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# **Choosing a career: Why not nursing?**

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

**degree of**

**Master of Philosophy**

**in**

**Nursing**

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## **Abstract**

In today's society, young people have many different opportunities for career choices. Nursing is a career that could offer many challenges and rewards to young people, yet most do not choose a career in nursing. This research project aims to explore how young people make career decisions and why young people might choose or reject nursing as a career choice. The literature suggests that the process of decision-making for young people is a complex multi faceted process that is influenced by predisposing factors such as their family, gender, culture and society, their ability to search for career options and the choices available to them. Young people's career decision-making in relation to nursing also seems to be influenced by these factors.

A qualitative descriptive research design was chosen for this research in order to bring the views of the participants to the forefront. Thirty four young people from two local colleges and a church group volunteered to participate in focus group interviews to discuss how they made career decisions and their perceptions of nursing as a career choice. Five focus groups were conducted including two single gender groups as well as three mixed gender groups. The majority of the participants identified as either Maori or Pasifika ethnicity. Data analysis was undertaken using thematic analysis to identify codes, categories and themes. Data analysis software called NVivo 7(QSR International, 2006) was used to aid in organising the data.

The career decision-making process described by Leach and Zepke (2005) was used as a model to present the findings. The findings suggest that in the *predisposition stage*, it is crucial to provide culturally appropriate advice and support to parents because of the key role they have in the young person's career decision. In the *search stage*, it is important that young people make positive connections with role models and mentors and are supported in exploring their career interests and aspirations within the educational environment. In the *choices stage*, young people should be aided in developing a career pathway. Finally the profile of nursing needs to be raised across all three stages of the career decision-making process. Addressing gender stereotypes held by both male and female young people as well as by parents, the educational environments and the community seems crucial in order to develop nursing as an attractive career option for young people.

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I would like to thank my colleagues and the Management of Whitireia Community Polytechnic for their ongoing support as I have undertaken this research project in order to complete my Master's study. This has included financial support from the Faculty of Health, Education and Social Sciences Research Committee as well some time to complete this project along side my work commitments. I have appreciated the support and interest of colleagues who have listened to me talking about the project and who have offered me critical advice and feedback.

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**Just a Nurse**  
**By Suzanne Gordon**

I'm *just a nurse*. I just make the difference between life and death.

I'm *just a nurse*. I just have the educated eyes that prevent medical errors, injuries and other catastrophes.

I'm *just a nurse*. I just make the difference between healing and coping, and despair.

I'm *just a nurse*. I just make the difference between pain and comfort.

I'm *just a nurse*. I'm just a nurse researcher who helps nurses and doctors give better, safer, and more effective care.

I'm *just a nurse*. I'm just a professor of nursing who educates future generations of nurses.

I'm *just a nurse*. I just work in a major teaching hospital managing and monitoring patients who are involved in cutting edge experimental research.

I'm *just a nurse*. I just educate patients and families about how to maintain their health.

I'm *just a nurse*. I'm just a geriatric nurse practitioner who makes a difference between an elderly person staying in his own home or going into a nursing home.

I'm *just a nurse*. I just make the difference between dying in agony and dying in comfort and with dignity.

I'm *just a nurse*. I'm just the real bottom-line in health care.

Wouldn't you like to be *just a nurse* too?

(Buresh & Gordon, 2006, p. 277)

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

In today's society, young people have many different opportunities for career choices. As Gordon's poem (p. vii) suggests, nursing is a career that could offer many challenges and rewards to young people, yet most do not choose a career in nursing. This research project aims to explore how young people make career decisions and why young people might choose or reject nursing as a career choice. The KPMG<sup>1</sup> Consulting (2001) report commissioned by the Nursing Council of New Zealand identified the issues of recruitment in nursing and promotion of the positive aspects of a career in nursing as a worldwide challenge. In 2002, the Nursing Council undertook a workforce survey that found that like many other countries, the nursing workforce in New Zealand is ageing with 1/3 of the actively practicing registered nurses between 40 and 50 years old (Ministry of Health, 2003). Nursing programmes also have a minority of students entering nursing who are under the age of twenty years. Brown and Matthews's (2003) study survey of student nurses found that only 13% of the students surveyed were less than twenty years of age and nearly 33% were aged 40 and over.

As well as an ageing workforce, New Zealand has an ageing population. Population ageing is a worldwide phenomenon in developed countries resulting from a shift from moderately high mortality and high fertility rates in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s to current moderately low mortality and low fertility rates (Dunstan & Thomson, 2006). By 2021, the predicted New Zealand population of people aged 65 years and over will constitute 22% of the NZ European population, 9% of the Asian population, 8% of the Māori population and 6% of the Pasifika population (Statistics NZ, 2006). This has increased from a total of 12% of people over 65 years in the total population in 1999. Older people typically need more health services than younger people. With an ageing workforce and an ageing population overall it is desirable to encourage younger people in careers in nursing (Marriner Tomey, Schwier, Marticke & May, 1996).

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<sup>1</sup>KPMG in New Zealand are part of an international network of professional services firms that provide auditing services with an industry focus (KPMG New Zealand, 2007).

## **Researcher's background and interests**

My interest in understanding how young people make career choices and why young people choose or reject nursing as a career choice stems from my work as a nurse educator. I have been working in nursing education for more than fifteen years and have been actively involved in the recruitment of people into nursing. One of the reasons that I chose nursing education as a career choice was my belief in the value of the role of the nurse in the health care environment and also in the value of nursing as a career choice.

I began my career in nursing education at Whitireia Community Polytechnic, which caters to mainly second chance learners and mature students. I became involved in the selection process for applicants and enjoyed meeting with potential students and exploring their perceptions around nursing as a career choice. Young people, especially school leavers, were a minority of enrolments and brought an interesting and exciting perspective to the programme that was dominated by a more mature student group of mainly mothers aiming to return to the workforce.

Whitireia Community Polytechnic particularly has a responsibility to the recruitment of Māori and Pasifika young peoples, as this is the community that the polytechnic serves. In the Porirua community 28% of the population identify as Pasifika and 20% as Māori and 28% of the total population are under the age of 15 years (Statistics NZ, 2001). In New Zealand, in the next 10 to 15 years the Pasifika population leaving school will be an important economic resource in society as they will form a larger portion of the workforce (Southwick, 2004). It is also predicted that the aged population of Māori and Pasifika in the Porirua community will increase substantially in the next 15 years. By 2021, the Māori population aged 65 and over is projected to number 56,000, compared with 20,000 in 2001. By comparison, the Pacific population aged 65 and over is projected to increase from 9,000 to 26,000 (Dunstan & Thomson, 2006).

In order to help address the health workforce shortage and to meet the demands of the aging population in the Porirua community, Southwick (2004) believes that there is a need to encourage Pasifika young people into sciences and ensure they have the entry criteria necessary to enter into the health workforce environment. "Bioscience (an

integration of anatomy, physiology, microbiology, genetics, pathophysiology and pharmacology” is seen as a core subject in nursing curriculum (van Rooyen, Dixon, Dixon & Wells, 2006, p. 593). A recent study by van Rooyen et al. (2006) linked a bioscience related entry criteria for nursing to higher performance in the bionursing papers in their nursing programme. Although not all nursing programmes require a science paper as part of their entry criteria, the bioscience component is a requirement of the Nursing Council of New Zealand for the Undergraduate Curriculum (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2005). At a Health Workforce Advisory workshop, it was reported that there had been little improvement in Māori and Pasifika students' undertaking of science subjects, or an improvement in their results in science subjects at secondary school, in the past 20 years (Encouraging Māori, 2005). This group believes that the limited numbers of students studying science at secondary school has affected the numbers going on to study health and science at tertiary level, and has also impacted on the number of Māori and Pasifika peoples in the health workforce (Encouraging Māori, 2005).

In 2005, the issues related to the international nursing shortage and the aging nursing workforce became important issues in our region. I was asked to join a collaborative initiative with the local district health board (Capital and Coast District Health Board) and a youth transition programme (Partners Porirua) to work together to raise the profile of health careers for young people in our area. We began with a breakfast meeting to which we had invited careers advisors, and principals from local colleges. Whilst we had a very small turnout at this initial meeting, we were encouraged by those attending who said that they would welcome support and information regarding career choices for young people in relation to health. From this meeting, a collaborative partnership developed between the three organisations with the aim of working together to achieve our goals of encouraging young people (especially Māori and Pasifika) to undertake health and science subjects at school and to consider health careers including nursing.

As I began working with the young people through the project and through careers expos and career's information evenings, I was struck by the lack of knowledge or interest that the young people had in relation to nursing as a career choice. I became interested in gaining a better understanding of how these young people made decisions regarding their career choice and particularly why they might choose or reject nursing.

## **The research aims**

The aims of this research study were to explore how young people make career choices and why young people choose or reject nursing as a career choice. For the purpose of this research, young people were defined as aged 16 to 18 years. A further aim of this study was to provide information from this study back to participants and their community in an accessible manner. A newsletter summary of the research findings and recommendations will be made available to all participants and their communities. These communities include the school environment and the church setting from which the participants were sought as well as the wider community with whom consultation was undertaken.

## **Context of the study**

In considering this research project, it was important to understand the contexts under which the research was being undertaken. This section will discuss the contexts of adolescent developmental tasks as they relate to career decision-making and the contexts of the New Zealand education sector.

### ***Boundaries of adolescence***

According to Steinberg (2002) adolescence is a time of growing up when a person moves from the immaturity of childhood into the maturity of adulthood. Traditionally adolescence has been synonymous with the teenage years of 13 to 19 and is generally the time the young person spends in secondary schooling. However, within the New Zealand context and in many other countries and cultures, this definition has changed due to changes in society. Now adolescence can be considered to begin from as early as 10 years of age with the earlier physical maturity of many young people. It often is seen to continue into early adulthood because of the economic dependence that many young people still experience at that time. This study will focus on young people in middle adolescence – a period defined by Steinberg (2002) as “between 14 to 18 years of age” (p. 4).

Today’s adolescent group is often referred to as “Generation Y” or the “Nexters” (Clausing, Kurtz, Prendeville & Walt, 2003, p. 373). They are becoming known for

being self-reliant, questioning, and technologically advanced more than any other age group. A survey of Nexters (Clausing et al., 2003) categorised them as having a more linear thinking, analytical ability that is strongly influenced by visual media. They are described as being exceptionally altruistic and, collectively, are a hopeful, future-oriented generation. Generation Y is expected to be a very mobile group who will willingly uproot to seek opportunity and find challenge and excitement in life (Clausing et al., 2003).

### ***Adolescence and career decision-making***

A central task of adolescence is engaging in the process of identity exploration (Erikson, 1968). It is common in New Zealand society for identity to be defined by your career and young people often begin to explore their identity by thinking about what type of career they want to have *when they grow up* (Drewery & Bird, 2004). The young person may explore their identity through subject choices at school or through transition programmes but this is often not a conscious attempt towards career development. Instead this identity exploration may be influenced by positive experiences that motivate the young person to continue trying new things and making different choices (Vaughan, Roberts & Gardiner, 2006). Wijers and Meijers (1996) describe career development as a process that links identity development and career decision-making. Career development is also seen as an important process in society as people move between being the learner and the worker at different points across the lifespan (Vaughn et al., 2006).

In 2004, the New Zealand Ministry of Education commissioned a study to explore how prospective students make decisions about entering or returning to tertiary education. Two researchers from Massey University's College of Education were contracted to undertake a systematic review of the literature regarding student decision-making. Their report (Leach & Zepke, 2005) provides some valuable insight into the complexity of the decision-making process. The findings suggested that "decision-making can be modelled" (p. 9) and Leach and Zepke (2005) adapted Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) three stage decision-making model to present their findings. The first stage of the model, "the *predisposition stage*, considers the family background, parental disposition to tertiary education, degree of self-belief of the student and the nature of the school

attended” as being important factors in the decision-making process (Leach & Zepke, 2005, p. 15).

The second stage of decision-making, “the *search stage* occurs when the student begins to search out options for tertiary study”. This stage is influenced by factors such as the “career aspirations and interests of the student, their academic achievement thus far, access to information and contact with tertiary institutions” (Leach & Zepke, 2005, p. 15). In the third stage of decision-making, “*choices*”, the student looks at “specific tertiary providers and programmes based on whether entry criteria are met, whether the right courses are available and whether the rewards and costs are in balance” (Leach & Zepke, 2005, p. 15).

While this model was originally developed to explore the decision-making process related to tertiary education, it is also useful as a model to explore the career decision-making process for young people. The stages of the model as adapted from the work of Leach and Zepke (2005) will be used as a framework in this study to organise the literature and findings related to career decision-making for young people in relation to choosing nursing as a career choice.

### ***The New Zealand education sector***

The context of the New Zealand education sector must also be considered in relation to how it influences young people’s career choices. Recent changes in the education sector at the secondary level, with the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework—including the National Certificate in Educational Achievement [NCEA] and other national certificate, has allowed young people to gain a wider range of credits through different learning opportunities. Students have an opportunity to pursue different study interests from a range of subjects that are taught nationally at three levels (Meyer, McClure, Walkey, McKenzie & Weir, 2006). According to Meyer et al (2006), one of the proposed benefits of this system was the introduction standards-based assessment which is believed to demonstrate a philosophical commitment to supporting learning for all students, not only those who were high achieving. Secondly, NCEA were designed to develop students as independent learners by encouraging them to make informed choices about their study and to become more engaged in their learning (Meyer et al., 2006). This development is presenting teachers, parents and young

people with a complex choice of school subjects that need to be clearly linked to different career choices (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2002). This may suggest a shift in the career decision-making process with young people needing to begin to explore career choices at an earlier age as they begin making their subject choices.

The introduction of NCEA has not been without its opponents and its difficulties. In a study undertaken by Alison (2005) on behalf of the Post Primary Teacher's Association, teachers generally reported support for the NCEA, but they expressed concerns regarding the assessment processes, the change management process, student motivation, resourcing, professional development needs for teachers and workload issues. Recommendations were made for an external review and further research in relation to NCEA. Young people's views and experiences of the NCEA and the effects on career decision making may also need to be explored (Alison, 2005).

Other recent developments in the secondary school sector include the improved resourcing and support for vocational educational and training programmes as part of NCEA. These programmes include the Gateway<sup>2</sup> programmes and the Secondary-Tertiary Alignment Resource <sup>3</sup>[S.T.A.R.]-funded courses. These programmes have improved acceptance of the pursuit of a non-academic pathway, which meets the needs of a different group of students within the secondary school system (Vaughan et al., 2006).

Recent developments in the tertiary education sector could also influence the context of this study. The tertiary education sector continues to be remodelled in an attempt to meet some of today's labour market and globalisation challenges. The Government continues to develop tertiary education funding mechanisms with aims of reducing course duplication, and funding and promoting apprenticeships and industry training.

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<sup>2</sup> Gateway is a programme offering hands on workplace learning for senior school students while they gain industry and NCEA qualifications. Gateway is available to senior secondary school students in decile 1-6 schools (Tertiary Education Commission, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> The Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resource [S.T.A.R.] provides all state secondary schools with additional funding to access courses that provide greater opportunities for students by personalising learning pathways and facilitating a smooth transition to the workplace or further study (Ministry of Education, n.d. a).

Recent initiatives such as the Modern Apprenticeships programme and a huge growth in industry training has meant that young people may also be tempted to leave the secondary school environment earlier with chance of getting into the job market sooner (Vaughan, 2004). This could influence the numbers of young people who are considering tertiary education and could result in lower numbers of young people considering nursing as a career choice.

Changes to tertiary funding have also resulted in a capping of student enrolments in many tertiary programmes which critics believe could result in some tertiary education providers ranking applicants who meet entry criteria (Mulrooney, 2007). This has a potential to limit the numbers coming into nursing and could be particularly significant for Māori or Pasifika young people if ranking is based predominately on academic success in secondary school.

### **Outline of thesis**

This first chapter has outlined the context in which this research takes place including my own background and interest in this topic as well as contexts for career decision-making, secondary and tertiary education and nursing for young people in New Zealand. Chapter Two reviews the literature in relation to young people's career decision-making and nursing using the decision-making framework.

Chapter Three discusses the methodology and the method employed; the ethical approval process and the selection of participants. A qualitative descriptive methodology was chosen for this project to bring the views of the participants to the forefront. Focus group interviews were used to give the participants an opportunity to discuss their views in the most natural setting as possible. The use of qualitative data analysis software to aid in the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis of data is also discussed.

Chapters Four, Five and Six present the findings of the focus group discussions in relation to identified themes. Chapter Seven is a discussion about the issues that arose from the data, and contains concluding remarks and recommendations for the future.



## **Conclusion**

Young people are engulfed in rapidly changing educational and social environments. The NCEA seems to offer young people the opportunity to undertake different educational pathways and to explore more career choices. Understanding the career decision-making process that young people undertake may provide insight into how young people make career choices and why they choose or reject nursing as a career choice. This insight may aid in making nursing an attractive career choice for today's young people.

With an ageing workforce and an ageing population, there is a need to encourage more young people to explore nursing as a career choice. This may include encouraging young people into health and science subjects at school. In the Porirua community, Māori and Pasifika young people will make a significant economic impact to the workforce in the next decade. They provide enormous potential for the development of a younger nursing workforce that matches the demographics of their community. Today's generation of young people are likely to take on more careers in their life than their parents may have had and their hopefulness for a positive future could see them embrace careers such as nursing. Supporting and encouraging these young people into nursing has the potential to change the face of the nursing workforce and improve the health of the some of the most vulnerable communities in New Zealand.