice if students were receiving comprehensive support and guidance throughout the subject selection process. It could also be argued that if parents were involved and thus better informed about the curriculum and the options available to students, they would be less likely to challenge the student's choices and could be a valuable source of support for the student instead. This may not be the case for all students though so some caution may be needed when involving parents.

When evaluating the support and guidance given to students during the process of subject selection, School C values supporting and guiding students through the subject selection process the most highly, when compared with Schools A and B. This school was the only one where the organisational structure dictated that the HOD Careers oversaw the subject selection process, which included time being made available for the careers advisors to interview all students before, during and after subject selections were made and to check all students' chosen timetables to ensure that there were no anomalies and that all could meet UE requirements. Viewing leadership practice at this school through the practice architectures lens exemplifies that a material-economic arrangement has been prioritised with resources made available to offer comprehensive support and guidance to students (Fazio et al., 2024; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). As well as the work of the HOD Careers and careers advisors, middle leaders leading the subject departments (HOFs) are expected to converse regularly with students to discuss their subject options. The encouragement of the practice of HOFs discussing with students how they can structure their learning journey to meet their interests and aspirations reflects the cultural- discursive arrangements at this school which emphasise the importance of dialogue and specialised guidance in shaping students' learning journeys (Fazio et al., 2024; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). The full involvement of middle leaders in the subject selection process shows that these school leaders have considered the socio-political arrangements when comprising the organisational structures underpinning the subject selection process (Fazio et al., 2024; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). The SLT recognise the pivotal role middle leaders play in setting high expectations for every student by offering them varied opportunities for learning and accomplishment (University of Auckland *Starpath* report, 2018; Skerritt et al., 2023).

The mentoring of senior students by teachers and careers advisors was also valued at School A but comparing the structure of the support and guidance programme to School C, resources are limited, and the careers interviews were only scheduled for Year 13s after subject selection had occurred and students are already following their timetable of subjects. As a result of these limitations, the participants had differing opinions about the quality of the guidance students received. The senior leaders felt that a great deal of time was invested in the school's mentoring programme with tutor teachers tasked with mentoring their Year 13 students. However, the HOD Careers and the students voiced that the quality of mentoring was not at the standard needed to enable students to make informed subject choices that align with their future study aspirations. Thus, senior leaders need an awareness that because of "different personal and professional orientations" (Maguire et al., 2015, as cited in Skerritt et al. 2023, p. 572) the teachers within their

school may vary in their delivery of programmes which may not enable all students to flourish the same. Adopting the practice architecture lens as a conceptual tool may assist the leaders in this school to understand the “arrangements present in … [their school], … that enable and constrain the ways a practice unfolds” (Fazio et al., 2024, p. 5) and begin to reshape the leadership practices and the organisational structures impacting on student subject selection.

In a previous study, Oakes (1992) discovered that curriculum leaders made assumptions about students' abilities, aspirations, and educational needs which then determined which courses were offered to students. The participants in this study also perceived this to be true for them as the students shared that they had been pressured by HOLAs to pursue subjects in their domain because they were likely to be academically successful but that they did not want to follow that subject pathway. This highlights the importance of schools embedding a non-biased structured programme of support and guidance into the subject selection process that promotes all students making the right subject choices for their academic capacity and future study pathways. Interpreting what one student from School A shared about his experiences of being in an accelerated learning programme, this school focuses on supporting and guiding their most academic students from the junior years, mapping out potential future study pathways and ensuring that they are accessing academic qualifications throughout their senior years at school. Reflections for leaders at this school correlate with what Williams et al.’s (2013) research queried which would be to consider whether students’ equitable access to attain academic qualifications, fulfil their aspirational future study pathway and generally achieve their “personal best” (p. 18) is hindered when not streamed into an accelerated academic programme.

In conclusion, the findings show that the students want to select subjects that are aligned with their future study pathways but that except for students at School C, they felt that they needed more guidance and information about universities and the entry requirements. The leaders from all schools agreed with the students that they needed to be better informed when making subject choices.

Barriers can Prevent Equitable Outcomes for Students and Access to Future study Pathways

Analysis of this study’s findings shows that the participants identified barriers within the organisational structures underpinning the subject selection process that could impact equitable outcomes for students. These findings contravene the purpose of education in New Zealand

which is for schools to provide “an education system that delivers equitable and excellent outcomes" for all (MoE, 2024a, p. 1). This aligns with other research findings from Biesta (2010), Hallinger and Heck (2011) and Wright et al. (2021) which showed that the establishment of structures and processes within schools can either impede or assist students’ educational outcomes, as systems can oversimplify the complexity of the student's individual learning needs.

Despite imperfections in the subject selection processes at the schools in this study, statistics released by the Tertiary Education Commission reveal that “… the majority of school leavers go on to tertiary study, with 36% entering foundational levels … 40% of school leavers achieve UE … 29% of school leavers go straight into the workforce” (TEC*,* 2024, p. 8). The statistics show that many students can transition into worthwhile pathways, but it was also reported that disparities in leaving qualifications carry over into future study pathways for some groups of students. For instance, Māori and Pacific students are less likely to gain UE and attend university. However, when these students are enabled to achieve UE, they are just as likely as non-Māori and non-Pacific students to pursue a university education (TEC, 2024). The barriers facing ethnic groups will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Collectively, the leaders in this study felt that having a structured process for subject selection was favourable, as senior and middle leaders could be designated specific roles in the process and a timeline outlined for the process to be completed, alleviating stress and enhancing individuals' sense of effectiveness (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). Both leaders and students recognised that the greatest restrictions came from prerequisites, curriculum pathway maps, the timetable structure and teachers. Barrier free access to education has been identified within *NELP* as a priority for school leaders and teachers so it was somewhat encouraging to hear from the leaders that they were aware of some of the barriers students face when selecting subjects but there is a need for leaders to devise strategies to overcome all barriers to ensure students have equitable access to educational outcomes and future study pathways.

Considering how the organisational structures impede equitable outcomes, leaders at School A questioned whether the strict prerequisite policy and complex pathway maps were creating *‘roadblocks’* for some students on their learning journeys. These leaders’ views aligned with researchers Ayalon (1995) and Williams et al. (2013) that sorting students into courses based on previous academic achievement can produce inequitable opportunities for students to reach their highest potential. Students from this school spoke a lot about how the prerequisites were a source of stress for some as the HOLA or HOD would decide whether the student could pursue a subject

or not, the decision either negatively or positively impacting their access to academic qualifications and future study pathways. The students also shared that some students would steer clear of subjects that had entry prerequisites as they perceived it would be too difficult to get into them. As Hallam and Ireson (2003) found, students' self-efficacy towards their learning can decrease if they are perceived by a teacher to be less able than others, thus limiting their potential achievement. Interpretation of the way the students discussed the process for entering some subjects points out that some students may be experiencing low self-efficacy and therefore opt for an easier academic path than perhaps the one they are truly capable of or believe that they are guided into a less academic pathway limiting their educational outcomes.

Whilst prerequisites were seen to have merit by some leaders as they can be used to guide students into subject courses that are aligned with their academic needs, interpretation of the students' responses at School A expound that the school's current prerequisite policy is challenging for some students, particularly when such measures are determined by the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers or middle leaders. Using a practice architecture lens, leaders at this school could recognise that the effects of organisational structures such as the prerequisite policy are not predetermined, as the actions of the HOLAs are shaped by the interplay of "sayings, doings, and relatings" (Fazio et al., 2024, p. 5). Leaders therefore must be mindful that teachers' perception of student ability might be best used by teachers as a guide and not as a gatekeeper for students' progression in certain academic subject pathways. Gathering feedback from students would be beneficial to truly understand the impact that the prerequisite policy has on student educational outcomes.

One leader at School A summarised the findings on the use of prerequisites directing students into alternative subjects, saying that the variety of differentiated pathways made things *'quite complicated'* and explained he was concerned that for some students the options available to them become *'quite specific and can limit where they can go'*. These findings correlate with Lee et al.'s (1997) research which suggested that secondary schools should reduce the number of courses offered to students and drive all students in the direction of pursuing academic subjects as opposed to potentially less aspirational options. Schools must be careful not to send students on a journey to nowhere by offering alternative pathways. The literature suggests there is little evidence that offering an alternative, less academic pathway is of value to any group of students (Adler & Issacs, 1982; Moulton et al., 2018) however, educators will be aware that some students' learning needs may be met by pursuing what is perceived to be a less academic pathway. Most relevant here is the work of Noddings (2013) as he warns against directing students into subjects,

based on what educators may think is for the best and, subsequently denying them exposure to programmes in which they can excel. This further highlights the need for the subject selection process to be supported by a robust and personalised system of guidance for students so that all have equitable access to subjects keeping the opportunity for future study pathways open. However, at both School A and School C, leaders stated that some Year 13 students find themselves with no suitable pathway in a subject. Leaders should be cognisant of the fact that offering different programmes for senior students to choose from is not the issue but rather it is the school's implementation of offering students' choice that needs improvements. As Williams et al. (2013) emphasise, organisational structures should be such that all students can achieve their personal best.

Aligning with the findings of a study by Youngs (2014) which highlighted that in New Zealand schools the opinions of curriculum leaders were favoured over the pastoral dean when making decisions relating to student educational outcomes, this study found that the role of the pastoral dean in the subject selection process was minimal, the HOLA or HOF having the most input into whether a student can pursue a course. Previous literature shows that there is a separation between pastoral and academic guidance for students when in fact there is an understanding that they are fundamentally interconnected (Best, 1999; Clark, 2008; Fraser, 2014; Swinson, 2010). The relevance of this literature and the research findings is for leaders to consider how to utilise pastoral and curriculum middle leaders to effectively guide the students to make subject choices that lead to equitable outcomes and access to future study pathways. Changing the material-economic arrangement within a school to utilise both the specialist knowledge of pastoral and curriculum leaders could be beneficial to increase equitable educational outcomes for students (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015).

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two highlighted that Māori students continue to describe a gap between the expectation of fairness and excellence within our education system and their actual experiences (Berryman & Eley, 2017) and the leaders' responses in this study suggest that this is true in their schools. The study's findings indicate that there is a perceived underrepresentation of groups of students in some areas of the curriculum, in particular STEM subjects. The comments made by some leaders that Māori and Pacific students in their schools are '*put in the naughty box early on'* and *'particular demographics to be pigeon-holed into taking easy subjects'* are in line with findings presented by Berryman and Eley (2017) who said that some educators perceive that "some groups of students are just not as good as other groups" (p. 109). Bishop (2019) and Wylie and Coblentz (2022) claim that the essential factor in understanding the issue of unequal

educational outcomes lies in the theoretical perspectives of teachers and that principals need to challenge teacher beliefs. The assertion by one leader that teachers need to look at the *'whole student'* resonates with what Hargreaves and Shirley (2020) refer to as teachers having "…collective responsibility for all students' success" (p. 92) and Molla and Gale (2019) who stated that leaders must purposefully set about challenging their unconscious biases that marginalise some students.

Aware that organisational structures and practices can marginalise Māori and Pacific students, the leaders all spoke of how their schools incorporate initiatives to try to prevent inequitable outcomes. It was evident that rather than review how the current structures result in inequitable practices for some groups of students, the leaders drew heavily on implementing external initiatives. The importance of teachers and leaders confronting their own "discursive positioning" so that the "deeper structures of disparity and inequality" in schools are challenged (Alton-Lee, 2015, p. 4) and not just reaching out to others outside of the school to fix the problem should be recognised.

One exception was School B where most of the students are Māori and Pacific. Whilst external education initiatives were encouraged, the school offered students the opportunity to engage with specialised learning units, such as Māori, Samoan, services and trades, catering to students' interests, and cultural and academic needs. Students in these pathways were also more likely to be mentored by Māori and Pacific teachers and leaders than at the other two schools. The leaders at this school indicated that offering these alternative curriculum pathways was seen as positive, particularly for engaging students in their learning. However, drawing on the literature previously discussed, perhaps caution should be taken to be sure that such programmes still lead to equitable outcomes for students and that opportunities for future study pathways are not compromised (Adler & Isaacs, 1982; Lee et al., 1997; Moulton et al., 2018; Noddings, 2013; Williams et al., 2013).

Despite their best efforts to offer engaging programmes, one senior leader at School B expressed concern that the structure of the curriculum offered outside of these specialised learning units was *'Eurocentric'* and that the mainstream classes do not cater to the cultural needs of Māori students resulting in disengagement and poor performance. He said that '*some teachers accept this as they have a negative opinion of certain groups of students'*. This suggests he may agree with Hynds et al's. (2016) concerns that some educators feel that Māori students should just "fit in with the mainstream approach" (p. 543) or that the colour-blind approach of teachers discounting the

need to recognise students' colour or race as proposed by Jansen (1999, as cited in Anthiemoolam & Vermaak, 2021) is prevalent in the school. Interestingly, no leaders referenced their knowledge of or implementation of Ministry of Education policies like *Ka Hikitia* and the *Action Plan for Pacific Education* as part of their strategic practice to address the barriers that can prevent equitable student outcomes.

Berryman and Eley's (2017) research showed that education visions for all students, such as those set by individual schools or the Ministry of Education, are "challenged when children come from Indigenous, poor, or other diverse groups" (p. 100). The leaders' comments about the inequities within subject selection indicate that this may be true in the schools in this study, particularly concerning Māori and Pacific students, but Asian students are another 'group' this study highlights as facing barriers when choosing subjects due to dominant parental influence. Both the leaders and students referred to *'...the Asian 5…'* which Teranishi (2002) explains as the perceived mindset of some Asian parents who believe that studying three science subjects along with maths and English will provide their children with the best future academic options and career prospects and, that some parents are putting '*…pressure on students to pick programmes that they value…'*. Leaders have the issue of how to "give all learners a high-quality, culturally responsive, seamless and inclusive education" (New Zealand Legislation, 2024, p. 1) irrespective of the student's economic or ethnic background. Further research would be needed to truly know the extent to which the schools' visions are not being adhered to for students from different groups.

The findings of this study also align with researchers Brady (2006), Patrick, et al. (2011), Zohar and Hipkins (2018), Illanelli and Duta (2018) and Hipkins and Vaughan (2019), all of whom identified that organisational structures such as timetable, class sizes and resources can create issues of inflexibility around student subject choices. Research participants in this study recognised that the structure of the timetable meant that for some students, the subjects they wanted were positioned in the same line and therefore clashed so could not be taken together. The three schools in this study opted to use this structure to comprise their timetables with subjects assigned to different lines, each line representing one-hour periods. Only one leader from School B voiced that he was invested in reviewing this structure. Limitations on class sizes or not having a teacher available to take the class also meant that some students' opportunities to take subjects were compromised. Students from two different schools also shared their disappointment that specific subjects that were offered at other schools were not offered at their schools, seeing this as a disadvantage as they prepared for university. These findings

acknowledge Smyth and Hannan's (2006) research which showed that "schools with similar characteristics can vary significantly in their provision of particular subjects" (p. 305). Both the leaders and students expressed that they saw unfairness in students not being able to access their first choice of subjects, but leaders did not yet have the answer to know how to provide equitable access to all subjects for all students. Through a practice architecture lens, leaders would be cognisant that "practices cannot be changed substantially without changing the practice architectures that hold them in place" (Fazio et al., 2024, p. 5) - an initial review of the material-economic arrangements at each school therefore a priority.

In trying to provide students with the subjects they wanted to study, School C was perhaps the most proactive. This school constructs the timetable after subject selections have been made to minimise as many clashes as possible and has a school policy to create more classes to meet student demand. Also, open entry into all Year 13 subjects enables students to choose their subjects without barriers.

As was the case with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, the findings of this study present a tension between the need for organisational structures that allow schools to function effectively but that also enable all students equitable access to learning programmes that enable them to fulfil their academic potential and access future study pathways. When devising and implementing organisational structures leaders need to consider if the associated practices will be driven by student needs and aspirations or will perpetuate inequitable outcomes for students. Viewing the findings through the practice architectures lens will encourage a holistic understanding of leadership practices and assist leaders in understanding how it is the collaboration of what people say and do and how they interact that influence and shape the structures and processes within a school (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015).

Structured Yet Flexible Subject Selection Processes

My perception is that the participants in this study acknowledge that whilst structures and processes are necessary to provide the "environment for systematic, formalised learning and teaching" (Christie, 1998, p. 286) they can also create barriers to equitable outcomes for some students, as discussed previously in this chapter. All leaders shared similar features of the subject selection process at their school. These processes included students receiving course information in Term 3 of Year 12 and being encouraged to talk to their teachers and heads of departments about the different subject courses available to them. Then, once informed, students make their choices via an online platform before the end of the school year. At one school, a comprehensive

programme of career guidance accompanies the subject selection process. At the start of the following year, students at all schools attend course confirmation to either confirm their selection or make changes. The schools' structured processes for subject selection are consistent but most leaders said that students' experience may differ based on their individual needs, illustrating that a flexible approach can be taken.

Although evidence of flexibility was limited in this study, the findings did show that leaders can be flexible with the subject selection process for some students where learning needs persist such as additional ESOL lessons, extra or less subjects timetabled and externally provided courses offered to some students. These school leaders' ability to embrace a flexible approach to school organisational structures, including creative implementations of curriculum, and learning schedules to enable all students to fulfil their academic potential correlates with previously reviewed literature (Morrison & Kedian, 2017; OECD, 2013). Academics suggest that to see more equitable outcomes for all students in their pathways to study, employment and creating purposeful futures, schools need to offer flexible learning programmes to facilitate students developing a sense of ownership for their learning in readiness to transition out of school (Hipkins & Bolstad, 2005; Iannelli & Duta, 2018).

Overall, the findings of this research showed that some leaders are responsive to accommodate students' choices but leaders at all schools admitted that they did not adopt the formal practice of receiving feedback from students about the subject selection process and the course offerings. One leader reflected and said that without engaging in conversations with students about subject selection we are not '*being challenged around the kind of different subjects that we're offering'*. To assist with providing equitable outcomes for all students it would be beneficial for leaders to review their course offerings against what the students are saying they want and need for future study pathways and their transition out of school.

Whilst the findings from this study reveal that the leaders are embracing some flexibility in the learning programmes at their schools to help students make academic progress and experience success (Brady, 2006; Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019; Patrick et al., 2011) there are a multitude of factors, as illustrated in previous literature and this study's findings, that may hinder the development and execution of a subject selection structure and process that ensures equitable outcomes for all.

When considering some of the organisational structures underpinning student subject selection and their potential to produce inequitable outcomes, the interpretation of the findings is that where there is less rigidity and a more personalised approach, students perceive the process to be more equitable. While students at School B craved more guidance to plan their subject pathways and transition out of school, they felt that the relatively 'casual' approach, referred to by one leader as *'a free for all',* of seeking advice from teachers of their choice and the prerequisites being negotiable, produced equitable outcomes for most. Surrounded by individualised support and guidance and open entry into courses, School C students felt that they were being directed towards the most aspirational pathway, thus equitable outcomes for all were possible. Contrastingly, at School A where the structure consisted of a rigid prerequisite policy and a process whereby students were expected to discuss with the HOLA whether entry into their subject was viable, students and leaders espoused the greatest sentiments of dissatisfaction and disappointment that equitable outcomes would not be for all students. For some leaders at this school, of particular concern were their Māori and Pacific students. It could be suggested that the rigid processes at School A are shaped by the leaders' personal views on what they believe is best for students and society, with a focus on what benefits the educators (Kemmis & Smith, 2008).

Whilst the subject selection processes are similar at each school, there are some differences in the leadership practices determining the organisational structures that guide student subject selection. The findings reveal that distributed leadership practice was favoured in two of the schools. The significant roles in the subject selection process given to middle leaders (HOFs, HOLAs and HODs) by the SLT at Schools A and C supports Spillane's (2006) earlier explanation that no one person can be expected to be the expert due to the range of subject specialisms in a secondary school, therefore shared leadership is more effective. This evidence suggests that the schools have reflected on the cultural-discursive arrangements to ensure that they are drawing on the specialist discourse that both middle and senior leaders can bring to the table on student subject selection processes (Fazio et al., 2024). The leaders from School B explained that distributing the leadership of the subject selection process and timetable design was something that they are aspiring to evolve now with the formation of a new senior leadership team.

Inconsistencies emerging from the distribution of leadership within the subject selection process at some of the schools in this study correlate with Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) earlier research findings. Evidence of this could be seen in the mixed views of the leaders from School A regarding the prerequisite policy. Whilst one leader was confident that collaboration between senior leaders

and middle leaders ensures that the prerequisite policy is fair and equitable, two leaders expressed concern that the inflexible attitudes of some HOLAs resulted in students' choices being compromised potentially leading to inequitable outcomes. The students' perceptions of having to beg to get into a subject or having no chance at all also question whether the policy is fair. Interpretation of the students' responses about navigating the prerequisite policy was that they seemed to fear trying to change to alternative subjects as they perceived that they would have to plead with HOLAs to let them into courses or would not even try to change as they knew the curriculum leader would say no. Middle leaders denying students entry into a subject contradicts the recommendations of the University of Auckland *Starpath* report (2018) which states that leaders must uphold elevated expectations for every student, offering them varied opportunities for learning and accomplishment. A comment from one student perhaps speaks for all as he challenged that the structures underpinning the subject selection process should consider that *'everyone is special and we're all different. Things should be considered case by case'*. This student's response supports Bolman and Deal's (2003) standpoint that effective leaders, such as HOLAs in the position of gatekeepers into subjects, need the capacity to guide beyond their values or perspectives in their approach to situations. When deciding whether a student can access an academic pathway, leaders, especially curriculum leaders could benefit from considering Vaughan's (2005) findings that having a greater awareness of what is going on "beneath the surface" for students is important (p. 39).

This research highlights that schools have similarities in their processes for students to select their Level 3 NCEA subjects but that despite many similar features, students' experiences are different depending on which school they attend. Why these differences occur are to some extent due to variations in the structure of the process at each school such as having a prerequisite policy or not, but whether all students "irrespective of their … ethnicity, belief, … social or cultural background …" (MoE, 2024a, p. 1) achieve equitable outcomes can be perceived to be attributed to the action of leading itself (Connolly et al., 2019; Raelin, 2016;).

School C's practice of the subject selection process being driven by the HOD Careers with a commitment to getting to know students through regular one-to-one career interviews illustrates how the school is trying to promote equitable access to academic pathways irrespective of students' individual and social differences. Whilst School A valued mentoring and career guidance their organisational structure lacked the time allowance and expertise seen in School C therefore deans and tutor teachers were tasked with mentoring students. The findings showed that the quality of mentoring was not always to the standard that would truly benefit the student navigating

the subject selection process. A similar story was told at School B as their structures did not formally incorporate career guidance or mentoring and the students wondered if the pastoral deans could do more with them. With the evidence showing that the right type of support and guidance is beneficial to senior students making subject choices and preparing for future study pathways, effective leadership practice would ensure that those involved are knowledgeable and skilled so that inequities do not arise. To address the inequities experienced by students within the schools, leaders may need to challenge the "arrangements and conditions … created by (and changed by) human practices" (Fazio et al., 2024, p. 5).

The open access to subjects approach seen at Schools B and C show that the leaders are committed to removing or at least reducing, barriers to academic qualification pathways. This contrasts with the rigid prerequisite policy at School A which the findings showed this leadership practice could result in inequitable outcomes for some students. The significance of the role of HOLAs in this school draws on other research findings which showed that when effective in their leadership practices, department heads can positively impact educational outcomes to a greater extent than principals (Highfield & Woods, 2023; Leithwood, 2016). Unfortunately, some student experiences would be that the leadership of HOLAs negatively impacted educational outcomes. The goal would be to see evidence of effective leadership practices whereby curriculum leaders take responsibility for every student's success and challenge their own unconscious biases that might marginalise some students (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020; Molla & Gale, 2019).

Leaders at School A said that they have *'introduced new courses in response to student demand'* because of the regular collaborative meetings with HOLAs and SLT. A similar leadership practice at School C was evident, with HOFs being able to approach the principal to add new courses and extra classes. School B leaders admitted that currently senior leadership and curriculum leadership were not entwined and therefore they were unaware of what more they could be doing within the timetable to accommodate student educational needs and maximise equitable outcomes but identified this as an area where improvements will be made.

From the students' perspective, they valued their school's response to their wanting to change their subject selection during the course confirmation sessions and the first few weeks of Term 1. The students attributed the need to change subjects to numerous reasons ranging from being pressured or ill-advised to do subjects by teachers and parents, to knowing more about the future

study pathway they wanted to pursue and university entry requirements. The ability to change subjects at course confirmation was a practice seen at all schools in the study.

All leaders spoke to practising some degree of culturally responsive leadership. Leaders articulated their awareness of what Berryman and Eley (2017) refer to as “a disjuncture” (p. 105) between the promise of equity and excellence and the reality of experience for Māori and Pacific students within their schools. The incorporation of initiatives into the schools’ programmes to raise interest in STEM subjects and raise academic aspirations was evident. Despite leaders' recognition that it is the “discursive positions that teachers take that are key to understanding the cause of Māori [and other groups of students] achievement difficulties in our schools” (Bishop, 2019, p. 13), this study did not reveal whether leadership practices are embedded to challenge individuals’ assumptions. Literature from Hallinger and Heck (2011), Leithwood (2016) and Hargreaves and Shirley (2020) emphasise the impact of school leadership on student educational outcomes as leaders are key in influencing three key variables: school culture, academic structures and processes, and people.

This research uncovered the leadership practices within the organisational structure of the subject selection processes at each school that best promoted providing opportunities for equitable outcomes for students. The discussion of these has provided the opportunity to reflect on how leadership practices can be employed to develop organisational structures and ensure processes are functioning to maximise equitable outcomes for students.

Conclusion - Discussion of Findings

It is evident that despite school leaders' efforts to provide opportunities for equitable outcomes for all students, the organisational structures at each school can impact positively and negatively on students navigating the subject selection process.

The key findings showed that some types of support and guidance such as meeting with career advisors, university visits and being taught in a supportive learning environment can be advantageous in assisting students in making informed choices and pursuing future study pathways on leaving school. Whilst schools offered some form of mentoring and information sharing, the structure of the support and guidance systems varied and in some cases was insubstantial leaving room for other factors to influence students’ subject selection.

With the need for comprehensive support and guidance identified, other barriers preventing equitable student choice and access to future study pathways were evident. Having an awareness of the informal and formal constraints that students may face when navigating the subject selection process at their schools will help leaders maximise opportunities for equitable outcomes for all. Taking action to overcome the barriers will ensure that leaders provide all students access to a variety of academic subjects and keep doors open to future study pathways.

Having a structured process for subject selection is necessary but the ability of leaders to remain flexible was identified as advantageous to students. As Leithwood (2016) makes us aware “school leadership is the second most important influence on student achievement” (as cited in Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020, p. 92), therefore leaders must consider the ways that their decision-making can affect students as they prepare to transition from school into further study. Being aware of the leadership practices that determine the structures guiding student subject selection will help leaders shift their practice and reduce the barriers to students making subject choices and preparing for future study pathways. Viewing leadership practices through a practice architecture conceptual lens can present leaders with a structured way of thinking about the issues relating to the organisational structure of the subject selection at their schools.

The next chapter will present the conclusions of this study, outline the limitations of this research and make recommendations for practice and future research.

Chapter Six – Conclusion and Recommendations

This research aimed to examine how the organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools influence the process of student subject selection and students' access to academic qualifications. The rationale for this research stemmed from my previous extensive experience as a pastoral dean, tasked with supporting students as they navigated making subject choices in preparation for transitioning from school to university, further education or employment. My understanding is that students often face barriers arising from structural design and leadership practices which prevent them from carving out the most aspirational and beneficial pathway for them. As educators, I believe we have a responsibility to ensure "equitable and excellent outcomes" for all students, "irrespective of their … ethnicity, belief, … social or cultural background …" (MoE, 2024a, p. 1).

Through semi-structured interviews with middle and senior leaders and, Year 13 students at three Auckland-based secondary schools, the following questions were explored:

1. How are these structures enabling or constraining student choice and future study pathways?
2. To what extent are these structures equitable across individual and social differences between students? and,
3. How do leadership practices determine the structures guiding student subject selection?

In response to the research questions, the research findings summarise the organisational structures such as the design of the subject selection process, the timetable framework and some leadership practices that can present barriers to student choice and equitable educational outcomes. Supportive learning environments, within which students receive either guidance or formal career education, are beneficial in enabling students to make informed subject choices, enhancing their opportunities to enter worthwhile future pathways. Based on these findings, the implications for school leaders tasked with structuring the student subject selection process at their school will be discussed. Also included in this chapter are recommendations for future research and an overview of the limitations of this study.

A key conclusion to be drawn from this research is that the structural design of the student subject selection processes and the organisation of the timetable coupled with some of the leadership

practices of middle and senior leaders can reduce the potential for all students to experience equitable and excellent educational outcomes by the end of Year 13. Whilst the majority of school leaders in this study spoke highly of their process for Year 13 student subject selection the emphasis was on the need for a systematic process for subject selection governed by time restricted parameters within which students had to make decisions all driven by the logistics of timetable design, staffing and teacher recruitment as opposed to a system that prioritises students' needs and achievements. The leaders expressed that they were somewhat challenged by the complexities of organising large secondary schools and akin to previous research findings, recognised that the need for 'structures' in schools does create issues of inflexibility in the area of student subject choices (Brady, 2006; Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019; Illanelli & Duta, 2018; Patrick et al., 2011; Zohar & Hipkins, 2018;). Students were less focussed on the mechanics of the process, favouring or in some cases seeking, a more personalised approach to subject selection to better meet their individual needs and ensure fair access to the curriculum and potential future academic opportunities. Of significance was that the leaders reflected on the current organisational structures used to facilitate student subject selection and acknowledged that student feedback on the process was not sought which suggests that future practice may be shifted where possible to better address student needs.

When considering whether the structures underpinning student subject selection enable or constrain student choice and future study pathways this research indicates that while these structured processes can facilitate student choice and open opportunities, they also have the potential to limit and constrain them. One key finding concluded that a flexible, humanistic approach was best practice to reduce the barriers students incur when selecting Year 13 subjects and aid in prioritising equitable access to learning programmes and future study. The research highlighted that students benefit from being exposed to comprehensive career education throughout their secondary schooling journey but highlighted that resources for this type of expert education and mentoring were limited in schools. The findings suggest that in the absence of structured and informative career education and guidance, students' subject choices are more likely to be shaped by a complex interaction of psychological and social factors (Hipkins & Bolstad, 2005) which in some instances can be detrimental to them pursuing subject pathways that best suit their academic potential and aspirations beyond school. Akin to Vaughan's (2005) research findings, this study illustrates the need for the teachers involved in the subject selection process to be aware of the underlying factors that might affect students as they navigate their academic paths.

Another key point to be drawn from the research regarding students' desire for a humanistic element within the subject selection process is that students rate having effective relationships with their peers and teachers as a pivotal factor as to whether they will pursue an avenue of study. The research indications are that this is of higher importance for students of Māori and Pacific descent. It is therefore imperative that teachers and heads of curriculum areas create educational spaces where students feel safe and can increase their self-efficacy towards their academic ability and improve educational outcomes (Hallam & Ireson, 2003). This is particularly important because earlier research has demonstrated that respectful and reciprocal teacher-student relationships are essential for enhancing student achievement (Hunter et al., 2016; Kana & Aitken, 2007; Silins & Mulford, 2002). Effective educational leaders will be cognisant of this need and endeavour to create a learning environment within which all teachers reflect on and evaluate their perspectives and understanding of education and teaching practices to eradicate unconscious bias towards certain students and subsequently, place culturally responsive practice at the forefront of the educational institution (Bishop, 2019; Jerdborg, 2022).

When evaluating the leadership practices determining the structures that guide the student subject selection processes, most significance was drawn from the conclusions made by the students who in some instances viewed middle leaders such as heads of departments as the gatekeepers to subject course entry. Whilst the curriculum expertise of these curriculum leads was most valued by the senior leaders, the students expressed that they needed to feel supported on their academic journey and wanted to experience less stress when trying to navigate an appropriate programme of study for their final year of school.

Implications for Practice

Reflecting on the findings of this research study about how organisational structures influence student subject choices and access to academic qualification pathways, there are several key factors that educational leaders should consider for prioritising equitable and high-quality outcomes for all students.

Acknowledging that schools rely on organisational structures, systems and processes for effective functioning, the task for educational leaders is to place the student at the centre of the decision making by asking how a process will impact all of their students. Questioning whether the chosen process is necessary and not driven solely by the personal views of leaders could be key to

reconstructing processes that focus on providing all students with the opportunity to achieve at their highest academic level. The vision of each school should be collectively shared with leaders and teachers as well as checking for understanding of the vision and how to take action to achieve it. Regularly gathering student feedback would be beneficial in ascertaining the impact that actions have on students and the experiences they have. This would provide leaders with the opportunity to review and revise practices.

This research highlighted that both hierarchical and distributed leadership structures are used in schools and the results refer to middle and senior leaders having the power to make decisions regarding student's access to subject courses. Whilst it is recognised that processes require those involved to have clear roles, there is the risk that the leadership is solely operational. Aware of the competitive element that exists between subject departments as curriculum leaders seek to have their subject perceived as the best, leaders might consider how to place the student at the centre rather than the subject. The organisation of subjects into departments with curriculum leaders, although a popular framework, may not be the only way or the most effective organisational structure to ensure students have equitable access to subjects (Bennett et al., 2007; Highfield & Woods, 2023; James & Hopkins, 2003; Siskin, 2014; Youngs, 2014).

In a process such as student subject selection, there needs to be flexibility and scope for considering students' needs individually. Exploring ways to adapt the timetable structure, and subject offerings and utilise teacher expertise to address students' requests and meet their aspirational goals should be an ongoing process. Simply doing things one way because it has been effective in the past may not necessarily enable the current students to achieve the educational outcomes they need. Leadership practices emphasising the need for teachers involved in the student subject selection process to be aware of what may be happening beneath the surface for students making subject choices (Vaughan, 2005) can help eliminate obstacles and ensure that all students have equitable access to academic qualification pathways.

A suggestion arising from this research is that schools should incorporate the effective mentoring of students and encourage teachers and middle leaders to know their students. This will provide the opportunity for teachers to work alongside students as they navigate subject choices and plan their future pathways. Mentoring will be most effective when bolstered by a comprehensive career education and guidance programme that shapes the student's learning journey before starting their senior education years. The challenge for senior leaders is to consider how to utilise middle

leaders to effectively guide all students without bias to make subject choices that lead to equitable outcomes and access to future study pathways.

Limitations of the Research

Whilst the methodological framework for this research study was comprehensively planned and put into action, like most studies, limitations can be identified (Mutch, 2005). The first limitation to illuminate is that the research was a small-scale study involving three schools based in Auckland, New Zealand therefore the findings are not generalisable to schools across a larger demographic. The number of participants involved in the study was also limited, with interviews conducted with two or three leaders and three students per school. Although the participants were directly involved in the subject selection process, their views may not be representative of other leaders and students at the schools. A further limitation to be considered is that the participants volunteered to take part in the study either because they identified that they were leaders with a key role in the subject selection process or because they were students with a particular interest in discussing the topic. This self-selection to participate in the study may have biased the results in one direction or another. Finally, as this was an interpretative study, there was the potential for personal bias from the researcher to emerge through the analysis of the data. To minimise this, the participants viewed the transcripts from the interviews to be sure that the researcher had captured the essence of what they shared. Through thematic analysis, care was taken to interpret the findings without researcher bias and to truly reflect the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Recommendations for Further Research

As highlighted in the review of the literature in Chapter Two, there is limited research on the topic of student subject selection and more specifically, how leadership practices and organisational structures in schools impact the students' experiences of making subject choices and their access to further educational opportunities so, this would be a field for additional research to be conducted in.

Specific to the findings from this research study is that school leaders are challenged to provide equitable access to all subjects for all students given the restrictions on resources that schools have. Further investigative research on how New Zealand secondary schools accommodate student subject choices with the resources available to the schools would be worthwhile.

With this study highlighting that students from different ethnic backgrounds experience subject selection differently, often because of their parents' influence, for example, Asian and Pacific students, further research would be needed to truly know the extent to which the schools' visions and equitable educational outcomes are not being realised for students from the different groups.

In terms of how leadership is distributed across subject departments and with an overarching hierarchical framework, further research could be carried out to see if alternative leadership structures can serve student choice and educational outcomes better. It could be of value to investigate whether schools using alternative leadership formats, different to subject departmental leadership, impact differently on students' choices and educational outcomes.

Additionally, further insight is needed as to how leaders can prioritise and sustain career education and guidance for all students so that students are well informed about the academic pathways available to them.

Final Thoughts

Educational leaders in New Zealand have a collective responsibility to design and deliver curriculum programmes that contribute to equitable academic outcomes for all students. Whilst providing an array of subjects is desirable, school leaders must be sure that students' chosen pathways enable them to access further education should they decide to do so. Senior and middle leaders have an important role in designing a process for subject selection that is inclusive of all students and does not discriminate based on teachers' perceptions or assumptions, inflexible rule structures and any unreviewed logistical and resource constraints that the school may have.

This research has found that providing specific types of support and guidance can play a crucial role in helping students make informed and meaningful subject choices. However, various barriers can impede equitable outcomes for students and restrict their access to future study pathways. To address these challenges, there is a need for subject selection processes that are both

structured and flexible, ensuring consistency while also adapting to meet the diverse needs of all students. By creating an environment that balances clear guidance with adaptability, educational institutions can better support students in making choices that align with their interests and aspirations, promoting more equitable academic opportunities.

References

Adler, M. J., & Isaacs, J. E. (1983). The Paideia proposal: An educational manifesto. *Contemporary Education*, *54*(4), 314.

Alterator, S., & Deed, C. (2018). Framing innovative learning environments. In *School space and its occupation* (pp. 1-11). Brill. DOI:10.1163/9789004379664_001

Alton-Lee, A. (2015). Disciplined innovation for equity and excellence in education: Learning from Māori and Pasifika change expertise. *invited paper for the World Educational Research Association focal session: Education of Diverse Students: A Multi Country Perspective*.

Anders, J., Henderson, M., Moulton, V., & Sullivan, A. (2018). The role of schools in explaining individuals' subject choices at age 14. *Oxford Review of Education, 44*(1), 75–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2018.1409973

Athiemoolam, L., & Vermaak, A. (2021). Teaching approaches adopted by teachers in multicultural classrooms in secondary schools in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, *15*(2), 168-183. DOI: 10.1108/jme-01-2021-0003

Argyris, C. (1977). Double loop learning in organisations. *Harvard Business Review*, *55*(5), 115-125. https://hbr.org/1977/09/double-loop-learning-in-organizations

AUT. (2023). Applying for Ethics Approval: Guidelines and Procedures (AUTEC). https://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics/guidelines-and-procedures#2

Ayalon, H. (1995). Math as a gatekeeper: Ethnic and gender inequality in course taking of the sciences in Israel. *American Journal of Education*, *104*(1), 34-56. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/444115

Ayres, L. (2008). Semi-structured interview. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, *1*, 810-811. DOI:10.4135/9781412963909

Battiston, A., Hedges, S., Lazarowicz, T., & Speckesser, S. (2020). Peer effects and social influence in post-16 educational choice. *CVER Research Discussion Paper*, *25*. https://cver.lse.ac.uk/textonly/cver/pubs/cverdp025.pdf

Bennett, N., Woods, P., Wise, C., & Newton, W. (2007). Understandings of middle leadership in secondary schools: A review of empirical research. *School Leadership and Management*, *27*(5), 453-470. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701606137

Berryman, M., & Eley, E. (2017). Succeeding as Māori: Māori students' views on our stepping up to the Ka Hikitia challenge. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, *52*, 93-107. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-017-0076-1

Best, R. (1999). The impact on pastoral care of structural, organisational and statutory changes in schooling: Some empirical evidence and a discussion. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 27*(1), 55-70. https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:143688074

Biesta, G. J. (2010). Why 'what works' still won't work: From evidence-based education to value-based education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29(5), 491-503. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-010-9191-x

Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Cavanagh, T., & Teddy, L. (2009). Te kotahitanga: Addressing educational disparities facing Māori students in New Zealand. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *25*(5), 734-742. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.01.009

Bishop, R. (2019). *Teaching to the North-East: Relationship-Based Learning in Practice*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. ERIC.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2003). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Boyask, R. A., Rees, T., Gristy, C., & Knowler, H. (2014). Implications of localism in educational policy on the aspirations of young people in Cornwall. University of Plymouth. https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=pioe-research

Brady, K. (2006). Living by the clock: The tyranny of the secondary school timetable. Paper presented at AARE annual conference, Adelaide, South Australia. https://www.aare.net.au/publications/aare-conference-papers/show/4969/living-by-the-clock-the-tyranny-of-the-secondary-school-timetable

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.. https://bookshelf.vitalsource.com/books/9781526417299

Brinkman, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Brooks, R., te Riele, K., & Maguire, M. (2014). *Informed consent and reciprocity.* SAGE Publications, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473909762

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods (4th ed.)*. Oxford University Press.

Cambridge International Education. (2024). Home page. https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/cambridge-upper-secondary/cambridge-igcse/

Cardno, C. (2012). *Managing effective relationships in education*. SAGE Publications, Ltd..

Christie, P. (1998). Schools as (dis) organisations: The 'breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching' in South African schools. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *28*(3), 283-300. DOI:10.1080/0305764980280303

Clark, K. E. (2008). The pastoral academic divide: Impacts and implications for pastoral care (Master of Education). Murdoch University, Perth. https://researchportal.murdoch.edu.au/esploro/outputs/graduate/The-pastoral-academic-divide-impacts-and/991005543151607891

Clough, P., & Nutbrown, C. (2012). *A student's guide to methodology*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education (7th ed.)*. Routledge.

Connolly, M., James, C., & Fertig, M. (2019). The difference between educational management and educational leadership and the importance of educational responsibility. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 47*(4), 504-519. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217745880

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Crevani, L. (2018). Is there leadership in a fluid world? Exploring the ongoing production of direction in organizing. *Leadership, 14*(1), 83-109. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015616667

Crotty, M. J. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process.* SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Davies, S., & Guppy, N. (1997). Fields of study, college selectivity, and student inequalities in higher education. *Social forces*, *75*(4), 1417-1438. https://doi.org/10.2307/2580677

Dean, J., Roberts, P., & Perry, L. B. (2023). School equity, marketisation and access to the Australian senior secondary curriculum. *Educational Review*, *75*(2), 243-263. DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2021.1909537

Deed, C., & Lesko, T. (2015) 'Unwalling' the classroom: Teacher reaction and adaptation. *Learning Environments Research, 18*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-0159181-6

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research. (2nd ed.).* SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. Macmillan.

Dilnot, C. (2018). The relationship between A-level subject choice and league table score of university attended: the 'facilitating', the 'less suitable', and the counter-intuitive. *Oxford Review of Education, 44*(1), 118-137. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2018.1409976

Dogan, O., Cakir, M., Tillotson, J., Young, M., & Yager, R. (2020). A longitudinal study of a new science teacher's beliefs and classroom practices. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.29329/ijpe.2020.228.7

Douglas Toma, J. (2011). *Sage Research Methods*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Dryler, H. (1998). Parental role models, gender and educational choice. *British Journal of Sociology*, 375-398https://doi.org/10.2307/591389

Dugan, J. P. (2017). *Leadership theory: Cultivating critical perspectives*. Jossey-Bass.

Duneier, M. (2011). How not to lie with ethnography. *Sociological Methodology*, *41*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9531.2011.01249.x

Fazio, X., Kemmis, S., & Zugic, J. (2024). Viewing science teacher learning and curriculum enactment through the lens of theory of practice architectures. *Science Education*.

Fitzgerald, T. (2009). The tyranny of bureaucracy: continuing challenges of leading and managing from the middle. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *37*(1), 51-65. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143208098164

Fraser, J. H. (2014). *The role of the dean in the pastoral care structure of a secondary school* (Doctoral dissertation, Open Access Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington). https://openaccess.wgtn.ac.nz/articles/thesis/The_role_of_the_dean_in_the_pastoral_care_structure_of_a_secondary_school/17008003?file=31461565

French, R., Imms, W., & Mahat, M. (2020). Case studies on the transition from traditional classrooms to innovative learning environments: Emerging strategies for success. *Improving Schools*, 23(2), 175–189. https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480219894408

Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. W. (2012). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications*. Pearson.

Given, L. M. (2008). Semi-structured interview. *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*, *2*, 810-811. DOI:10.4135/9781412963909

Golafshani, N. (2002). Teachers' conceptions of mathematics and their instructional practices. *Philosophy of Mathematics Education Journal*, *18*, 1-14.

Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, *8*(4), 597-607. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2003.1870

Gonzalez Thompson, A. (1984). The relationship of teachers' conceptions of mathematics and mathematics teaching to instructional practice. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, *15*(2), 105-127. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00305892

Green, J., & Thorogood, N. (2004). *Qualitative methods in health research*. SAGE Publications, Ltd..

Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Ectj*, *29*(2), 75-91. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02766777

Guba, E. G. (Ed.). (1990). *The paradigm dialog.* Sage Publications, Inc.

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2011). *Leadership and student learning outcomes*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Hallam, S., & Ireson, J. (2003). Secondary school teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about ability grouping. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *73*(3), 343-356. https://doi.org/10.1348/000709903322275876

Hammersley, M. (2012). *What is qualitative research?* (p. 144). Bloomsbury Academic.

Hansen, M. N. (1997). Social and economic inequality in the educational career: Do the effects of social background characteristics decline? *European Sociological Review*, *13*(3), 305-321.

Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2006). *Sustainable leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. (2020). Leading from the middle: its nature, origins and importance. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 5*(1), 92-114. https://doi-org.ezproxy.aut.ac.nz/10.1108/JPCC-06-2019-0013

Harris, A. (2008). Distributed leadership: According to the evidence. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *46*(2), 172-188. DOI:10.1108/09578230810863253

Highfield, C. (2010). Disparity in student achievement within and across secondary schools: an analysis of department results in English, maths and science in New Zealand. *School Leadership and Management*, *30*(2), 171-190. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632431003685860

Highfield, C., & Woods, R. (2023). Recent Middle Leadership Research in Secondary Schools in New Zealand: 2015–2022. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-023-00304-4

Hipkins, R., & Bolstad, R. (2005). Staying in science. *Student participation in secondary education and on transition to tertiary studies. New Zealand Council for Educational Research*. Retrieved from https://www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/14606.pdf

Hipkins, R., & Vaughan, K. (2019). Subject Choice for the Future of Work: Insights from Research Literature. *New Zealand Council for Educational Research,* Retrieved from https://www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/NZC_NZCP%20-%20Research%20Literature%20Report.FINAL_.pdf.

Hoepfl, M. C. (1997). Choosing qualitative research: A primer for technology education researchers. *Journal of Technology Education, 9*(1)*)*. DOI:10.21061/jte.v9i1.a.4

Hoy, W. K., & Sweetland, S. R. (2001). Designing better schools: The meaning and measure of enabling school structures. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *37*(3), 296-321. DOI:10.1177/00131610121969334

Hudson, M., Milne, M., Reynolds, P., Russell, K., & Smith, B. (2010). Te Ara Tika: Guidelines for Māori research ethics: A framework for researchers and ethics committee members. *Auckland: Health Research Council of New Zealand*. https://www.hrc.govt.nz/resources/te-ara-tika-guidelines-maori-research-ethics-0Hunter, J.,

Hunter, R., Bills, T., Cheung, I., Hannant, B., Kritesh, K., & Lachaiya, R. (2016). Developing equity for Pāsifika learners within a New Zealand context: Attending to culture and values. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, *51*(2), 197-209. DOI:10.1007/s40841-016-0059-7

Hupkau, C., McNally, S., Ruiz-Valenzuela, J., & Ventura, G. (2017). Post-compulsory education in England: Choices and implications. *National Institute Economic Review, 240*(1), 42-57. https://doi.org/10.1177/002795011724000113

Hynds, A., Averill, R., Penetito, W., Meyer, L., Hindle, R., & Faircloth, S. (2016). Examining the impediments to indigenous strategy and approaches in mainstream secondary schools. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *19*(5), 534-556. https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:147018790

Kumar, R. (2018). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Iannelli, C., & Duta, A. (2018). Inequalities in school leavers' labour market outcomes: Do school subject choices matter? *Oxford Review of Education, 44*(1), 56–74. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2018.1409970

Illich, I. (1995). *Deschooling society*. Marion Boyars.

International Baccalaureate. (2024). Home page. https://www.ibo.org/

Jackson, P. (1979). Sources of Satisfaction. School Subjects and What Secondary School Students Think of Them. Item 13, Set No. 2, 1979. Research Information for Teachers. Retrieved from http://ovidsp.ovid.com/ovidweb.cgi?T=JS&PAGE=reference&D=eric1&NEWS=N&AN=ED190666.

Jerdborg, S. (2022). Educating school leaders: engaging in diverse orientations to leadership practice. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *25*(2), 287-309. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2020.1770867

James, C., & Hopkins, J. A. (2003). The leadership authority of educational middle managers': The case of subject leaders in secondary schools in Wales. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, *31*(1). https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/publications/the-leadership-authority-of-educational-middle-managers-the-case-

Jonsson, J. O. (1999). Explaining sex differences in educational choice an empirical assessment of a rational choice model. *European Sociological Review*, *15*(4), 391-404. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.esr.a018272

Kana, P., & Aitken, V. (2007). “She didn't ask me about my grandma” Using process drama to explore issues of cultural exclusion and educational leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *45*(6), 697-710. DOI 10.1108/09578230710829883

Katz-Buonincontro, J. (2022). *How to interview and conduct focus groups*. American Psychological Association.Kemmis, S., & Smith, T. J. (2008). *Enabling praxis.*Sense Publishers.

Kemmis, S., Wilkinson, J., Edwards-Groves, C., Hardy, I., Grootenboer, P., Bristol, L., & Bristol, L. (2014). *Praxis, practice and practice architectures. Changing practices, changing education*, 25-41. Springer Science and Business Media.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. SAGE Publications, Ltd..

Lee, V. E., Croninger, R. G., & Smith, J. B. (1997). Course-taking, equity, and mathematics learning: Testing the constrained curriculum hypothesis in US secondary schools. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *19*(2), 99-121. https://doi.org/10.2307/1164205

Leithwood, K. (2016). Department-head leadership for school improvement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *15*(2), 117-140. DOI:10.1080/15700763.2015.1044538

Lichtman, M. (2013). *Qualitative research for the social sciences*. SAGE Publications, Ltd..

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newberry Park.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2014). *Designing qualitative research*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Martin, J. L. (2023). *Cognitive Plausibility and Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Mathie, A., & Carnozzi, A. (2005). *Qualitative research. A how-to introductory manual for researchers and development practitioners.* IRDC.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Ministry of Education. (2012). Leading from the middle: Educational leadership for middle and senior leaders. https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Key-leadership-documents/Leading-from-the-middle

Ministry of Education. (2024a). Nau mai haere mai / Welcome. https://www.education.govt.nz/

Ministry of Education. (2024b). Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030. https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/action-plan-for-pacific-education/

Ministry of Education. (2024c). Education and Training Act 2020. https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/legislation/education-and-training-act-2020

Ministry of Education. (2024d). Ka Hikitia - Ka Hāpaitia. https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/ka-hikitia-ka-hapaitia/

Ministry of Education. (2024e). For parents and whānau. https://parents.education.govt.nz/secondary-school/learning-at-school/what-my-child-learns/

Ministry of Education. (2024f). Ministry funding deciles. https://parents.education.govt.nz/secondary-school/secondary-schooling-in-nz/deciles/#measure

Ministry of Education. (2024g). Our purpose. https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/our-role- and-our-people/

Ministry of Education. (2024h). Secondary schools in NZ. https://parents.education.govt.nz/secondary-school/secondary-schooling-in-nz/secondary-schools-in-nz/

Ministry of Education (2024i). The educational leadership model. https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Key-leadership-documents/Leading-from-the-middle/The-educational-leadership-model

Ministry of Education. (2024j). The Equity Index. https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/changes-in-education/equity-index/

Ministry of Education. (2024k). The role of the Ministry of Education. https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/our-role-and-our-people/what-we-do/#purpose

Ministry of Education. (2024l). The Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities. https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/the-statement-of-national-education-and-learning-priorities-nelp-and-the-tertiary-education-strategy-tes/

Moulton, V., Sullivan, A., Henderson, M., & Anders, J. (2018). Does what you study at age 14–16 matter for educational transitions post-16?. *Oxford Review of Education*, *44*(1), 94-117. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2018.1409975

Molla, T., & Gale, T. (2019). Positional matters: school leaders engaging with national equity agendas. *Journal of Education Policy*, *34*(6), 858-876. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2018.1556811

Morrison, M. & Kedian, J. (2017). In the mi[d]st of policy enactment: Leading innovative learning environments (ILEs) in New Zealand schools. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice, 32*(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.021383409039876

Murcia, K., Pepper, C., & Williams, J. (2020). Youth STEM career choices: What's influencing secondary students' decision making. *Issues in Educational Research*, *30*(2), 593-611. http://www.iier.org.au/iier30/murcia-abs.html

Mutch, C. (2005). *Doing educational research: A practitioner's guide to getting started*. NZCER Press.

New Zealand Curriculum. (2024). The New Zealand Curriculum. https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum

New Zealand Legislation. (2024). The Education and Training Act 2020. https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS170676.html

Niemiec, C. P., & Ryan, R. M. (2009). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice. *Theory and Research in Education, 7*(2), 133-144. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878509104318

Noddings, N. (2013). *Education and democracy in the 21st century*. Teachers College Press.

NZQA. (2024). About NCEA. https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/about-ncea/

Oakes, J. (1992). Educational matchmaking: Academic and vocational tracking in comprehensive high schools. *National Centre for Research in Vocational Education.* University of Berkley, California. https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R4189.html

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2013*). Innovative learning environments.* OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264203488-3-en

Oxford Languages. (2024). https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/

Padilla-Díaz, M. (2015). Phenomenology in educational qualitative research: Philosophy as science or philosophical science. *International Journal of Educational Excellence*, *1*(2), 101-110. DOI:10.18562/IJEE.2015.0009

Palaganas, E. C., Sanchez, M. C., Molintas, M. P., & Caricativo, R. D. (2017). Reflexivity in Qualitative Research: A Journey of Learning. The Qualitative Report, 22(2), 426-438. https://doi.org/10.46743/ 2160-3715/2017.2552

Pan, H. L. W., & Chen, W. Y. (2024). Unpacking the linkages between beliefs and behavioural intention for curriculum reform: A cognitive approach for school middle leaders. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*.DOI:10.1177/17411432231223793

Patrick, L., Care, E., & Ainley, M. (2011). The relationship between vocational interests, self-efficacy, and achievement in the prediction of educational pathways. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *19*(1), 61–74. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072710382615

Perry, L. B., & Southwell, L. (2014). Access to academic curriculum in Australian secondary schools: A case study of a highly marketised education system. *Journal of Education Policy*, *29*(4), 467-485. DOI:10.1080/02680939.2013.846414

Polit D. S. & Beck C. T. (2010) *Essentials of Nursing Research. Appraising Evidence for Nursing Practice*. 7th ed. Lippincott-Raven Publishers.

Politis, Y., Killeavy, M., & Mitchell, P. I. (2007). Factors influencing the take-up of physics within second-level education in Ireland—the teachers' perspective. *Irish Educational Studies*, *26*(1), 39-55. DOI:10.1080/03323310601125229

Raelin, J. (Ed.). (2016). *Leadership-as-practice: Theory and application*. Routledge.

Reich, Y. (2017). The principle of reflexive practice. *Design Science*, *3*(4). https://doi.org/10.1017/dsj.2017.3

Saltmarsh, S., Chapman, A., Campbell, M., & Drew, C. (2015). Putting "structure within the space": Spatially un/responsive pedagogic practices in open-plan learning environments. *Educational Review, 67*(3), 315–327. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2014.924482

Schwandt, T. A., Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2007). Judging interpretations: But is it rigorous? trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New directions for evaluation*, *2007*(114). https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.223

Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: Relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. *English language teaching*, *5*(9), 9-16. http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n9p9

Seale, C. (2004). Quality in qualitative research. In *Qualitative Research Practice* (pp. 379-389). SAGE Publications Ltd, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608191

Seashore Louis, K., Dretzke, B., & Wahlstrom, K. (2010). How does leadership affect student achievement? Results from a national US survey. *School effectiveness and school improvement*, *21*(3), 315-336. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2010.486586

Sheppard, B. (1996). Exploring the transformational nature of instructional leadership. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, XLII*(4), 325-344. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234599554_Exploring_the_Transformational_Nature_of_Instructional_Leadership

Shernoff, D. J., Tonks, S. M., & Anderson, B. (2014). The impact of the learning environment on student engagement in high school classrooms. *Teachers College Record*, *116*(13), 166-177. DOI:10.1177/016146811411601315

Simmons, A. N. (2008). A reliable sounding board: Parent involvement in students' academic and career decision making. *NACADA Journal*, *28*(2), 33-43. DOI:10.12930/0271-9517-28.2.33

Siskin, L. S. (2014). *Realms of knowledge: Academic departments in secondary schools*. Routledge.

Silins, H., & Mulford, B. (2002). Leadership and school results. In *Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration*, 561-612. Springer.

Skerritt, C., McNamara, G., Quinn, I., O'hara, J., & Brown, M. (2023). Middle leaders as policy translators: prime actors in the enactment of policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, *38*(4), 567-585. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2021.2006315

Small, M. L., & Calarco, J. M. (2022). *Qualitative literacy: A guide to evaluating ethnographic and interview research*. University of California Press.

Smyth, E., & Hannan, C. (2006). School effects and subject choice: The uptake of scientific subjects in Ireland. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *17*(3), 303-327. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243450600616168

Swinson, J. (2010). Working with a secondary school to improve social relationships, pupil behaviour, motivation and learning. *Pastoral Care in Education, 28*(3), 181-194. doi:10.1080/02643944.2010.504221

Teaching Council Aotearoa NZ. (2023). Values – Uara. https://teachingcouncil.nz/professional-practice/our-code-our-standards/

Te Kura. (2024). https://www.tekura.school.nz/

Teranishi, R. T. (2002). Asian Pacific Americans and critical race theory: An examination of school racial climate. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *35*(2), 144-154. https://doi.org/10.1080/713845281

Tertiary Education Commission. (2024). *Transitions from secondary school research report*. https://www.tec.govt.nz/focus/our-focus/transitions-from-secondary-school

Terzi, L. (2020). On educational excellence. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, *27*(2), 92-105. https://doi.org/10.7202/1074040ar.

Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analysing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *27*(2), 237-246. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748

Thomson, P., Hall, C., Earl, L., & Geppert, C. (2020). Subject choice as everyday accommodation/resistance: Why students in England (still) choose the arts. *Critical Studies in Education*, *61*(5), 545-560. DOI:10.1080/17508487.2018.1525754

University of Auckland. (2018). Starpath project. https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/education/research/research-networks-and-groups/starpath-project.html

Vaughan, K. (2005). The pathways framework meets consumer culture: Young people, careers and commitment. *Journal of Youth Studies, 8*(2), 173–186. https://library.nzcer.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-retrieve-file.pl?id=641967758e64

Van de Werfhorst, H. G., De Graaf, N. D., & Kraaykamp, G. (2001). Intergenerational resemblance in field of study in the Netherlands. *European Sociological Review*, *17*(3), 275-293. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/esr/17.3.275

Van de Werfhorst, H. G., Sullivan, A., & Cheung, S. Y. (2003). Social class, ability and choice of subject in secondary and tertiary education in Britain. *British Educational Research Journal*, *29*(1), 41-62. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192032000057366

Wall, C. (2019). *Self-efficacy in the Classroom: A Socio-cultural Perspective on the Contributing and Detracting Factors* (Doctoral dissertation, Auckland University of Technology).

Wilkinson, J., & Kemmis, S. (2015). Practice theory: Viewing leadership as leading. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 47*(4), 342-358. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2014.976928

Wilkinson, J. (2021). *Educational leadership through a practice lens*. Springer.

Williams, L., Venville, G., & Gordon, S. (2013). The appearance of equity in understandings of academic excellence. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *62*, 11-20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2013.06.001

Wright, L. (2008). Merits and limitations of distributed leadership: Experiences and understandings of school principals. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, (69). https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:54940645

Wright, N., Thompson, T., & Horne, T. (2021). Talking spaces: Architects and educators. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, *56*(1), 45-59. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-021-00193-5

Wylie, C., & Coblentz, D. (2022). *Teaching, School, and Principal Leadership Practices Survey: Aggregate Picture 2021*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Youngs, H. (2014). Moving beyond distributed leadership to distributed forms: A contextual and socio-cultural analysis of two New Zealand secondary schools. *Leading and Managing*, *20*(2), 88-103. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.036860147564451

Zohar, A., & Hipkins, R. (2018). How “tight/loose” curriculum dynamics impact the treatment of knowledge in two national contexts. *Curriculum Matters, 14*, 31–47. http://dx.doi.org/10.18296/cm.0028

Appendices

Appendix 1

MIDDLE AND SENIOR LEADERS SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interviewer introduction, thank you and purpose (2 minutes)

Tēnā koe. My name is Emma Jones and I'd like to thank you for taking the time to be part of this research. The focus of the interview is to gain your opinions regarding how the organisational structures at your school (as a representation of secondary schools in New Zealand) impact on how student subject selection occurs and how these structures may be enabling or constraining student choice and future study pathways.

This interview should take a maximum of 45 mins.

General questions (10 minutes)

- Can you provide an overview of the typical structure and processes in place at your school for student subject selection?

Specific questions (30 minutes)

- Are the processes for subject selection the same/different for all students? Why/why not?
- Are selection processes fit for students from all backgrounds?
- If so, how does the school ensure that subject selection processes are fair and equitable for all students?
- If not, in what circumstances are the selection processes not fair to students?
- What are some of the things that might limit student subject selection?
- Which of these come from the school?
- Are there any other factors at play that might limit students' subject selection?
- Are there any instances where students feel pressured to choose certain subjects due to external factors like societal expectations?

- Are there any instances where students feel pressured to choose certain subjects due to external factors like future job prospects?
- How does the school address this?
- Are there any initiatives in place to encourage underrepresented groups to consider a wider range of subjects, especially those that might not be traditionally associated with their demographic?
- How does the school gather feedback on the student subject selection process from students? parents and teachers about the subject selection process?
- How does the school gather feedback on the student subject selection process from parents?
- How does the school gather feedback on the student subject selection process from teachers?
- Are there any plans to evolve the current structures or processes for subject selection in the future? What factors might drive these changes?
- What changes would you like to see happen?
- Is there anything else you would like to add relating to the student subject selection process?

Closing (2 minutes)

Thank you for coming today and discussing this topic. Your insight and opinion have given me an excellent insight into the structures at your structure that determine how student subject selection occurs in relation to your school.

Appendix 2

YEAR 13 STUDENTS SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interviewer introduction, thank you and purpose (2 minutes)

Tēnā koe. My name is Emma Jones and I'd like to thank you for taking the time to be part of this research. The focus of the interview is to gain your opinions regarding how the organisational structures at your school (as a representation of secondary schools in New Zealand) impact on how student subject selection occurs and how these structures may be enabling or constraining student choice and future study pathways.

This interview should take a maximum of 45 mins.

General question (10 minutes)

- Can you provide an overview of how student subject selection occurs at your school?

Specific questions (30 minutes)

- Are the processes for subject selection the same/different for all students? Why/why not?
- Have you ever felt pressured to choose certain subjects?
- What caused you to feel this pressure?
- Did the school help you to navigate this pressure and support you to make informed decisions in the subject selection process?
- Have you been encouraged to take particular subjects or know that some of your friends have been targeted to pick subjects?
- If yes, do you know why you were encouraged to select the subjects?
- How do students usually approach subject selections? What factors tend to influence their choices?

- What role do teachers, deans, careers advisors and parents play in guiding students' subject selection? How do they help students make informed decisions?
- Are there any particular challenges students commonly face when deciding on their subjects? How are these challenges addressed by the school?
- Does the school provide flexibility for students to change their selected subjects if the student realises that their initial choices aren't suitable? How is the process handled?
- How does your chosen combination of subjects impact your future academic and career opportunities, particular in relation to university admissions or job prospects?

Closing (2 minutes)

Thank you for coming today and discussing this topic. Your insight and opinion have given me an excellent insight into the structures at your structure that determine how student subject selection occurs in relation to your school.

Appendix 3

Principal Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced: 04/11/2023

Project Title

An investigation of how organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools impact on student subject selection and their access to academic qualification pathways.

AUTEC approval no. 23/272

An Invitation

Tēnā koe. My name is Emma Jones, and I am a Deputy Principal at Howick College, Auckland, NZ. I am currently halfway through my studies to complete a Master of Education at AUT – Auckland University of Technology and am writing a thesis to complete the degree. Within this research study I am trying to find out whether students have fair access to Level 3 NCEA subjects through the schools' subject selection processes. You have been invited to participate in the research because you are a Principal of a New Zealand secondary school.

What is the purpose of this research?

This study explores how organisational structures at New Zealand secondary schools impact on how student subject selection occurs. It is hoped that this investigation will help me, and others, understand how educational leaders can better assist students in selecting Level 3 NCEA subjects and fulfil their aspirations. The study will involve the middle and senior leaders involved with the subject selection process at three secondary schools and a purposefully selected sample of three Year 13 students from each school. The participants in the study will be required to partake in semi-structured interview sessions.

The conclusion of the research will be the submission of a 90pt thesis to complete a Master of Education degree. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Your school has been identified to participate in this study as it is situated in Auckland. This study will investigate the structures at three Auckland secondary schools. For this research study I require two leaders per school who are involved in some way in the process of student subject selection at your kura. I will also require three Year 13 students. Should I receive more acceptances than I require I shall select on a first come first served basis.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you are interested in participating in the research, please sign the Permission to Access form and return it in an email to me, emma.jones@howick.school.nz. For further information you may call me on (number redacted). I will be in contact to arrange a mutually agreed time to meet with you and finalise the plan for the research to take place. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used.

However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible. As the Principal of the school, I will require you to sign the Permission to Access form and all participants will need to complete a Consent Form.

What will happen in this research?

If you agree for your school to be part of this research, I will arrange a time to meet with you to finalise the plan for the research. I will require you to distribute the Staff Information Sheet to the middle and senior leaders who are involved in the student subject selection processes at the school. I will also require you to assist me with arranging a preliminary one-hour meeting with the Year 13 Dean to arrange for the students to be invited to participate in the research. Your permission is required to enable the Dean to distribute the Student Information Sheets to the Year 13 students inviting them to participate in the research. In summary, I will require two one-hour slots to interview two staff members involved in determining the structure of the student subject selection process at your school and three one-hour slots to interview three Year 13 students about their timetable and experience of the subject selection process. Meetings and interviews would take place on your school site. Indicative interview questions will be provided to the participants prior to the interview date. Light refreshments will be provided during the interview session. During the interview the staff and students do not have to answer a question that they do not want to. The interview will be recorded and transcribed afterwards. The qualitative data collected will be used in the findings section of my thesis to be submitted. The thesis is to complete a Master of Education degree.

What are the discomforts and risks?

The discomforts and risks associated with participating in this research are minimal. But participants will need to assign one hour of their time, preferably in a non-contact period. They must be sure that they can afford this time away from their normal routine and responsibilities. I am aware that in the interview I may ask them questions about their experience of the student subject selection process that may cause some discomfort if they feel that they are questioning or discounting current leadership practices by stating their viewpoint. There is the risk that other people from the school may link the findings to those interviewed as the sample size is small.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

I commit to creating a safe environment where participants feel confident to share their thoughts and feelings about their experiences without fear of judgement.

What are the benefits?

The benefits of this research are that a change in educational leadership practices may occur to ensure that students have equitable access to subject pathways. School leaders may use self-reflection as a tool for refining their own practice. As a researcher I will benefit by completing the research study and thesis to gain the Master of Education qualification.

How will my privacy be protected?

The interviews will take place in a private space and will be with the researcher and the participant. Neither the participant's name nor the school's name will be reported in the findings. However, there is the risk that other people from the school may link the findings to those who were interviewed (should they be aware of who participated in the research) as the sample size is small therefore complete privacy and confidentiality cannot be assured.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

It is intended that the interviews will take one hour to complete. The participants' time commitment to this research is most appreciated.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

As Principal you will be given up to two weeks to consider this invitation although please be aware that I will send a follow up email after one week to ensure that you have received the invitation to participate in the research. The same will apply when inviting participants to participate.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Once I have transcribed your interview, you will be provided the opportunity to read the transcription and agree for me to include it in the reporting of the findings. At the conclusion of the research study, I will provide you with a summary of the findings. The same process will be for the participants in the interviews.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Associate Professor Ruth Boyask, ruth.boyask@aut.ac.nz, (number redacted).

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (number redacted).

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Permission to Access form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Mrs Emma Jones, emma.jones@howick.school.nz, (number redacted).

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Associate Professor Ruth Boyask, ruth.boyask@aut.ac.nz, (number redacted).

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *28/11/2023*
AUTEC Reference number 23/272.

Appendix 4

Staff Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced: 20/08/2023

Project Title

An investigation of how organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools impact on student subject selection and their access to academic qualification pathways.

AUTEC approval no. 23/272

An Invitation

Tēnā koe. My name is Emma Jones, and I am a Deputy Principal at Howick College, Auckland, NZ. I am currently halfway through my studies to complete a Master of Education at AUT – Auckland University of Technology and am writing a thesis to complete the degree. Within this research study I am trying to find out whether students have fair access to Level 3 NCEA subjects through the schools' subject selection processes. You have been invited to participate in the research because you are a middle or senior leader involved in determining the student subject selection process at your school.

What is the purpose of this research?

This study explores how organisational structures at New Zealand secondary schools impact on how student subject selection occurs. It is hoped that this investigation will help me, and others, understand how educational leaders can better assist students in selecting Level 3 NCEA subjects and fulfil their aspirations. The study will involve the middle and senior leaders involved with the subject selection process at three secondary schools and a purposefully selected sample of three Year 13 students from each school. The participants in the study will be required to partake in semi-structured interview sessions.

The conclusion of the research will be the submission of a 90pt thesis to complete a Master of Education degree. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

If you are a middle or senior leader within the school, you were identified as a potential participant in this research by your Principal or Associate Principal. You have been invited to participate in this research as you are involved in some way in the process of student subject selection at your kura. For this research study I require two school leaders per school. Should I receive more acceptances than I require I shall select on a first come first served basis.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you are interested in participating in the research, please email me, emma.jones@howick.school.nz. For further information you may call me on (number redacted). I will be in contact to arrange a mutually agreed time for the interviews to take place. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible. All participants will need to complete a consent form.

What will happen in this research?

As a participant in this research, I will arrange a time to interview you about your experience of the student subject selection process at your school and the leadership practices that determine the structures that are in place (indicative interview questions will be provided prior to the interview date). The interviews will take place at your school and will take approximately one hour to complete. Light refreshments will be provided during the interview session. During the interview you do not have to answer a question if you do not want to. The interview will be recorded and transcribed afterwards. The qualitative data collected will be used in the findings section of my thesis to be submitted. The thesis is to complete a Master of Education degree.

What are the discomforts and risks?

The discomforts and risks associated with participating in this research are minimal. But, in order to participate you will need to assign one hour of your time, preferably in a non-contact period. You must be sure that you can afford this time away from your normal routine and responsibilities. I am aware that in the interview I may ask you questions about your experience of the student subject selection process that may cause some discomfort if you feel that you are questioning or discounting current leadership practices by stating your viewpoint. There is the risk that other people from the school may link the findings to those interviewed as the sample size is small.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

I commit to creating a safe environment where you as a participant feel confident to share your thoughts and feelings about your experiences without fear of judgement.

What are the benefits?

The benefits of this research are that a change in educational leadership practices may occur to ensure that students have equitable access to subject pathways. School leaders may use self-reflection as a tool for refining their own practice. As a researcher I will benefit by completing the research study and thesis to gain the Master of Education qualification.

How will my privacy be protected?

The interviews will take place in a private space and will be with the researcher and you as the participant. Neither your name nor the school's name will be reported in the findings. However, there is the risk that other people from the school may link the findings to those who were interviewed (should they be aware of your participation in the research) as the sample size is small therefore complete privacy and confidentiality cannot be assured.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

It is intended that the interviews will take one hour to complete. Your time commitment to this research is most appreciated.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will be given up to two weeks to consider this invitation although please be aware that I will send a follow up email after one week to ensure that you have received the invitation to participate in the research.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Once I have transcribed your interview, you will be provided the opportunity to read the transcription and agree for me to include it in the reporting of the findings. At the conclusion of the research study, I will provide you with a summary of the findings.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Associate Professor Ruth Boyask, ruth.boyask@aut.ac.nz, (number redacted).

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, *ethics@aut.ac.nz*, (number redacted).

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Mrs Emma Jones, emma.jones@howick.school.nz, (number redacted).

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Associate Professor Ruth Boyask, ruth.boyask@aut.ac.nz, (number redacted).

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *28/11/2023*

AUTEC Reference number 23/272.

Appendix 5

Student Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced: 20/08/2023

Project Title

An investigation of how organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools impact on student subject selection and their access to academic qualification pathways.

AUTEC approval no. 23/272

An Invitation

Tēnā koe. My name is Emma Jones, and I am a Deputy Principal at Howick College, Auckland, NZ. I am currently halfway through my studies to complete a Master of Education at AUT – Auckland University of Technology and am writing a thesis to complete the degree. Within this research study I am trying to find out whether students have fair access to Level 3 NCEA subjects through the schools' subject selection processes. You have been invited to participate in the research because you are a Year 13 student who has experienced the student subject selection process at your school.

What is the purpose of this research?

This study explores how organisational structures at New Zealand secondary schools impact on how student subject selection occurs. It is hoped that this investigation will help me, and others, understand how educational leaders can better assist students in selecting Level 3 NCEA subjects and fulfil their aspirations. The study will involve the middle and senior leaders involved with the subject selection process at three secondary schools and a purposefully selected sample of three Year 13 students from each school. The participants in the study will be required to partake in semi-structured interview sessions.

The conclusion of the research will be the submission of a 90pt thesis to complete a Master of Education degree. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

As a Year 13 student you have self-identified that you would like to participate in this research as you meet one of the following criteria: i) a student who is following their desired programme, ii) a student who is satisfied with their subject selection but with some hesitation and iii) a student who is not studying their preferred programme. For the research study I require three students from each school. Should I receive more acceptances than I require I shall select on a first come first served basis.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you are interested in participating in the research, please email me, emma.jones@howick.school.nz. For further information you may call me on (number redacted). I will be in contact to arrange a mutually agreed time for the interviews to take place. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible. All participants will need to complete a consent form.

What will happen in this research?

As a participant in this research, I will arrange a time to interview you about your experience of the student subject selection process at your school and the leadership practices that determine the structures that are in place (indicative interview questions will be provided prior to the interview date). The interviews will take place at your school and will take approximately one hour to complete. Light refreshments will be provided during the interview session. During the interview you do not have to answer a question that you do not want to. The interview will be recorded and transcribed afterwards. The qualitative data collected will be used in the findings section of my thesis to be submitted. The thesis is to complete a Master of Education degree.

What are the discomforts and risks?

The discomforts and risks associated with participating in this research are minimal. But, in order participate you will need to assign one hour of your time, preferably in one of your study periods. You must be sure that you can afford this time away from your normal routine and responsibilities. I am aware that in the interview I may ask you questions about your experience of the student subject selection process that may cause some discomfort if you feel that you are questioning or discounting the teachers and leaders at your school by stating your viewpoint. There is the risk that other people from the school may link the findings to those interviewed as the sample size is small.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

I commit to creating a safe environment where you as a participant feel confident to share your thoughts and feelings about your experiences without fear of judgement.

What are the benefits?

The benefits of this research are that a change in educational leadership practices may occur to ensure that students have equitable access to subject pathways. School leaders may use self-reflection as a tool for refining their own practice. As a researcher I will benefit by completing the research study and thesis to gain the Master of Education qualification.

How will my privacy be protected?

The interviews will take place in a private space and will be with the researcher and you as the participant. Neither your name nor the school's name will be reported in the findings. However, there is the risk that other people from the school may link the findings to those who were interviewed (should they be aware of your participation in the research) as the sample size is small therefore complete privacy and confidentiality cannot be assured.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

It is intended that the interviews will take one hour to complete. Your time commitment to this research is most appreciated.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will be given up to two weeks to consider this invitation although please be aware that I will send a follow up email after one week to ensure that you have received the invitation to participate in the research.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Once I have transcribed your interview, you will be provided the opportunity to read the transcription and agree for me to include it in the reporting of the findings. At the conclusion of the research study, I will provide you with a summary of the findings.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Associate Professor Ruth Boyask, ruth.boyask@aut.ac.nz, (number redacted).

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, *ethics@aut.ac.nz*, (number redacted).

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Mrs Emma Jones, emma.jones@howick.school.nz, (number redacted).

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Associate Professor Ruth Boyask, ruth.boyask@aut.ac.nz, (number redacted).

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *28/11/2023*

AUTEC Reference number 23/272.

Appendix 6

Dear Principal / Presiding Member

Re: Permission to access your school for research purposes (AUTEC approval no. 23/272)

I am studying for a master's degree in education at AUT and writing a thesis to complete my studies. The title of the research is *'An investigation of how organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools impact on student subject selection and their access to academic qualifications.'* This research requires me to investigate the organisational structures at three Auckland secondary schools therefore I am requesting permission to access your school to conduct my research. I have attached the Principal Information Sheet to provide you witha detailed insight into what the research will entail. In summary, I will require two one-hour slots to interview twostaff members involved in determining the structure of the student subject selection process at your school and three one-hour slots to interview three Year 13 students about their timetable and experience of the subject selection process. I will also need a preliminary one-hour meeting with the Year 13 Dean to arrange for the students to be invited to participate in the research. Meetings and interviews would take place on your school site.

If you are happy to provide permission for me to access your school to conduct this research, please sign and return the attached form to emma.jones@howick.school.nz. Once permission to access your school is granted, I will arrange a time to meet with you.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my research proposal.

Yours sincerely, Emma Jones

Appendix 7

Permission for Researchers to Access Organisation / Staff / Students

Project title: **An investigation of how organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools impact on student subject selection and their access to academic qualifications.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr. Ruth Boyask**

Researcher: **Emma Jones**

◻ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 04/11/2023

◻ I give permission for the researcher to undertake research within _____

◻ I give permission for the researcher to access the staff / students / employees of _____

Principal's name: .....……

Principal's CEO / Presiding Member Contact Details (if appropriate):

……..

……..

Signature: ……

Date: ……

Note: The head of the organisation should retain a copy of this form.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *28/11/2023*

AUTEC Reference number 23/272.

Appendix 8

Participant Consent Form

Project title: ***An investigation of how organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools impact on student subject selection and their access to academic qualification pathways.***

Project Supervisor: ***Dr Ruth Boyask*** *Researcher:* ***Emma Jones***

◇ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 20/08/2023.

◇ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

◇ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

◇ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.

◇ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.

◇ I agree to take part in this research.

◇ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes◇ No◇

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate): .....

Date: .....

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *28/11/2023*

AUTEC Reference number 23/272.

Appendix 9

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

28 November 2023

Ruth Boyask - Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Ruth
Re Ethics Application: 23/272 An investigation of how organisational structures in New Zealand secondary schools impact on student subject selection and their access to academic qualification pathways.

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 15 November 2026.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Inclusion of the AUT logo on the Principal Information Sheet and the AUTEC approval number.

Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEC unless requested but must be completed before commencing your study.
Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.
All forms are available online http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics
For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz
The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: emma.jones@email redacted; Ruth Boyask

BLANK PAGE