Senior High School Students' Challenges and Reflections in Their Enrolled Academic Strands

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ABSTRACT

Making a career decision is a significant challenge for students entering Senior High School, as they must choose a track aligned with their interests and future career paths. Many students, however, are enrolled in strands they did not originally choose, making it important to understand their experiences. This study aimed to uncover the challenges and reflections of the Grade 11 students regarding their enrolled academic strands. It used a qualitative, phenomenological research design anchored on the Developmental Theory of Ginzberg (1996), which views career development as a lifelong process progressing through fantasy, tentative, and realistic—each reflecting evolving preferences, abilities, and opportunities. Eight (8) Grade 11 students participated in this study selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data were gathered using semi- structured interviews with open- ended questions to obtain rich data. Results revealed four major themes regarding their challenges: doubts about the enrolled strand, fear of research subjects, difficulty adapting to a new learning environment, and indecisiveness in academic choices. In terms of reflections, five key themes emerged: preparation for college, acceptance of academic difficulty as a challenge, acquisition of quality learning, thoughtful selection of options, and development of responsibility. The findings implies that although students face significant anxiety and academic struggle at the start, these difficulties are essential for building the skills needed for college. Through overcoming initial doubts and fears, students learn to take full responsibility for their own education. The results further suggest that schools should continue to offer challenging coursework while providing the necessary guidance to help students turn their early struggles into meaningful personal growth. Essentially, promoting a supportive environment will encourage students to seek help when needed and enhance their overall experience.

Keywords: Senior High School, Strand, Challenges, Reflections, Grade 11 students, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

The decision-making process for students regarding their career choices is crucial, as it significantly impacts their future (Lay-son, 2021; Nazareno et al., 2021). However, making a career decision is one of the toughest parts of entering Senior High School, as students must choose a track that aligns with their interests and helps prepare them for the career they wish to pursue in college. A decision-making in choosing a career path is a complex process in which involves assessing personal interests, values, and skills to identify suitable career paths (Azhenov et al., 2023; Digamon & De La Peña, 2021).

In South Africa, high school learners face considerable challenges when choosing academic strands. Learners navigate uncertain career paths often leading to mismatches in their choices due to limited guidance and unclear career pathways (Ajayi et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in China, research indicates that the exam-oriented emphasis of the Chinese education system can restrict students' career development, as many high school students receive limited resources and guidance to explore future career options (Zhai et al., 2023).

With the implementation of the k to 12 programs in basic education in the Philippines, under RA 10533 or the enhanced basic education act of 2013, students shall choose the track and strand related to their interests (Malaga & Oducado, 2021). Furthermore, a process evaluation study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) found that around 98% of Senior High School (SHS) institutions nationwide, including those in the CALABARZON region, do not offer sports and arts tracks, severely limiting students' ability to enroll in their preferred strands (Brillantes et al., 2019).

In the context of Davao de Oro, particularly in Tagugpo National High School, the school offers only one track, which is Academic Track with strands of "General Academic Strands (GAS), and the "Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS). Due to the limited tracks offered, some students, transfer to other school, where their chosen strands are available, while others settle with the available tracks that may not align with their interests. Consequently, students transferring is a huge threat of the school institution, as it can decrease the population of the school, causing to some constant change, and affecting the school's overall performance.

Meanwhile, most studies on this topic have been conducted using quantitative approaches, and the researcher found only a limited number of qualitative studies. Moreover, the existing qualitative research often focuses on Grade 10 and Grade 12 students, primarily in urbanized areas. Given this gap, there is an urgent need for a study that explores the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of Grade 11 students regarding their chosen academic strands. This study is particularly valuable as it can provide insights to help Junior High School students make informed decisions when selecting strands aligned with their career goals. Ultimately, the findings may guide students to approach this important decision thoughtfully and avoid rushing into choices that could affect their Senior High School experience and future pathways.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study aimed to explore and describe the challenges encountered and reflections formed by Grade 11 students regarding their currently enrolled academic strands in a public secondary school in Pantukan, Davao de Oro. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What challenges do Senior High School students experience in their enrolled academic strands? and (2) What reflections do Senior High School students share regarding their experiences in their enrolled strand?

Theoretical Lens

This study was primarily anchored on Ginzberg's Developmental Theory of Career Choice (1996), which posits that career development is a lifelong process that unfolds through a series of developmental stages. According to the theory, individuals progress through three major stages—fantasy, tentative, and realistic—each comprising several substages that reflect changes in interests, abilities, values, and perceived opportunities as individuals grow and mature.

Ginzberg's theory outlines the Fantasy stage (childhood to early adolescence), during which career choices are guided by imagination and play, with little consideration of personal abilities or real-world constraints. This is followed by the Tentative stage (late adolescence to early adulthood), where individuals begin to narrow their career options through four substages: interest, capacity, value, and transition, as they increasingly consider their skills, values, and future goals. Finally, the Realistic stage (mid-adulthood onward) involves making concrete career decisions, adapting to occupational demands, and advancing within a chosen field through the substages of trial, stabilization, and consolidation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research focuses on the collection and analysis of non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations, and textual materials, to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives (Tenny et al., 2022). This design was utilized to explore the challenges encountered and reflections formed by Grade 11 students within

their enrolled strands. The qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, as direct interaction with participants enabled the researchers to obtain rich, detailed, and authentic accounts of their lived experiences and insights.

Specifically, a phenomenological approach was adopted because it centers on understanding individuals' lived experiences related to particular phenomena. In this study, the approach focused on the challenges and reflections of Grade 11 students with their enrolled academic strands. Phenomenological methods, particularly in-depth interviews, emphasize capturing the essence and meaning of participants' lived experiences, allowing for a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of their perspectives (Lauterbach, 2018).

Participants

This study consisted a total of eight participants: four (4) participated in a focus group discussion (FGD), and four (4) participated in in-depth interviews (IDI). Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, a qualitative research method used to intentionally select participants who could provide rich and relevant data for analysis. Unlike random sampling, participants were deliberately chosen based on specific characteristics aligned with the purpose of the study. This approach was also referred to as judgmental or selective sampling (Dovetail, 2023). Furthermore, the researchers adhered to the recommendation of Lauterbach (2018), who suggested that phenomenological studies typically involve six to twelve participants.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: first, they were Grade 11 students enrolled in the public school where the study was conducted. Second, they were willing to share their lived experiences, particularly the challenges and insights related to their enrolled strand. Students who were unable or unwilling to discuss their lived experiences were excluded from the study.

Data Collection Tools

This study utilized in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) as the primary data collection methods using a semi-structured interview guide questions. In-depth interviews allowed participants to share personal insights in an open and conversational manner, making them particularly suitable for exploring individual perspectives. In contrast, focus group discussions facilitated interactive group dialogue, enabling the collection of diverse viewpoints through shared experiences. Selected Grade 11 students participated in discussions guided by the researcher to generate data relevant to the research questions. In addition to primary data collection, existing literature from journals, books, and scholarly articles was reviewed to support and contextualize the study's findings.

This methodological approach focused on capturing various dimensions of students' lived experiences, including their thoughts, emotions, aspirations, decisions, and actions. Through the analysis of these elements, the study sought to develop a deeper understanding of students' challenges and reflections regarding their academic choices. Ultimately, the research provided insights into the decision-making processes and challenges encountered by Grade 11 students in selecting and pursuing their academic pathways.

Data Collection

This qualitative study involves several systematic procedures to obtain meaningful data, one of which is the data collection process. Data collection techniques are vital for answering research questions, testing hypotheses, and achieving the objectives of a study (Karunarathna et al., 2024). Prior to data collection, the researchers secured permission from the school head to conduct the study, outlining its purpose, participants, and data collection procedures. Following approval, participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that those chosen met the established inclusion criteria. The researchers also sought permission from the advisers before communicating with and recruiting the target participants.

Subsequently, informed consent was obtained from all participants, clearly explaining their right to voluntarily withdraw at any time, the purpose of the study, the data collection procedures, and the measures taken to maintain confidentiality, as well as the potential risks and benefits of participation. The consent form also included the

researchers' signatures. Subsequently, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in quiet and conducive locations agreed upon by the participants. To ensure completeness and accuracy of the data, permission was obtained to audio-record the interviews and discussions. Backup audio files were securely stored on electronic devices, and high-quality recording equipment was used to ensure clarity and reliability of the recorded data.

Data Analysis

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework, which includes the following steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final report. All audio recordings were transcribed, and the data were analyzed in alignment with the research questions using coding and thematic analysis. During coding, the researchers assigned words or short phrases that captured the key and meaningful aspects of the data, systematically organizing them into categories prior to conducting thematic analysis. To ensure a thorough and accurate interpretation of the responses, a data analyst and a subject matter expert were consulted, which contributed to well-supported conclusions and recommendations.

Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Transferability

Ensuring the trustworthiness of this study was essential for validating its findings and conclusions. In qualitative research, trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enhance credibility, strategies such as prolonged engagement and member checking were employed to ensure that the data accurately reflected the participants' perspectives. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. The importance of these strategies in establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research has been emphasized in previous studies (Forero et al., 2018). Through the implementation of these methods, the study's findings are rendered more robust and credible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Experienced by Grade 11 Students in Their Enrolled Academic Strand

There are four (4) major themes emerged on the challenges faced by SHS students in their enrolled strands. These include: 1) Doubts about the enrolled strand; 2) Fear of research subjects; 3) Difficulty adapting to a new learning environment; and 4) Indecisiveness in academic choices. Table 1 shows the major themes and core ideas of the challenges experienced by Grade 11 students in their enrolled academic strand.

Table 1. Challenges Experienced by Students in their Enrolled Academic Strand

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Doubts about the Enrolled Strand	• Students start doubting their strand when they struggle with difficult lessons and heavy schoolwork. • Students feel that their chosen strand does not match their real interests, making them question their decision. • Students say that peer pressure and what society expects influenced their choice more than their own preference.
Fear of Research Subjects	• Fear and difficulty in understanding research concepts and requirements. • Worries about financial burden due to some research expenses. • Fears and struggles with time management and meeting deadlines in research subject. • Concerns for the lack of group cooperation, leading to an uneven workload in doing research.

Difficulty Adapting to a New Learning Environment	• Social adjustment, including making new friends and fitting in. • Struggles with public speaking and class presentation activities. • Misconception about the strand's difficulty compared to expectations. • Academic pressure and the challenge of managing multiple tasks.
Indecisiveness in Academic Choices	• Students change their interests over time, which makes them question if they picked the right strand. • Students feel unsure about their future careers, making it hard for them to decide on a strand. • Students feel pressured to make the "perfect" choice, making them even more uncertain. • Students struggle to decide because they don't get enough career advice and support.

Doubts about the Enrolled Strand

Students often experienced uncertainty regarding their chosen academic paths, which affects their motivation and academic performance. This doubt may stem from a lack of self-awareness or insufficient career guidance. In addition, experiencing challenges such as doubts can sometimes be the reason why students often feel unmotivated, especially when you come unprepared. The participants have experienced doubts in their enrolled academic strands which can be linked to the responses of IDI-1 and FGD-1 who shared their experiences:

"For me, I guess HUMSS is okay, but sometimes I doubt if this is really the right strand for me. There are times when the subjects get too hard, and I start to wonder if I can really handle this in the long run (IDI-1).", and *"For me, the strand I chose is okay, but honestly, I didn't really have a choice because the other strands were already full, so I kind of felt forced. Sometimes I think, what if I got into a different strand—maybe it would've fit me better (FGD-1)."* FGD-4 also added that, *"...as an undecided person, I didn't have a clear decision about which college course to take, so I chose GAS."*

Another experience shared by the participants about why they experience doubts in the strands chosen, is because of peer pressure and what society expects influenced their choice more than their own preference. In addition, participants also struggle with difficult lessons and heavy schoolwork. IDI-2, FGD-3, and IDI-3 mentioned that: *"What influenced me was former GAS students who graduated. They convinced me that GAS was a good choice. They told us that while HUMSS is okay, GAS is better for them. Because of what they said, I was persuaded to take GAS (IDI-2)." "I thought it would be easy, but it turns out it's just the same as HUMSS—there's no difference (FGD-3)." "For me, my experience with my chosen strand (HUMSS) is that it's difficult. There's no such thing as an easy strand, so that's the only thing I can say—it's just hard (IDI-4).*

This is supported by the study of Alim (2024) which showed that self-doubts in choosing senior high school strands stem from uncertainty about personal interests, abilities, and future career paths, compounded by societal pressures and the fear of making the wrong choice, which can lead to labor mismatch and unemployment. Furthermore, Lao et al., (2023) cited that doubts in choosing senior high school strands arise from misalignment with future college courses, challenges faced in those courses, and the influence of family on career choices, leading students to question their initial decisions. Similarly, a study mentioned that self-awareness, fear, anxiety in decision-making, career information, and peer pressure contribute to self-doubt among senior high school students (Boye & Nyarko-Sampson, 2023).

Fear of Research Subjects

Moving to a higher level of education, such as senior high school, can be challenging, as students must adjust to a new curriculum and unfamiliar subjects. Some subjects require considerable time and financial resources to complete successfully. Based on the participants' shared experiences, they mentioned that among all the subjects in the senior high school curriculum, research is the subject in which they most often experience fear and difficulty, particularly in understanding its concepts and requirements. This concern was expressed by participants stating: *"It's really difficult because almost every subject requires research (IDI-3)" and "In research, there are so many concepts that are difficult to understand, especially if it's your first time making a research paper (FGD-4)."*

Moreover, students reported experiencing financial burdens due to research-related expenses. Research subjects also require significant time and effective time management, causing some students to struggle with meeting deadlines. Additionally, Grade 11 students face challenges in group research activities due to poor cooperation, where only a few members complete most of the work, resulting in an uneven workload. *"Research is very difficult because there's so much to do, and I struggle to manage my time, especially when there are also other assignments and projects (IDI-1)."* Also, *"The research deadline sometimes takes priority over our other subjects, and it feels like all deadlines fall on the same day (FGD-3)."*

Based on the study of Casinillo et al., (2023), some students face difficulties in the new environment due to challenges like poor internet connectivity, lack of a conducive place for learning, extraneous distractions, and social expectations, which impact their mental and physical health. Similarly, the study Lloyd-Lewis et al., (2024) states that students often fear research subjects due to perceived difficulty, lack of necessary skills (e.g., mathematics), and a belief that these subjects lack relevance to their future careers. However, Ghimire (2023) argues that some students may thrive in research environments, finding motivation and engagement through active participation and innovative teaching methods, which can alleviate anxiety.

Difficulty Adapting to a New Learning Environment

Entering senior high school, particularly Grade 11, represents a new educational level that requires significant adjustment. Students often find this transition challenging due to the introduction of a new curriculum, the need to develop new study habits, and adaptation to a new learning environment. Social adjustments, such as making new friends and fitting in, further add to these challenges. As noted by participants in IDI-3 and FGD-1, these transitions can affect students' sense of belonging and academic performance, as students are often compelled to form new habits and lifestyles to adapt to their new environment. *"At first, it's really hard to find new friends, especially if you don't know anyone in your section."* Also, *"I had a hard time understanding people in my new environment, but over time, I got used to it."*

Similarly, in senior high school, particularly in Grade 11, another experience shared by the participants is their struggle with public speaking and class presentations due to the adjustments required by the new learning environment, as mentioned by participants in IDI-2*, "I always get nervous during reporting because I'm afraid, I might make mistakes.",* and FGD-3.*"Public speaking is not easy, especially when all eyes are on you."* Moreover, students also experience misconception about the strand's difficulty compared to expectations. As quoted by IDI-4, and FGD-4: *"I thought this strand would be easy, but it's actually hard." "At first, we thought this strand would be relaxed, but the academic pressure is intense."* Furthermore, students also experience Academic pressure and challenge of managing multiple tasks. As mentioned by FGD-2: *"It's very stressful because almost every week there's a deadline."*

This finding aligns with the study of Hughes et al., (2019), which noted that students often experience difficulties adjusting to senior high school due to complex learning environments, unfamiliar physical spaces, intimidation from older students, and a lack of supportive areas, all of which may lead to disengagement from learning. Similarly, Fillomena and Maravilla, (2020) found that students encounter school adjustment problems stemming from factors such as peer pressure, academic stress, and changes in social dynamics, which can hinder effective adaptation to the senior high school environment. These studies emphasize the importance of supportive learning communities and adaptive teaching strategies in facilitating smoother transitions for students.

Indecisiveness in Academic Choices

Transitioning to senior high school can be challenging. Some students struggle to decide which strand to take because they are still uncertain about their college plans, leading to feelings of indecisiveness and anxiety about their future careers, as noted by participants in IDI-1, *"I was really confused about which strand to choose because I wasn't sure what I wanted to take in college."* and FGD-1, *"Exactly, the future feels so uncertain, so I just randomly picked a strand."* This indecisiveness often results in procrastination and reduced academic performance, largely due to the pressure of making the "perfect" choice. Such pressure not only affects students academically but also influences their daily lives, causing overthinking and self-doubt about whether they have made the right decision.

Besides, students change their interests over time, which makes them question if they picked the right strand. Shared by IDI-2, and FGD-2: *"At first, I liked my strand, but now I feel like I want to transfer." "My interests changed, but I can't transfer anymore."* On one hand, students also feel pressured to make the "perfect" choice, making them even more uncertain. As mentioned by IDI-3, *"I'm scared of making the wrong choice because it feels like a once-in-a-lifetime decision."* and FGD-3: *"It's hard because there's too much pressure—it's like you really need to make the perfect choice."* On the other hand, students also struggle to decide because they don't get enough career advice and support. As shared by IDI-4, *"There wasn't any clear guidance, so I was really confused about what to choose."* and FGD-4, *"If there was clearer career advice, it would have been easier to choose."*

Research indicates that anxiety-related symptoms contribute to difficulties in decision-making, particularly in academic contexts. Students often experience indecisiveness when choosing senior high school strands due to multiple interrelated factors, including societal expectations, parental influence, peer pressure, and personal interests, as well as disparities in resources and opportunities shaped by socioeconomic status and regional expectations (Gupta & Kaur, 2024). Additionally, limited access to career counseling, financial constraints, and uncertainty about future career pathways further intensify students' indecision, leaving them unprepared to make informed academic choices (Bahattari, 2024). Moreover, Grigor and Turda (2022) found that low levels of optimism, insufficient information about career options, and internal conflicts also hinder students' ability to make decisions aligned with their values and aspirations.

Reflections of Grade 11 Students Regarding their Experiences in Their Enrolled Strand

On the reflections of the participants in their enrolled strand, five (5) major themes emerged: 1) Preparation for college; 2) Acceptance of academic difficulty as a challenge; 3) Acquisition of quality learning; 4) Thoughtful selection of options; and 5) Development of responsibility. Table 2 shows the major themes and core ideas of the reflections of Grade 11 students regarding their enrolled strand.

Table 2. Reflections of Students Regarding their Enrolled Strand

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Preparation for College	• Students found that their chosen strand would help them prepare for challenges. • Student skills have been improved and found that it would help him/her in the future studies. • The chosen strand meets the requirement for college and higher education. • The students experienced rigorous academic standards that simulate college, equipping them for future studies.
Acceptance of Academic Difficulty as a Challenge	• The students became resilient because challenging subjects, heavy assignments, and complex research push them to build their skills. • The students enhanced their perseverance as strict deadlines and demanding tasks drive them to work harder. • The students developed problem-solving skills by confronting rigorous coursework that forces them to adapt. • The students embraced every academic challenge as an opportunity to improve their overall learning experience.
Acquisition of Quality Learning	• The students acquired a strong academic foundation as their strand improves their reading, grammar, essay writing, and public speaking skills. • The students improved their communication skills in a college-like environment that prepares them for higher education. • The students gained a well-rounded education by learning diverse knowledge and topics.

Thoughtful Selection of Options	• The students made thoughtful decisions by aligning their strand with their personal interests and long-term career goals. • The students ensured the best fit by considering advice from peers and former students. • The students enhanced their future prospects by carefully evaluating the subject matter and its relevance to their goals. • The students refined their decision-making by balancing their own capabilities with curriculum demands.
Development of Responsibility	• The students became more responsible as strict deadlines and demanding assignments taught them discipline and time management. • The students developed accountability by effectively managing both independent tasks and group projects. • The students improved their self-reliance by handling a heavy workload proactively. • The students advanced their responsibility by overcoming rigorous academic challenges that build a strong work ethic.

Preparation for College

This result indicates that students recognize the significance of their enrolled strand in equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for college. Many students expressed confidence that the subjects they are taking closely align with their future academic pursuits. One participant emphasized that senior high school is often described as a life-changing journey, filled with challenges that push students to their limits. *"I chose this strand because it helps me face challenges in college, as the topics, I'm learning are related to the subjects I will take in college (IDI-1)."* While these experiences can be difficult, they are not in vain; the challenges serve an important purpose by preparing students for the demands of college.

The group discussions revealed that students perceive their strand as an essential preparatory stage for higher education. Participants noted that, *"In our group, many said that their chosen strand provided the right preparation for the challenges in college (FGD-1)."* Beyond academic preparation, students acknowledged significant improvements in their skills, particularly in areas directly applicable to their future careers. One respondent remarked, *"The lessons in my strand will really help me in the future because I've learned a lot that I can use in my job (FGD-3)."* Moreover, students highlighted that their strand meets the academic requirements for college, ensuring a smoother transition to higher education. *"I chose this strand because I saw that the subjects I'm taking will help me in my future college education (FGD-4)."*

Students who are not adequately prepared for college often face difficulties managing coursework, time, and social relationships (Garcia & Lim, 2020). College readiness requires both academic and emotional competencies, including critical thinking, self-regulation, and resilience, to meet the demands of higher education. Students lacking these skills are more likely to struggle with academic rigor and the independence expected in college, while those with emotional resilience can better handle setbacks, manage stress, and seek support when needed. Programs that integrate academic and emotional preparation have been shown to improve college success by providing students with the foundation to navigate challenges and transition effectively into higher education (Fernandez et al., 2021).

Acceptance of Academic Difficulty as a Challenge

Accepting difficulty as a challenge is an important mindset that allows students to view obstacles as opportunities for growth. Those who embrace challenges are more likely to persist and overcome setbacks in their academic journey. Senior high school, while demanding, plays a significant role in personal development and prepares students for future endeavors, such as college. Difficulties are often designed to push students out of their comfort zones, build resilience, and strengthen character. Experiencing these challenges is therefore essential, as they equip students with the skills and mindset needed to succeed in the next stage of their journey. One participant noted, *"Even though the assignments and research are intense, I continued because I know they are teaching me resilience."*

In addition, students emphasized how challenges in senior high school strengthened their determination to succeed. IDI-2 shared that *"Despite the difficulty of projects and reports, I also learned to be strong and stay motivated."* Also, students developed problem-solving skills by confronting complex tasks that required critical thinking. As one interviewee explained, *"The difficult situations in class provided an opportunity to develop our critical thinking skills."* This adaptive mindset enabled students to view academic challenges as steppingstones to intellectual and personal development. *"The challenges in class gave me a great opportunity for learning because they made me stronger.",* as mentioned by FGD-1.

This finding is supported by the study of Mendoza and Villanueva (2022), which shows that students who adopt a growth mindset are more likely to perceive difficulties as part of the learning process rather than as failures, fostering resilience and perseverance when facing challenges. Likewise, Ramos et al. (2020) suggest that students who view challenges as opportunities for learning demonstrate higher motivation and are less likely to give up in the face of obstacles. This aligns with recent findings that supportive teacher-student interactions and overall learning environments are positively associated with student motivation, engagement, and academic mindedness (Regidor et al., 2024; Vestad & Bru, 2024). Moreover, contextual factors such as perceived school climate and supportive instructional practices have been shown to strengthen the effects of students' growth mindset on academic outcomes (Li et al., 2025).

Acquisition of Quality Learning

Students consistently stressed the significant academic benefits of their chosen strands, reporting improvements in essential skills such as reading, grammar, essay writing, and public speaking. Access to quality learning is crucial for academic success, as it directly supports knowledge retention and skill development. Throughout the senior high school journey, particularly in different academic strands such as HUMSS and GAS, students encounter challenges designed to prepare them for their future careers and higher education. Each path presents unique difficulties that simulate real-world experiences in the field, helping students develop the skills, resilience, and confidence necessary to succeed in their chosen areas of study and to thrive in college.

One participant shared that *"The HUMSS strand helped improve my reading, grammar, and essay writing, which will be useful for my future."* Another student remarked that *"Because of presentations and reporting, I became more confident in speaking in front of many people."* This exposure to rigorous academic standards and real-world applications has enabled students to develop a well-rounded skill set that prepares them for college and professional settings.

Studies show that students who have access to quality learning resources, including effective teaching and appropriate instructional materials, are more likely to achieve academic success (Arumuru & David, 2024). Specifically, students who participate in interactive learning experiences and receive clear, structured instruction demonstrate higher academic performance. In line with this, Dela Cruz (2021) emphasizes that quality learning extends beyond the content itself to include the teaching methods employed. When educators use diverse instructional strategies and actively encourage student participation, learners are more engaged with the material and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Equally, quality learning is closely linked to the learning environment. Mendoza and Garcia (2022) found that students who feel supported in a positive and inclusive environment tend to perform better academically. These students are more motivated to attend classes, actively participate in discussions, and complete assignments consistently. Therefore, quality learning encompasses not only the academic content but also a supportive and interactive environment that promotes both intellectual and personal growth.

Thoughtful Selection of Options

The process of strand selection in senior high school is often a deliberate and thoughtful decision for many students. They carefully align their choices with personal interests, academic strengths, and long-term career goals, recognizing that each strand has its own specialization. Thoughtful consideration is crucial, as selecting an inappropriate strand can impact academic performance and future opportunities. In essence, choosing an

academic path requires evaluating multiple factors to ensure that students pursue a course that aligns with their abilities, aspirations, and potential career trajectories.

One of the participants remarked that, *"I chose my strand based on my interests and the course I want to take in college."* Students also considered advice from their peers and former students to ensure they made an informed decision. As shared in focus group discussions, *"I listened to the advice of my friends who have finished senior high to make sure I made the right strand choice."*

In this regard, students who take the time to carefully consider their options tend to make more informed choices that align with their passions and long-term goals (Lim & Mendoza, 2021). Thoughtful selection not only ensures a better fit between the student and their chosen field but also enhances motivation and engagement in their studies. In addition, thoughtful selection has been linked to improved academic outcomes, as students who feel a sense of purpose in their studies are more likely to succeed (Ramos et al., 202).

In the context of career choices, thoughtful selection plays a crucial role in shaping a student's future. Students who make informed decisions about their career paths are more likely to experience job satisfaction and success after graduation (Garcia & Santos, 2022; Oliveira & Marques, 2024). Research indicates that structured career guidance programs—such as counseling services, mobile apps, and exploration interventions—can significantly improve students' career decision-making self-efficacy and clarity (Hsu, 2025).

Development of Responsibility

Every career path has its own challenges, which is why the specific choice is less important than how responsibly a student approaches it. Being a responsible student is a key aspect of personal development, significantly contributing to both academic success and overall growth. As students advance in their education, they are expected to take greater responsibility for their learning, behavior, and decision-making, cultivating the skills and discipline necessary for future achievements. For instance, students emphasized that their chosen strand has significantly contributed to their growth in responsibility and time management, as IDI-2 stated, *"Because of the many deadlines, I learned how to manage my time and be responsible."* In addition, group projects and independent assignments further fostered a sense of accountability among students. IDI-3 noted that, *"In our group projects, I learned that each member should be responsible and willing to help other."*

Students who develop a strong sense of responsibility are more likely to take ownership of their learning and make proactive decisions in their academic lives (Garcia et al., 2020). Responsibility also encompasses effective time management, allowing students to balance academic workloads with extracurricular activities. Moreover, students who take responsibility for their actions and decisions are better prepared to face the challenges of college life (Dela Cruz, 2021). Notably, developing responsibility also prepares students for life beyond school. Responsible students are more likely to succeed in their careers, as they have cultivated the self-discipline and decision-making skills essential for the workforce. Responsibility extends beyond academic achievement to include ethical behavior, personal accountability, and social awareness (Mendoza & Villanueva, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study on the challenges and reflections of Grade 11 students highlights the complex experiences they face during an important transition in senior high school. These challenges include doubts about their chosen strands, anxiety about research subjects, difficulties adjusting to a new learning environment, and uncertainty about their academic and career paths. As students move through this transition, they often question their goals, values, and personal aspirations. By reflecting on their experiences, they gain a deeper understanding of both the difficulties they encounter and the strengths and coping strategies they develop. This research shows that these challenges should not be seen as setbacks but as important parts of personal growth and learning.

Additionally, this study has been a meaningful journey, providing an opportunity to hear the real voices of Grade 11 students as they describe their challenges and reflections within their chosen strands. As researchers who are also Grade 11 students, we found the study especially relevant because we have faced similar challenges and can relate to the participants' experiences. Knowing that others face the same difficulties offers reassurance and

highlights the importance of shared experiences. This research is particularly valuable for Grade 11 students, as it allows them to express concerns that may have gone unheard and provides insight into the varied experiences of their peers in senior high school.

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