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What does success mean to you?

Perceptions from across the English education system

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Abstract

What it means to be successful, both in life and in education, is an essentially contested concept, characterised by diverse, varied and often conflicting definitions. Trying to prescribe a single idea of educational success is at best naïve and at worst damaging, both to individuals and to systems. In particular, overly prescriptive definitions of success, including those prescribed by systems of assessment and accountability, engenders a form of education which is not easily distinguished indoctrination.

This study explores the multidimensional phenomenon of educational success and its intersections with educational-assessment and identity-construction by examining how success is defined and determined. It investigates the diversity of individuals' perceptions and examines the consequences of tensions and contradictions in these perceptions. The research was exploratory and participatory, consisting of a photo-voice project and intensive interviews with 30 participants from across the English education sector: 13, pupils, 7 teachers and 6 policy-makers. Data was analysed inductively, drawing on constructivist grounded theory, to construct two main themes.

The first theme examines the roles of systems of assessment and accountability as mediators of extrinsic and intrinsic definitions of success. It investigates how definitions of success vary at different levels of the education system and illustrates the controlling influence of externally defined definitions of success. The second theme explores the time-dependent nature of educational success as pupils co-construct their identities and negotiate their own definitions of success. This theme reveals the exploratory nature of becoming independent and emphasises the need for a degree of self-direction in education.

The thesis concludes by suggesting the importance of allowing an element of uncertainty in education as a fundamental aspect that enables education to be emancipatory rather than indoctrination.

List of Figures, Tables and Abbreviations

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Abbreviations

A-levels – Advanced levels

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

SC – Steering Committee

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We're socially conditioned, I believe, to a very prescribed notion of what, in the educational sphere, success looks like. At the school I went to, what a success looked like was a Russell group university - with a push on Oxbridge.

I would fall into the bracket on paper where that would be attainable, and I guess it's the nature of schools, and the nature of friendships, that I would be in a circle of friends where we would all be academic and we would all have similar aspirations. So that would work for us. But I'm certain there would also be students in our school who would not been able to achieve the grades required for success at the end of post-16. And I can't speak for them, but I imagine that would perhaps shape their views of themselves. I was kind of an anomaly in so much as I could achieve and then I fell back, but even now talking about it, I still prescribe to that same idea of what success is.

The irony is, we are launching tomorrow our UCAS cycle for our year 12s. And on the one hand, I will be promoting the importance of finding the best fit for you; if it's an apprenticeship route, if it's employment with training, if it's university, if it's a Sutton trust university, or if it's Oxbridge. I will ensure that students are equipped with knowledge to make the best choice for them. However, ultimately, in the same breath I will be pushing students, who are more socially and economically deprived than myself 20 years ago, to go to the very top universities in the country because I know they can achieve it on paper. But I'm almost feeding the beast which I feel spat me out. I'm a bit of a contradiction, bit of a hypocrite, because I know for myself that my most successful time, my most happy time, was the year I spent in a, league-table-wise, lowly university; and then I am promoting the reverse to my students. So, I think we are just conditioned, I don't know why this is, but I'm guilty of doing the exact same myself.

(Harris, teacher - shortened-quote)

This epigraph sets the scene for the thesis. Harris, one of the teachers interviewed for this study, highlights the conflict faced by teachers as they negotiate the process of education. In reading it, we glimpse the dualism which runs throughout this thesis, the capacity for education to empower or control, to emancipate or indoctrinate.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The vast majority of people in the UK spend over a decade of their childhood in schools. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, the fundamental purpose of education and its role in our society remain 'essentially contested concepts' (Gallie, 1955). What it means to be successful, both in life and in education is an elusive, dynamic and contextualised question, rife with conflict, contradiction and compromise. As a question, it has developed alongside societal and cultural shifts, whilst retaining elements that transcend these changes. This thesis reports on an exploratory study using in-depth intensive interviews of 30 participants to investigate individuals' perceptions of success in the English education system. In this research, I add to this philosophical debate by grounding the discussion in the lived experiences of pupils, teachers and policy-makers, all of whom navigate these tensions on a daily basis.

People have widely differing views of the purpose of education and what it means to be successful (e.g. Bass & Good, 2004; Egan, 1997; Reay, 2017; Young, 2007; Janmaat et al., 2016). Determining who is deemed successful and measuring success is rife with tensions and contradictions (e.g. Broadfoot, 1996; Hanson, 1993; Stobart, 2008). This process is both mediated by power hierarchies embedded in the organisational structures of education systems and formative on the development of learner and teacher identities (Hacking, 1986; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). Despite widespread agreement that there are multiple ways to succeed in education, learners and educators, are routinely judged against success criteria that they have not co-constructed. Children's perceptions of success in particular are often under-represented and much of the discussion trivialises their opinions and inputs (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016). This study explores the multidimensional phenomenon of educational success and its intersections with educational-assessment and identity-construction by examining how success is defined and determined. I investigate the diversity of individuals' perceptions and examine the consequences of tensions and contradictions in these perceptions. This study is exploratory, without tightly worded research-questions and approaches these complex and abstract ideas from the perspectives of pupils, teachers and policy-makers. My aim for this research is to explore the intersection of success, assessment

and identity in the English education system, from the perspectives of pupils, teachers and policy-makers.

In this chapter, I provide the context and my rationale for pursuing this study. I reflect on my motivation and positionality as a researcher. Chapter 2 provides a literature review. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodological considerations for this study - it's participatory nature and the grounded theory approach - before detailing the process in the Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents a descriptive overview of the findings and provides a starting point for Chapters, 6 and 7, which discuss two themes which emerged from the data. Finally, Chapter 8 gives a general discussion with reflections on the purpose and philosophy of education.

1.1 Mass Education in England

Since the inception of a state-run system of mass education in England, in the late 1800s (Britain, 1870), the nature of school and society has changed dramatically. Preceding the beginning of state-education in England, economist Smith (1791) recognised the potential benefits of mass education to a nation, writing:

> *An instructed and intelligent people, besides, are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one. They feel themselves, each individually, more respectable and more likely to obtain the respect of their lawful superiors, and they are therefore more disposed to respect those superiors* (p.353)

Mass education in England can perhaps be said to have begun with the 1802 Factory Act, which legislated for the provision of a minimum of two hours of education per day for children under the age of 10 working in textiles factories (UK Parliament, 2021). Alongside industrialisation, provision of state-funded education increased slowly over the next century, with successive acts increasing children's education and restricting their employment (Cruickshank, 1978). This saw the beginning of the tension between dual aims of education

as a tool for both increasing national economic productivity and individual betterment (Carl, 2009).

Prior to industrialisation, English society was relatively static, with limited movement between social classes. Education was not linked to social mobility, primarily because this did not exist at the time. Instead, schooling predominantly aimed to provide the skills, knowledge and training that was deemed necessary for individuals, depending on their social status (Broadfoot, 1996; Mcculloch, 2020). Since then, as societal structures have become more 'discrete' (Foucault, 1977), there is a sense that individuals can improve their societal standing through education (Arday, 2021; ESRC, 2012). Whilst the purpose of education and the ways in which it is possible to 'succeed' through education may have evolved and diversified, education remains a fundamental aspect of a child's integration into society.

1.2 Personal position and motivation

My personal history, experiences and biases influence my motivations for this research, my choice of content and methodological approach, and my interpretation of the data. Having initially trained as a physicist, before moving into education by retraining as a physics teacher, my background as a quantitative scientist shaped my initial perceptions of educational-success and assessment. However, I increasingly became aware of the limitations of overly quantitative definitions of educational success. This study stems from a growing recognition of the need for a broader and more nuanced approach, to how success is both defined and measured.

My teaching experience shaped my desire to prioritise participation and privilege the perceptions of pupils over other stakeholders. The participatory approach that I take attempts to disrupt some of the power-asymmetries that pervade both education systems and traditional research methods, and prioritises the production of research that is meaningful and relevant to the lives of participants. My professional experience also supported this project in allowing me easier access to schools. It helped gain credibility with teachers in interviews: mentioning my past as a teacher meant that teachers seemed more

comfortable sharing aspects of their roles, due to a sense of shared experience. It also made coding of teacher interviews easier, and in early analysis I was aware that the perspective of the teacher seemed to be dominant, meaning I actively re-analysed pupil and policy-maker interviews. Despite this, my experience in schools has probably resulted in an analysis that is skewed towards the perspectives of teachers and pupils. This was in part a deliberate attempt to privilege their voice but also likely came about from a familiarity with the experiences and perspectives of these groups.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0.1 The literature review in grounded theory

This research study takes a grounded theory approach (section 3.3), which emphasises a delayed literature review such that the focus remains on the data and literature and prior experience are used as analytical tools to support the construction of findings (Charmaz, 2014; J. Mills et al., 2006; Thornberg, 2012). In this thesis, I acknowledge and draw on existing theory and literature, including to develop my methodology. Once the initial phase of data collection was completed, alongside subsequent data collection and analysis, I conducted a continuous literature review which was guided by the data (see figure 4.1). In this chapter I present and discuss some of the literature surrounding assessment and accountability. I end with an overview of some of the literature which focuses on broader questions about educational aspirations and the purpose and nature of education. This supports the rest of the thesis and provides important context for the discussion in chapters 6 & 7.

The concept of educational success can be examined at two levels, that of the individual, or that of the system. To paraphrase Mills (1959), it is not possible to separately understand the experiences of the individuals nor the intricacies of system without understanding them both. Whilst there is significant overlap in the conceptualisations of success at these scales, it is not possible to capture the nuance and diversity of individual definitions of success at the level of entire systems. Consequently, we rely on quantitative metrics, which can be manipulated and understood, even when they refer to hundreds of thousands of individuals. The relationship between individual and system-level definitions of success is mediated by assessment and accountability, both as tools for measuring success and as factors in defining success.

2.1 Success and Assessment

Assessment dominates teachers' and pupils' experiences of education, determining both what is taught and how we teach it (Elwood, 2012; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2009). While precise definitions of the meaning of assessment vary (Newton, 2007), most include to

two major features, that of measurement and that of judgement. Measurement can be thought of as neutral and assessment is then framed as enabling: qualifications open doors to otherwise inaccessible opportunities (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). Judgement, however, is normative and from this perspective assessment practices are controlling, they determine and define what we view as success. This highlights the dual capacity for education, and in this instance educational-assessment, to be a process of emancipation or indoctrination a repeated theme throughout this thesis.

2.1.1 History of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)

Whilst GCSEs were not a specific focus of this research, all pupils in the study were recruited from years 9-11 (aged 13-16 years), the period of their education during which they prepare for their GCSEs. After this, there is greater variety of educational-pathways, so GCSEs represent the final national assessment taken by almost the entire cohort. This study explores success, education and assessment, and every participant interviewed spoke about GCSEs, and so a brief contextualisation of the history and role in the English education system of these examinations is provided here.

First introduced in 1988 as a replacement for the discontinued O-level (Ordinary level), GCSEs were intended to serve as a qualification for pupils who left school aged 16 (Brooks, 2014). Since then GCSEs have been at the centre of several debates, in particular about rising pass-rates, which has happened consistently since their introduction, excluding changes to grading mechanisms (DfE, 2020b; JCQ, 2020). Some suggest these increases show improving educational standards (Gibb, 2018), whilst other suggest this is evidence of grade inflation as exams get easier (Smithers, 2019). Either way, GCSE examinations have a significant influence on our collective understanding of educational quality and any discussion of success at an individual and system-level would feel incomplete without acknowledging their role.

2.1.2 The intersection of success and assessment

Reay and Wiliam's (1999) seminal paper, “I'll be a nothing”, set out to examine how pupils’ perceptions of tests impacted “their understandings of themselves as learners” (p.343)

and raised concerns about the profound impact assessments have on pupils. Over two decades later, the concerns raised are still evident in pupils perceptions of educational assessment and the impact that this has on their futures (e.g. Buchanan et al., 2020; Hargreaves et al., 2021; additionally see chaper 7). Exam stress or anxiety is a well-documented phenomenon in the English education system, with pupils from primary to secondary schools reporting anxiety about exams and their impact (Elwood, 2012; Putwain et al., 2012). Increasingly not only is there an acknowledgement that exams cause anxiety, it has also been suggested that they can lead to poorer educational-outcomes (e.g. Roome & Soan, 2019; N. R. Smith et al., 2021). This study adds to this discussion by exploring the way in which assessment acts as both an enabler of success and a factor in defining it.

2.2 Success and Accountability

. There exists widespread discussion regarding the impacts of overly-quantitative and 'rational' approaches to accountability practices (e.g. Shore & Wright, 2015). Intelligent accountability (O'Neill, 2013) and democratic accountability (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Cochran-Smith et al., 2017, 2018), both speak to the element of power and the relational nature of accountability systems. O'Neill examined the relationship between accountability and trust, arguing that to be trusted requires proving yourself trust-worthy, a process that involves putting yourself in a position of relative vulnerability. Cochran-Smith's 'democratic accountability' highlights the inherent power dynamics in accountability systems and emphasises the need to reconceptualise accountability as professional responsibility. In both of these, the importance of power is emphasised, if not always explicitly stated: the power to determine who and what is successful.

Ingram et al. (2018) investigated the role of educational reforms to the accountability system and highlighted the tensions that teachers face in balancing school-level and pupil outcomes, in particular for outcomes not routinely measured by accountability systems. They suggested that further understanding of this process of negotiation is needed, to better understand how teachers make decisions and the impacts that these decisions have on pupils. In part, this study takes up this challenge. By taking a step back and starting the discussion by

thinking about the meaning of success we can begin to see how individuals' beliefs and values influence how they negotiate balancing measures of student-level and school-level success. Increasing accountability measures can be seen as tool for wielding increasing levels of control over schools, teachers and teaching-practices, fundamentally degrading the capacity of education to be critical, imaginative and ultimately emancipatory (Giroux, 2010). In Chapter 7 I develop this discussion by examining the influence of increasingly restrictive controls on teachers. By exploring the role of accountability systems as mediators for imposing externally determined definitions of success in a process that removes agency, I argue for the importance of 'uncertainty' as a way of safeguarding space for teachers to resist these external definitions and negotiate their own definitions of success.

2.3 Success, aspirations and the purpose of education

Contrary to much of the policy debate which points to a 'poverty of aspirations' amongst economically disadvantaged pupils (Bennett, 2012), Treanor (2017) suggested that it was not lower aspirations, but rather a sense of powerlessness to realise their aspirations which impacted on pupils' educational experiences. Baker et al. (2014) further suggested that teachers had a significant influence on pupils' aspirations and educational decision-making. Persistent low attainment, unsurprisingly, seemed to reduce pupils' aspirations (McCulloch, 2017), suggesting that although aspirations do have a role in determining educational progress, the reverse influence is important. The literature on aspirations highlights the tension between visions of education which are either emancipatory of indoctrinating. The word 'emancipation' come from Latin and literally means 'coming out of ownership' (Stevenson, 2015). It has come to mean becoming free from political, societal or legal restrictions. In education, the process of emancipation is linked to the process of becoming independent, of gaining ownership over your identity. Indoctrination represents the other end of the spectrum. Originally meaning 'teaching', indoctrination has come to suggest a form of instruction that is oppressive and controlling, fostering dependence not independence (Stevenson, 2015). Negotiating the balance between emancipation and indoctrination is critical in an environment in which pupils are framed as having low aspirations and in which teachers are expected to teach pupils how and what to aspire. This discussion resonates with

the theme raised in this thesis regarding the negotiation between pupils, teachers and policy-makers as they navigate conflicting definitions of success.

Freire (2000) outlined a radical vision of education, centred around the relationship between teacher and student, which highlighted the potential for education to be either oppressive or emancipatory. Freire contested the narrative which frames education, and hence emancipation, as something done *to* the student *by* the teacher. He argued for a dialogic pedagogy-of-freedom in which "education is not carried out by 'A' for 'B' or by 'A' about 'B', but rather by 'A' with 'B'" (p.93). Freire described manipulation as an attempt to "anesthetize the people so they will not think" (p.150) and suggested that a method of manipulation "is to inoculate individuals with the bourgeois appetite for personal success" (p.150), echoing my use of indoctrination in this thesis. Biesta (2020) added to this discussion by proposing 'subjectification' as a fundamental domain of education. He emphasised the process of "arousing a desire in children and young people to exist as the *subject* of their own life" (pp.94-95). There are parallels with Sen's (2001) description of an 'agent' as an individual who has the capability to act to bring about change in line with their own values. Sen emphasised the importance of education as something that both has the potential to help empower individuals to achieve their goals but also empowers individuals to challenge and explore those goals in the first place. This study explores this second feature of education: what pupils, teachers and policy-makers perceive as success and how are these perceptions are constructed and negotiated.

Sadler (1989) described an important element of education as the "transition from feedback to self-monitoring" (p.126), to highlight the shifting of judgement from something done by an educator to a learner towards something that the learner can do for themselves. This echoes Goodall's (2018) claim that:

> "A good schooling system makes itself redundant, by producing learners who are capable of learning independently, outside and outwith the classroom"
>
> (p.604)

Both of these point to the growing independence of learners. If we understand emancipation to mean coming out of ownership, then we have to consider the mechanisms of ownership that we are referring to. Whilst I would not suggest educators have legal or physical ownership of their students, their monopoly-of-judgment means they have some ownership of pupils' educational success and, through this, their futures. To develop an education that is emancipatory we have to consider the mechanisms by which learners themselves can take some ownership of their educational process.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Punch and Oancea (2014) described a "pre-empirical stage" in which:

> *analysis of the problem and its context and of the aims and questions for the research clarifies the empirical and methodological considerations* (p.6).

In Chapters 1 and 2, I have illuminated the problem and its context as well as discussing the aims and rationale for the research. In this chapter, I address the methodological considerations which directed the design of my methods, before describing, in chapter 4, the specifics of the research design and methods. I start by justifying my philosophical position, which I describe as ontologically realist but epistemologically constructivist. I explain the principles of the participatory approach which I take in this research. Finally, I describe how my research is guided by Charmaz's (2014) approach to grounded theory.

3.1 Philosophical Positioning

There is a tendency to equate qualitative research with interpretivist approaches. I instead take a separated understanding of epistemology and ontology, such that one doesn't necessarily define the other. I draw on Tikly's (2015) development of Bhaskar's (1975) 'critical realism' as a bridge between different paradigms (Parra et al., 2021). Bhaskar and Tikly as well as theorists, such as Freire, Sen and Biesta, who are influential for this thesis, take as fundamental, the importance of emancipation in much of their work. The phenomena of interest for this research were perceptions of success and individual experiences of education. Knowledge of these must be socially constructed, hence my epistemological constructivist position. However, they reflect deeper 'structures' (Tikly, 2015) which can have causal relationships with pupils educational outcomes and futures.

3.2 Participatory approach

I take a participatory approach to ensure that the research reflects as meaningfully as possible the lived-realities of participants, as well as to challenge the entrenched power-asymmetries which dominate conventional methods (Nind, 2021; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). I hope to co-produce research which is relevant and representative of the priorities of the participants (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). As a teacher, I recognised that learning suffered when pupils were passive participants and benefitted when pupils took ownership of their learning (Freire, 2000; M. Mills, 2014). Similarly, participatory approaches to research prioritise shared ownership, seeking to produce more meaningful and impactful research (C.MacDonald, 2012). I have previously participated as a teacher in research studies and those which prioritised my engagement and influence, had greater impact on my practice.

3.2.1 Hart's ladder of participation

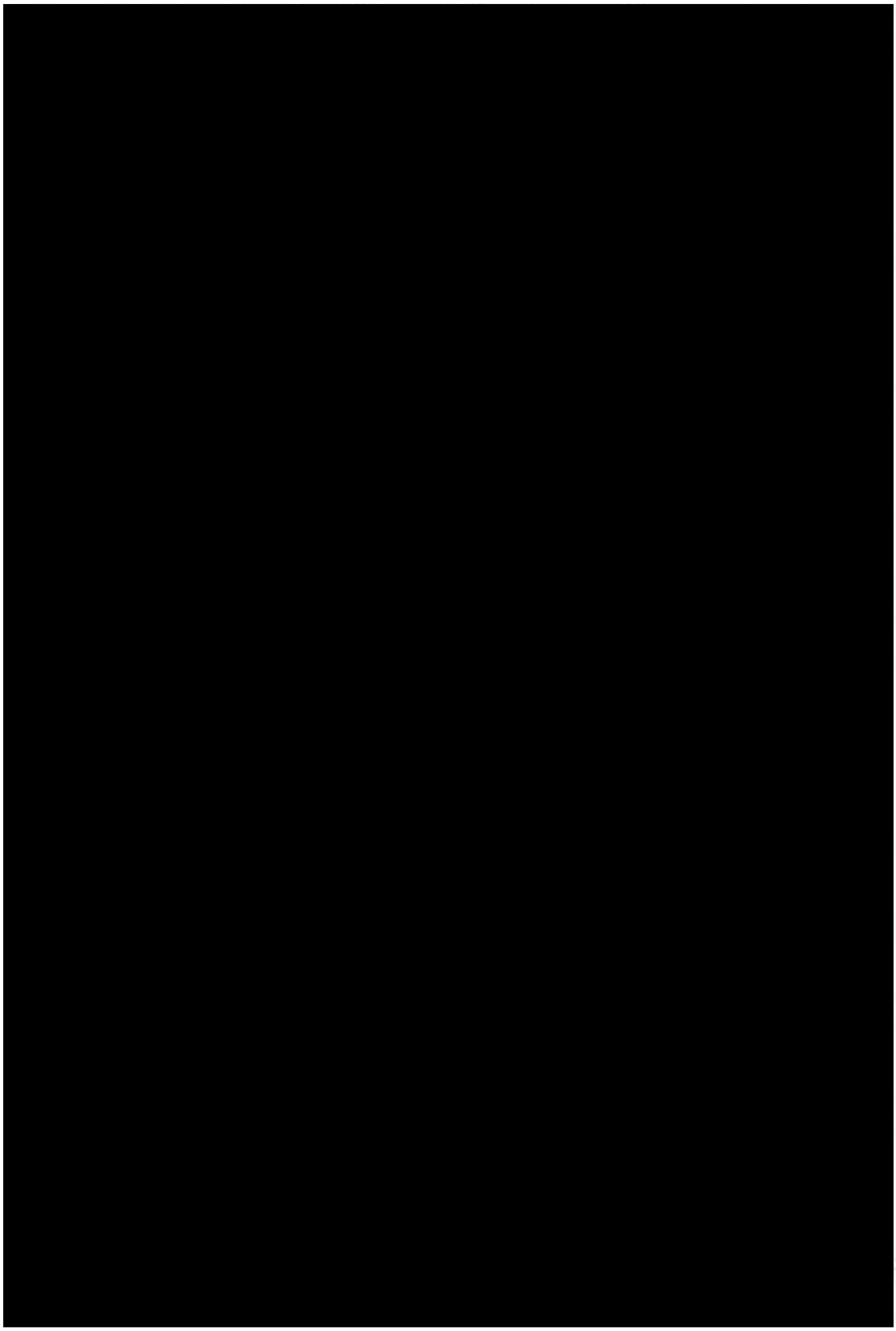
Hart (1992) developed his 'ladder of participation' (figure 3.1) to reflect Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizenship participation. In both cases, the ladder reflects a commitment to the ideals of democracy and the challenge in realising these. More recently Hart (2008) has clarified this model, emphasising its intention as a tool for reflection on the participatory nature of a project or study, as opposed a definitive metric or ranking system. Hart argues that 'higher' levels of participation aren't necessarily superior to 'lower' ones. Instead, he urges researchers to reflect on how the nature of the project involves the participating children and whether a higher degree of participation would improve it.

Given the focus on personal lived-experiences of participants and the aim to develop theory grounded in this experience, a participatory approach felt appropriate (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Planning for authentic participation from children requires flexibility in both direction and methods (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015b). Whilst the time constraints associated with carrying out research as part of my master's degree as well as the need to have a pre-determined research design for ethical clearance make it impractical to carryout research that is child-initiated, there are three aspects of my research design, which prioritise participation:

1. The interviews were designed to be accessible, to cover topics which the participants consider meaningful to their lives, and to engender learning
2. The photo-voice project increased the accessibility of the research and allowed pupils to set the initial topic for discussion, giving them some ownership of the interview.
3. The steering committee ensured repeated engagement with participants who shaped data collection and analysis, ensuring any findings remained relevant to them.

3.2.2 Engagement, Ownership and Learning

The word 'participate' has roots in Latin with 'pars', meaning 'part', and 'capare', meaning 'take' (Hoad, 2003). The combination of these, 'participare', means both to participate, 'taking part', and to share, 'taking *a* part'. These two meanings of the word illustrate my understanding of participatory research. On the surface, participation is about engagement, about *taking part* in the research process. Having participants engage meaningfully with the research process lends credibility and validity to the research findings. On a deeper level, participation is about the ownership of the research process, *taking a part* of the decision-making power. This means framing the participants as co-researchers, who are not just sites of data-extraction, but active producers of that knowledge. It involves sharing the power and control that the researcher has over much of the research process. Vare (2007) frames participation as learning and I include this as a third element of my understanding of participation.



3.3 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a rejection of the dominant "hypothesis-testing" approach to scientific research, grounded theory instead prioritises an inductive approach to generate new theories or extend existing theory. Constructivist grounded theory, developed principally by Charmaz (2014), extends the original (post)positivist epistemology, recognising that "all data reflect the historical, material, social, and situational conditions of their production" (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019, p.751). Grounded theory is a flexible methodological approach, but most approaches retain certain key features:

1. An iterative and concurrent approach to data collection and analysis, with analysis directly influencing subsequent data collection
2. A delayed literature review to reduce the influence of existing theories
3. Development of theory that is *grounded* in the data rather than preconceived ideas or theories

3.3.1 Rationale for Constructivist Grounded Theory

Throughout its history, grounded theory has been used and adapted by researchers working within different philosophical paradigms (Levers, 2013). As a physicist-turned-social-scientist with experience of the limitations of an overly quantitative understanding of education (section 1.2), I was drawn to this approach to research which challenges dominant ideals of research quality. Given the nature of this research project, which is exploratory, participatory and grounded in the experiences of participants, a grounded theory approach aligned well. As an 'emergent method' (Charmaz, 2008), grounded theory is well-suited to participatory research, allowing for a process that is open-ended and for which the destination is uncertain and unknown. I draw on grounded theory as a powerful methodological approach for emergent, participatory and critically realist research with an emancipatory focus (Charmaz, 2017).

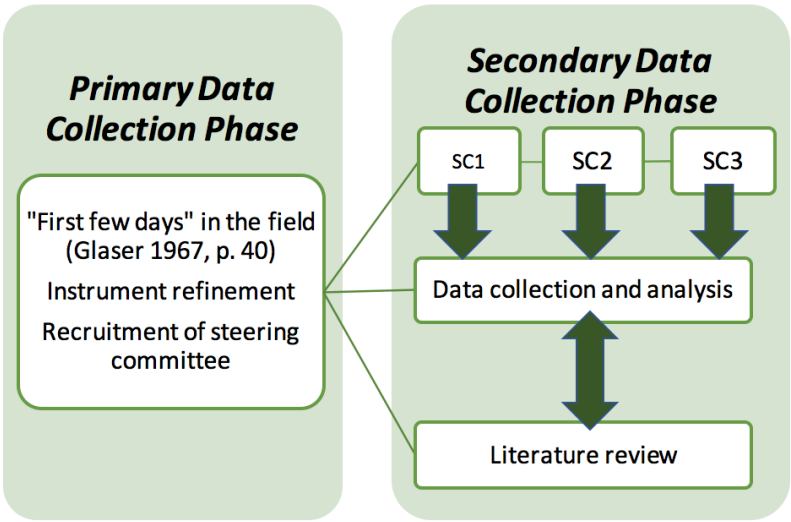
Chapter 4 Methods

This chapter describes the study design and implementation. It comprises three sections: the first addresses how the data were produced and analysed, the next discuses some of the ethical considerations, and the last is a reflection on the rigour of this study. I have included additional material in appendix 4.

4.1 Data Collection

4.1.1 Study Design

I used in-depth focussed-interviews as the primary method for data collection, both for their flexibility to follow a topic that matched the priority of the participant and for their capacity to probe important findings. With pupils, interviews were supplemented by photo-voice projects, carried out prior to the interview. These represented methods for data collection in and of themselves, whilst also providing a stimulus for interviews. Data collection took place over four months, alongside the literature review, with school holidays providing useful breaks for deeper analysis and reflection. Finally, the study was supported by a steering committee, recruited from participants who took part in the initial phase of data collection. This group comprised of 3 pupils, a teacher, a policy-maker, and my supervisor, and guided both data collection and analysis. This study design is represented in figure 4.1, below.



[Figure 4.1 – Study overview (SC is abbreviation for Steering Committee Meeting)]

4.1.2 Recruitment

The purpose of this research was to explore a phenomenon, rather than to make generalisable claims about a population, so I was not concerned about representativeness, rather about the credibility of the claims I made. I attempted to balance the practicalities of completing the research in time for submission as part of my Master's degree alongside the aim to reach the point of 'theoretical saturation' (Charmaz, 2014). The concept of 'theoretical saturation', developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a tool to guide sample-size, has received significant attention in the literature, with authors criticising its inconsistent and under-explained application (Charmaz, 2014). Bowen (2008) suggests 'sampling adequacy' (p.141) to explicate that the end point of recruitment is when you feel confident that you have collected sufficient data to support the theoretical categories that you have constructed during the analysis. Charmaz (2014), suggested that categories become 'saturated' when "fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights" (p.213).

Whilst I initially planned to interview 5 teachers, 5 policy makers and 10 pupils, sample-size was flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2021): after early analysis, I decided to recruit more pupils than originally planned. Data collection took place over two main phases: a primary phase, with 6 pupils, 1 teacher and 1 policy-maker and a secondary phase, with 7 pupils, 6 teachers and 5 policy-makers. All school pupils were in years 9-11 (aged 13-16). Details of the recruitment process, including example recruitment emails, are given in appendix B.

Grounded theory suggests the use of theoretical sampling (Conlon et al., 2020), whereby recruitment is driven by ongoing analysis. Whilst my sampling was purposive (Chun Tie et al., 2019), I was forced to balance this against practical limitations. The pupils and teacher for the primary data collection phase were recruited from a school in which I had worked previously. This was mostly pragmatic for reasons - two other schools who had initially agreed to take part pulled out after the UK government changed its guidelines and closed schools after they had been open for only one day after the Christmas break (BBC, 2021). Pupils were over-recruited in this phase, both to increase the likelihood of recruiting enough for the steering committee as well as to over-represent their voice from the start and to guide the initial the direction of the research, I felt it was important to privilege the views

of pupils. My supervisor used her professional network to recruit an experienced policy-maker who would be able to contribute both in the interviews and to the steering committee.

For the second phase of data collection, participants were recruited from four London schools. Schools predominantly led the recruitment process, although I made efforts to purposefully request teachers across a range of experience and levels of seniority, following identified differences between early-career and experienced teachers as well as those with additional responsibilities. Schools distributed my recruitment materials to pupils who self-selected to participate and organised interviews directly with me by email. My supervisor led on the recruitment of policy-makers, inviting participants from her professional network based on whether she felt they would be a good fit for the study.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly difficult for schools, faced with uncertainty and rapidly changing guidelines which impacted both teaching and assessment. This meant that many schools withdrew from the study at various stages. Given the exploratory and participatory nature of the study, I prioritised having enough time for iterative recruitment, data collection and analysis. To this end, I had two schools signed up by the end of November for the initial phase of data collection and another two schools interested in taking part in later stages. My initial timeline involved commencing the first phase of data collection in January, but when schools were told to close on January 6th, all four schools understandably pulled out of the study. Subsequently, recruitment involved negotiating not over-burdening schools, whilst also allowing enough time to allow data collection to progress slowly and iteratively.

Another reflection is the difficulty I had in recruiting enough children. Because pupils' accounts are regularly under-represented in research, I felt it was important to over-represent pupils. However, schools understandably have safeguarding protocols in place which act to restrict access to pupils. This was intensified by my request to conduct online interviews, an experience which was new to schools. Schools were therefore reluctant to allow me to interview pupils and I frequently had contradicting interactions with members of the same school who had different understandings of the same safeguarding policies. Whilst I strongly agree with the importance of protecting those who are more vulnerable, an un-

intended consequence of this may be to limit their opportunity to engage with external opportunities, such as research.

4.1.3 Data collection: Photo-voice

The use of arts-based methods with young people has received increasing attention and support as a way of facilitating meaningful participation (J.-A. MacDonald et al., 2011). The photo-voice project was carried out with pupils and involved taking photos or collecting images (examples in appendix F) which represented success from the perspectives of the participants. These photos were submitted to me by email before the interview and acted as an initial stimulus to guide the start of the discussion.

The use of photo-voice in this study illustrates the two aspects of participation - engagement and ownership. The project helped prepare pupils to articulate complex and abstract ideas during the interview. It also gave them time to familiarise themselves with the research project and gain confidence with the subject matter before the start of the interview. Using the submitted photos as a stimulus for the interviews meant they started on comfortable ground, facilitating meaningful discussion. One pupil stated, “having to take photos helped me express my ideas” (Ismail, pupil) and another reflected that it increased her confidence going into the interview because, “I felt like I knew more about what we were going to talk about” (Katie, pupil). The photo-voice element emphasised an element of participation as ownership: by submitting photos, pupils set the initial direction and topic, taking some ownership of the interview itself.

4.1.4 Data collection: Interviews

Interviews are the most common form of data collection for grounded theory research as they allow in-depth and flexible exploration of new ideas (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Interviews took place over Microsoft Teams. Participants had the option to keep their cameras on or off. They were recorded and transcribed, using Microsoft Teams auto-transcription, before I edited them for accuracy and clarity (Appendix H). Anonymised transcripts were sent to participants by email so that they could check for accuracy and remove any quotes if they wished. Interviews took around 45 minutes, although pupils interviews were shorter,

recognising the tiring nature of extended video-calls. Interviews were conducted as 'focussed-interviews' (May, 2011), with loosely-structured interview guides which were continually adapted based on analysis of previous interviews (Appendix C). Participants were encouraged to reflect on or develop ideas to encourage learning through their participation (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017).

Interviews began with participants describing personal perceptions of success, either represented in their photos in the case of pupils, or with a discussion about their time at school as a child with adults. This structure facilitated rapport-building and participation, with participants often sharing reflective and personal accounts of their changing views of educational success. Participants were encouraged to ask questions, particularly towards the end of the interviews, and this bi-directional questioning further enabled a more participatory interview. Almost every participant reported enjoying the interview experience, with most reflecting that they had found the discussion engaging and important. The following exchange at the end of an interview reflects, I hope, these three aims; engagement, ownership and learning:

> *I think you're very skilled in your technique, in so much as you really… you're a great listener. You don't interject […] and even when I finish, […] you just pause to allow someone just to extend their thoughts, which I did on several occasions. It's, going to make for a very interesting study I'm sure and further down line and I'd love to have a read of it, if that would be OK.*
>
> (Harris, teacher)

Whilst there is much literature on the use of interviews in the research process (e.g. Robson & McCartan, 2016), the COVID-19 pandemic imposed a switch to remote methods of data collection. Whilst the decision was made out of necessity, this switch presented opportunities as well as challenges. An interview is primarily an interaction, and the nature of this interaction changes when carried out in an online space (Richardson et al., 2021). It is harder to pick up social cues, and occasionally slower internet connections made conversations challenging. In one instance, this made the interview so difficult that we had to re-schedule for another time. This was both frustrating and wasted the time of the teacher

involved, who was already clearly very busy. However, remote interviews meant that participants were able to schedule interviews for times and places that suited them (e.g. Morris, 2015). This flexibility is not normally available to in-person interviews and was considered a benefit by some participants, especially policy-makers who were predominantly working from home and so seemed to find scheduling interviews straightforward. One participant turned their camera off, put headphones in and went for a walk during the interview. This meant that the participant spoke freely, without the self-consciousness brought on by seeing themselves on their computer screen and the constant reminder that they were being interviewed. This interview was reflective and personal, requiring very little input from me. Interviews using hands-free headsets while walking, would be an interesting methodological approach to investigate in a future study.

4.2 Steering Committee

A steering committee made up of three pupils, one teacher and one policy maker was recruited from the initial stages of data collection. This group, along with my supervisor and me, has met twice so far, in April and June, with the final meeting planned for September, once schools re-open. Documentation relating to the steering committee is attached in Appendix G. The steering committee supported the iterative and participatory nature of the research and ensured that the research was held accountable to the lived-experience of participants. It made use of specific knowledge, experience and expertise that participants had to reinforce the analysis and construct meaningful conclusions. I drew on Heron's (1996) description of co-operative inquiry, in that the steering committee was involved throughout the study in decision making around both data collection and analysis (Heron & Reason, 2008). The third meeting of the steering committee is scheduled for September, once the school year has started again, in which I plan to present the results of this research and organise dissemination. I aim to publish the findings from this research in an academic journal and members of the steering committee have been given the option to contribute to the writing and to be a named author on any papers.

4.3 Analytical Strategy

Analysis was conducted iteratively and concurrently with data collection. Analysis started during interviews, by adapting questions and probing interesting ideas. At the end of each interview I wrote interview summaries (Appendix D), which I re-read during analysis. Coding took place using NVivo, and was made up of three phases, open, axial and selective coding, described below. Throughout analysis I engaged in constant comparison of new data with existing data and themes (Mathison, 2005). I listened to the audio of recordings during the first and occasionally subsequent coding of each transcript. Whilst this slowed the coding process, it helped keep a broader picture of the interview, something which otherwise may have been lost.

4.3.1 Comparison

Comparison is integral to the social sciences and the field of Comparative and International Education, almost by definition (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2020; Bray et al., 2014). Grounded theory prioritises 'constant comparison', between and within cases (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I drew comparisons both during interviews, as I asked participants to reflect on their answers, particularly in relation to earlier responses, as well as between and within groups of participants during analysis and steering committee meetings. Kubow & Fossum (2007) advocate for "exploratory comparison" (p.25), whereby they caution against framing comparisons as false-binaries and emphasie the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of educational phenomena. In my descriptive summary of some of the common definitions of success (table 5.1) I have tried to highlight that participants held views the moved along different spectra, as opposed to fitting neatly into dichotomous categories.

4.3.2 Coding

Many grounded theorists refer to the initial coding phase as 'open-coding' (Given, 2008). Open-coding involves 'opening-up' the data by coding both intensively and generatively, and sticking closely to the data - remaining *grounded* in the data. Some grounded theory researchers suggest line-by-line coding, (see Belgrave & Seide, 2019 or Charmaz, 2014), but I have instead tended to code more flexibly and pragmatically (e.g. Elliott, 2018). Where sentences follow together and were, in my view, necessarily linked in order to

be properly understood, I coded larger sections of text under a single code. I also left some pieces of data un-coded where I felt it did not add to the analysis. Coding 'generatively' means generating many codes in a spontaneous and flexible fashion. Where possible, codes closely matched the words and phrases used in the piece of data which lead to the creation of the code, a practice encouraged by Charmaz (2014). In other cases, codes were the first idea that came to me as I was reading or listening to the interview. For example, in one of these generative phases, I wrote two codes, "success is easier to see in hindsight" and "it is hard to predict the future". Eventually, both of these were categorised into the broader theme of "time", and they illuminated important aspects of this theme, about the directionality of time and success. Occasionally it became clear that codes that I had created needed to be further broken down. For example, I initially had a code 'failure' but further divided this into two codes: 'momentary-failure' and 'lasting-failure'. For details see appendix E.

The next phase of coding involved 'axial-coding' (Allen, 2017). This process involves sorting and grouping codes together, beginning to define and make sense of the outputs from the initial phase of coding. I have mentioned repeatedly that the entire research process was iterative and this was particularly true during these two phases of analysis. Often, links between codes are clear immediately, and new codes regularly emerged as I was categorising existing ones. It was predominantly while I was open- and axial-coding that I was continuing data collection, so while I write about these as separate processes, they intermingled and overlapped.

The final phase of analysis - 'selective-coding'- relates to the process of developing or crafting themes and is illustrated in more detail throughout Chapters 5, 6 & 7. My final interviews with school pupils were carried out towards the end of June and proved an opportunity to turn some of the results of this selective analysis back on some raw data in a process that became quite deductive. This helped to convince me that I had adequately saturated some themes (see sections 4.1.2 & 5.4).

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Doing interviews is a privilege granted us, not a right that we have

(Denzin, 2001, p.24)

During the design of this research study, I consulted the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018) and the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee guidelines, in particular those pertaining to research with young people. Ethics approval for the study was granted on December 9th, 2020 (Appendix A). Due to the digital nature of data collection, I carried out a data protection impact assessment using the University of Oxford's education department's data privacy procedure (Appendix A).

Whilst gaining ethical clearance is clearly important, there is a danger that it can lead to a front-loading of ethical decision-making and consideration. Alongside these formal ethical requirements, I reflected on the ethical consideration throughout the research, drawing on Mackworth-Young et al.'s (2019) recommendation of reflexive 'ethics-in-practice' and Simons and Usher's (2000) description of 'situated ethics'. In particular Glen's (ibid.) discussion of 'integrity in action' research aligns well with the participatory nature of this study. These approaches caution against seeing ethical considerations as predictable problems which can be solved through application of pre-determined universal moral principles. Instead, they propose an approach to ethical research that is reflexive and context-dependent, requiring the researcher to adapt and adjust their approach depending on the circumstances. This reflexive approach was supported by discussions with my supervisor, one of my lecturers, my steering committee and student peers where appropriate.

Below, I reflect on three specific ethical issues that arose over during the study: 1) Benefits from the research, 2) participatory ethics and 3) researching with children. Other ethical issues are addressed elsewhere, such as recruitment, as well as the burden placed on participants during a time when they are all likely to be undergoing particularly high levels of professional and personal uncertainty due to the ongoing pandemic.

4.4.1 Who benefits from the research?

An important personal motivation for this research is as part of my master's qualification. However, participants may also benefit as participation in research can be enjoyable and empowering (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Perceptions of benefits of participation varied over the course of the interviews, with several participants expressing hesitancy at the start or reflecting that they had initially been nervous or unsure about participation. However, having gone through the interview, many felt that they had benefitted from the process, both in terms of their own personal learning and from feeling that they had contributed to what they perceived as an important and meaningful study:

> *I'm really glad that you didn't just speak to the people who've already been through the education system, it was people who are actually in it at the moment and are experiencing it every day […] I don't think pupils' voices are heard loud enough.*
>
> (Faith, pupil)

4.4.2 Participatory ethics

Much of the literature and discussion of ethics understandably focusses on the role of the researcher. Ethical decisions are made by the researcher, often on behalf of participants, who are framed as passive and in need of protection from harm (Cohen et al., 2017). In approaching this research with a desire to prioritise a participatory approach to research, I reflected on the meaning of a participatory approach to ethics. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) suggested that most ethical issues revolve around relationships between researchers and participants. Since participatory research seeks explicitly to re-define researcher-participant relationships, it raises additional ethical considerations. This discussion here does not represent an answer, but instead a question which I think is worth further thought and investigation in a future project.

In the first instance, ethical practice is participatory in the sense of participation as 'taking part'. Ethical decisions are shared with participants through the practice of informed consent, and measures to protect confidentiality are discussed and negotiated with

participants. However, I questioned the assumed practice of anonymity and whether anonymity is empowering to participants. It is often claimed to give participants the freedom to express views un-biased by fears of reprisal but there is an important consideration of power hierarchies in the practice of anonymising participation. Participants already in positions of relative power (policy-makers or senior teachers) were most in favour of anonymity. Pupils and early-career teachers were less certain and in some cases seemed interested in the possibility of having their names attached to their data, seeing it as empowering and as a way of having their voice heard.

Gordon questions whether requiring anonymity is a form of silencing (Gordon, 2019). Anonymity can be an important protective measure, but also can potentially be something which prevents participants from owning the narrative that they provide. After discussions with participants I decided to anonymise the research by pseudonymising participants. I still wonder, however, if anonymity better serves those already in positions of power and is less valued by those who are less powerful. Investigation of this is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it represents an interesting avenue to explore further in a later study.

4.4.3 Young people and power

Young people, in particular, are often framed as passive and vulnerable in the ethics literature (Range et al., 2001). During the recruitment process, schools were rightly cautious about allowing me to conduct and record online interviews with pupils. Alongside this were complications associated with informed consent. Whilst, all participants had been given information sheets and had signed assent forms, alongside carers' consent forms, it became clear when discussing some ethical considerations with participants before starting the recording that many hadn't fully read these documents. Whilst we did then discuss the ethical implications for taking part in the research, the degree to which pupils can be said to have given informed consent has to be questioned.

Throughout the recruitment and interview process I witnessed enthusiasm and engagement from pupils. Many pupils reported enjoying and learning from the photo-voice projects. Several pupils also reflected on the importance of these conversations, suggesting

that teachers and policy-makers did not often hear their views. In keeping with Mackworth-Young et al.'s principle of reflexive ethics, flexibility was given to participants to negotiate the mechanisms of data collection: for example, 5 interviews took place with two students together, where they had suggested this would help them feel more comfortable, two pupils and one teacher asked for interviews to take place without a camera and 4 pupils asked not to submit photos.

Chapter 5 What does success mean to you?

> *I'd say everyone is successful in school, but not one person is successful in everything they do. Success should be defined as a process. So, when I see others around me putting in 100% in subjects that that they love, I feel like that they've reached that level of success: they're doing what they love, doing what they want to do and putting in the effort.*
>
> (Ismail, pupil)

When asked what they perceive as the meaning of success, participants' responses were diverse. Some were concrete: the results of a test, learning a particular dance move, playing in a football game. Others were more abstract: doing something that you love, being happy and resilient, contributing to society. Many participants highlighted the divergent nature of success - that success could and should mean different things to different individuals - but also spoke of the converging pressures of standardised-assessment and accountability mechanisms. Success was described as processual, with many participants using the metaphor of a journey, as a contrast to outcome-based definitions of success. Participants highlighted the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic definitions of success – who defines whether you are successful. Some participants emphasised the contextual nature of success - success could look different not only for different people, but on different days or in different circumstances. The relationship between success and independence was emphasised, particularly by pupils. Whilst for most people success tended to be framed positively, for some success was more nuanced, with both positive and negative aspects. Table 5.1 summarises these varying categorisations of the meaning of success. I then illustrate the process of comparison across three axes, a vertical, horizontal and temporal axis, adapted from Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study approach, as a useful analytical lens. This comparison forms the basis for the construction of the emergent themes presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

What does success mean?	Descriptor of category	Example Quotes
Concrete and abstract	Some definitions of success referred to concrete examples, whereas others involved more abstract ideas.	"When I was thinking about the question of what is success, I started to think that it can be so many different things. For example, success for one person can be getting up early. For another person, it's finishing their degree or getting the job they've always wanted. […] There are little moments, you just made your bed or you missed your alarm, but you still made your train, tiny moments of success, but then there are bigger moments like your big dream, like your ultimate goal." (Etienne, pupil) "The first one is with my friends. We're just cooking together. I thought that linked to success because I was in this position where I could just have fun, with my friends and not worry about other things for the time being" (Rhianna, pupil) "I define success as being happy and resilient. If you're not happy and you're not resilient, you're not gonna get nowhere." (Fatima, pupil)

What does success mean?	Descriptor of category	Example Quotes
Convergent and divergent	Convergent definitions of success stem from pressures to succeed according to pre-determined criteria, as opposed to divergent success which allows for greater diversity in what success in any given situation could look like.	"Success reminds me of a cloud, because it's always changing. And when people look at clouds they each see something different. I don't look at success and see one thing I see a lot of things." (Lili, pupil) "Success comes in many different forms - you don't have to be successful on exams to show what your strong points are, you don't necessarily need to be smart to be successful. Like models, they don't do tests to be successful." (Anne, pupil) "We had a support teacher in from Oxford who gave me very good feedback for thinking a bit differently from the constraints of the curriculum. And I remember being really pissed-off with my normal English teacher because she kept marking me down […] I think I had a bit of a diversity of thought and I think the teachers at the time didn't have energy or time, not that they didn't have the inclination, but I think that they're just so busy marking coursework that slightly different answers didn't fit in the box" (Leonie, policy-maker)
Processual and outcomes-oriented	Many participants emphasised the processual nature of success, often in contrast to the final outcome, such as the final result after a sequence of learning.	"I think that what's important about success is the journey that you had to take to get there." (Stephen, pupil) "I would define success as a journey, not as a single moment." (Ismail, pupil) "Success is having a class and taking them from year nine when they start GCSEs and getting them all the way through to year 11 and seeing that progress" (Juliette, teacher)

What does success mean?	Descriptor of category	Example Quotes
Context-dependent nature of success	Success can mean different things in different contexts.	"I don't think I was particularly successful at school. But I know if I'd gone to a different school I would have been successful." (Isabelle, teacher) "If you've got a really naughty kid, who hasn't got a very good home life, where it's very much a gang culture. If that kid survives from year 7 to year 11 and comes out with something that's success for them. They don't necessarily need a to have passed all their GCSEs" (Juliette, teacher) "You shouldn't really judge a child by the way they're doing in school. You should really consider everything they do outside of school as well as within the school." (Katie, pupil)
Extrinsic and intrinsic	Participants reflected on the importance of who defined success and felt most successful when their own intrinsic definitions of success were validated by external recognition.	"My last picture was the Oxford stamp on the letter that you sent us. Oxford is a University that makes me think of success. Lots of people know Oxford, not just in this country but abroad and that makes me think of success." (Rameez, pupil) "I think a large part of success is other people giving you that reassurance, giving that recognition, making you feel supported by them in your own success." (Stephen, pupil) "Success is dictated by the government's belief of what an education needs to look like"(Georgia, teacher) "I liked being liked by teachers." (Ben, policy-maker)

What does success mean?	Descriptor of category	Example Quotes
Success and Independence	Success was often characterised by increasing independence, progression and realisation of life ambitions.	"On your first day of school, especially as a young female, walking to school by yourself is a success." (Faith, pupil) "Our vision is that every student leaves school with the ability and the knowledge to choose what they want to do next" (Georgia, teacher) "The bit that I like is the fact that I have a group of 18-year-olds sitting in front of me who are about to start their lives and I get to be part of that process." (Isabelle, teacher)
Exams, grades and labels	Exams and assessment dominated the discussion. Every participant raised this early in the interview, without prompting.	"Success in schools is just grades. I can't really think of how you can be successful without getting the grades. You can't be a top student without the grades. You could be well behaved, be good to the teachers but without the grades, I don't really see how you could be successful." (Yusuf, pupil) "I thought I was a success because I achieved good qualifications at the end of it and I think for me, that would have been my view of success." (Wendy, policy-maker) "I think in terms of definitions of success I was quite high achieving - in terms of A-levels and GCSE grades I did quite well. I did well on tests and things. So, numerically, I think I was relatively successful and I think when I was younger I got a lot of joy out of that self-esteem boost from that numerical definition of success." (Thea, teacher)

What does success mean?	Descriptor of category	Example Quotes
Success isn't always a positive thing	Some participants gave a more negative description of success.	"I think levels of happiness actually didn't correlate entirely to how good I was at doing things […] So, on the one hand, I was very successful at being good at lessons and passing tests […] but socially I felt more like a fish out of water" (Sina, policy-maker) "Some people can settle and be happy, but not as successful as they could be. That's where that pressure comes from because I want to be happy, but also, I want to be successful. I see that the difference in my parents, my mum is happy, but she's not a success. But then my dad's really successful, but I feel like he's not as happy" (Rhianna, pupil) "Your peers are the people that you're constantly trying to get a better grade than, or be the better person… But then your peers are also people who make your day. They're your friends they're the people who get you through hard times […] so it's almost a toxic success" (Faith, pupil)

[Table 5.1 – What does success mean to you? A summary of participant perceptions.]

5.1 Vertical axis – Success is more convergent at higher levels

Success can be defined at different levels in education. When asked what success means to them, pupils think of their own success:

> *I feel like being successful is something that you can only define for yourself and for me, being successful doesn't involve anyone else but myself.*
>
> (Ismail, pupil)

Teachers could recall their perceptions of success as school children but now, as teachers, their understanding of success is more complex as they now have to think about whole classes of pupils:

> *When you go up the hierarchy of the school you have more data. As a class teacher, you care about your 30 kids. As a head of KS3 I think, 'right, where did those 650 pieces of data come from?' and you do lose that background information? […] we've got 2000 kids in the school. That data on paper, you don't see the story behind it. You don't see the SEN need that kid had. You don't see the EAL needs or the attendance that kid had.*
>
> (Juliette, teacher)

This pattern continues moving up further to policy-makers, who think about and define success in terms of hundreds of thousands of individuals.

> *I think that we have, in our technical world, become very obsessed with making things look sensible. I don't think that the individual is forgotten in those discussions, but I don't think you can design an education system that satisfies every single individual. There's 750,000 students certificating each year in the GCSE maths or English. But I think we could probably do a bit better making sure that as we develop policy, the unintended consequences on individuals are*

really understood. […] But I think you'd be naïve to think that you can think about every single individual.

(Leonie, policy-maker)

Consequentially, defining success at each level has to become more technical, less nuanced. This is characterised by increasingly convergent definitions of success, with less capacity for individualised definitions. These more restricted definitions of success propagate back down the hierarchy, predominantly through accountability measures, meaning that although teachers', and particularly pupils' definitions of success are divergent, they are forced to negotiate these within a system which prescribes narrower definitions:

Getting people across hurdles, that are represented by a number of grades and a number of qualifications is the definition of success, as defined in accountability measures

(Wendy, policy-maker)

So, I think they've taken almost an average of the whole world and said right, this is what works for the average, let's stick everyone into this situation so then we'll get a good percentage who go up in the world… I don't think it works for everyone, but I understand where they're coming from.

(Faith, pupil)

I think the accountability system probably drives a lot of that thinking, because that's how schools and teachers are measured […] In relation to the standards discussion, you have to be able to say with confidence that if it's someone's coming out with a qualification […] that they've got to a particular level. Do you compromise that principle to satisfy a different objective which is that you want to recognize different people's capabilities?

(Leonie, policy-maker)

5.1 Horizontal comparison – Resistance is a privilege

Comparing horizontally, the contextual nature of success becomes apparent. Several teachers and policy-makers used the metaphor of a 'big fish in a small pond' to refer to their primary schools and feeling of success by comparing themselves to others in their environment. In contrast Isabelle (teacher, table 5.1) attended an academically high-attaining school and so felt comparatively unsuccessful. Perhaps unsurprisingly all the teachers and policy-makers recruited were relatively successful at school, so it is amongst the pupils that the opposite end of this contextual spectrum is most apparent:

> *I look around the class and people are getting 7s, 8s and I'm sitting there getting a 5 [..] and I'm surprised I'm doing higher maths, I don't know if I can achieve those grades and that worries me.*
>
> (Violet, pupil)

> *When you're in a classroom you say, 'oh, that person over there can do that, and I can't. Why can't I do that? She's achieving this. She is being successful in this task and I am not. What is wrong with me?'*
>
> (Faith, pupil)

Going beyond defining success by comparing yourself against others, however, is the idea that definitions of success vary depending on the context of the individual in question. In many instances, pupils with lower past attainment or from more deprived backgrounds had more limited definitions of success imposed on them. Participants described diminished definitions of success for pupils in lower-sets, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. Juliette's quote in table 5.1):

> *We try and celebrate individuals that have managed to get through the trauma of living in West London, with their migrant parents and difficult home backgrounds*
>
> (Nathan, teacher)

5.3 Temporal comparison – Are definitions of success becoming narrower?

This study was conducted at one time point, meaning temporal tracing of definitions of success is not possible, but some participants raised ideas that highlight this comparison. Some of the more experienced teachers claimed that definitions of success were narrowing over time, in part driven by increasing accountability measures:

> *If I think of the nature of curriculums now compared to 10 years ago, it's so geared towards high attaining, middle class students, armed with cultural capital. The movement to linear exams, the morphing of the system and Progress-8*[1] *where we have these notions of certain academic subjects, in certain brackets. It penalizes schools that would want to offer a bespoke curriculum for students that are most in need of it.*
>
> (Harris, teacher)

These reflections fit within the broader discussion, highlighted in the literature review in Chapter 2, illustrating how success educational reforms have acted to further restrict and constrain practice, a theme I will return to in Chapter 6.

5.4 Two emergent theories

From this and further analysis, discussed in chapter 4, I have constructed two themes which emerged from my analysis and interpretation of the data. In chapter 4 I claimed to have reached theoretical saturation for the first but not the second of these to themes and I justify this below, alongside brief overviews of the two themes. These themes are then discussed in more detail in chapters 6 and 7, where I attempt to situate them within the body of literature.

[1] Progress-8 is an accountability measure, brought in to attempt to give a measure of pupil progress between the end of primary and their GCSEs, as opposed to relying solely on attainment (DfE, 2020a)

5.4.1 Assessment and accountability mediate the negotiation of intrinsic and extrinsic definitions of success

The first emergent theme focusses on extrinsic and intrinsic definitions of success and the role of assessment and accountability practices in mediating these. This was raised by every participant, usually very early on in the interview. Preliminary analysis of early interviews enabled deeper probing in later interviews, as the theme developed. Additionally, in the first steering committee meeting, an early version of this theme was proposed and discussed, providing valuable critique of the theme. As data collection proceeded, it became apparent that new data collection was in fact providing more of a verification of the theme, than advancing and developing it further, at which point I felt confident that I had sufficiently saturated this theme. To briefly summarise, before a more detailed discussion in the next chapter, this theme suggests that the negotiation of intrinsic and extrinsic definitions of success is mediated at the individual-level by assessments and at the system-level by accountability measures. When these practices prioritise only extrinsic definitions this undermines the process of education, rendering it indistinguishable from indoctrination. Redressing the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic definitions of success then becomes vital for a quality education which allows for a multiplicity of successes.

> *It takes a narrow view of what success is, but the intention behind national tests is to make sure that every child gets a good education. We measure that by these expectations we have of what they should be able to do by certain ages and who has and hasn't met that. And what the school is then doing to help the children to catch up […] So, we are setting very clear messages on what success is. But as a school, you would hope that they would also be thinking about other measures of success: children being engaged in the subject, children feeling like this is a worthwhile thing for them to be doing. A teacher who can impart that to their students is succeeding, even if that doesn't always translate into every child meeting the performance expectations on certain tests. But that's not something we're measuring, so it's not something that the system necessarily always sees as important.*
>
> (Ben, policy-maker).

5.4.2 The pressure for linear progression engenders anxiety about the future and disincentivises exploration and self-discovery.

The second emergent theme relates to the intersection of success and identity formation. It builds most directly on the conceptualisation of success as independence and develops an emancipatory vision of education. It focusses on the tension in the process of education in that it can be used as a mechanism for control or for empowerment, in particular by exploring the longitudinal nature of educational-success. To develop this theme further, I suggest that repeated interviews with participants, either side of important transitional experiences, such as their GCSE or A-level exams would provide important theoretical insight, something I suggest in my conclusion in chapter 8. Originally coded as “everything is certain in hindsight, but the future is impossible to predict”, this theme attempts to develop a view of education that is exploratory, emancipatory and embraces uncertainty.

Chapter 6 Uncertainty, Assessment and Accountability

Little boxes on the hillside

Little boxes made of ticky-tacky

Little boxes on the hillside

Little boxes all the same

[…]

And the children go to school […]

And then to the university

Where they are put in boxes

And they come out all the same

(Reynolds, 1962, verses 1&3)

> *It's this box that everyone has, […] society's standard, this box that's been carved out for you, that's been ingrained with you for a long time […] And then if you don't fit into society's box, society and other people look down on you […] I went to school and every day I faced this box - what my peers expect of me, what my teachers expect of me, what the whole universe and the world and my future expects of me.*
>
> (Faith, pupil)

Assessment is both a measurement and a judgement. The act of measurement is often positioned as neutral, but judgement implies a normative aspect - certain things are considered more successful than others. A challenge arises in the bi-directional use of educational assessment in systems of accountability. Moving up the educational hierarchy from pupils to policy-makers, assessment is used to observe and measure success, but moving back down from systems to individuals, assessment is used to define success. This bi-directional nature of educational assessment reflects two aspects of Foucault's (1977) conceptualisation of the exertion of disciplinary power: surveillance and normalisation. This

is reflected in the way in which educational-assessment measures and judges, and educational-accountability aims to understand and control.

In this chapter, I discuss how assessment, used as a metric for accountability, changes our understanding of education and becomes a mechanism of control. I illustrate this in three sections, first discussing how our collective understanding of the purpose and process of education has been distorted by the dominance of 'data-driven' approaches to education. I then reflect on the interaction of data and the neoliberal value of competition, before exploring the ways in which the reliance on a data-based understanding of education has restricted teaching practice and increased the level of control over education, particularly for lower-attaining and disadvantaged pupils. I conclude by arguing for the importance of uncertainty as a fundamental aspect of education, emphasising it as the element that distinguishes education from indoctrination.

6.1 They only know me by my data

> *A lot of my line managers don't see me teaching. They don't know what I'm doing day-to-day. Everyone is so busy […] that no one really knows if I'm a successful teacher except in the grade that I produce at the end of the year for the students.*
>
> (Georgia, teacher)

> *It literally doesn't matter whether you are the best teacher in the world or you are a crap teacher, […] as long as you produce that data.*
>
> (Isabelle, teacher)

In every interview, the dominance of data as a way of understanding education and individuals was clear. Pupils spoke about grades and test results, teachers described targets and league-tables, and policy makers described the importance of accurate measurements, so that the data produced was reliable. Elwood (2012) reported that for some students in her study examinations represented the single most important part of their education. Across the

literature, researchers emphasise the impact that grades and labels have on their understanding of education and, ultimately, on their identity (e.g. Chamberlain et al., 2011; Hanson, 1993, 2002; Hattie et al., 2015; Reay & Wiliam, 1999; Tran, 2014). In the rest of this section I will discuss the consequences of having a data-driven understanding of success and the purpose of education on our understanding and practice of education, in particular through the growth of systems of accountability.

Pupils almost exclusively referred to the subjects that they studied by the exams at the end: 'GCSE physics', 'GCSE geography' or 'GCSE PE'. There was the overwhelming sense that the purpose of education was defined by the examinations that happen at the end of each period of education. When national examinations were cancelled in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, students reflected in a Guardian article that they felt that "another year has been wasted" (Blackall, 2021, paragraph 12). I will discuss some of the consequences of defining success in education according to its outcome in the next chapter, but this tension reflects Campbell's law:

> *the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor*
>
> (Campbell, 1979, p.85).

The dominance of quantitative metrics of success in the English education system has distorted our collective sense of the purpose of education to the stage where every participant used examination results as one of, if not the only, measure of educational success (Yusuf - table 5.1).

The two quotes at the start of this section highlight an important idea that came out of discussions with teachers. Both teachers speak about data that *they have produced.* This reflects the tension in the fact that this data, and most teachers were referring to the results of GCSE examinations, is somehow seen as being produced both by teachers and students. Teachers felt that a significant part of their role was the production of data. Selwyn (2021) reflected on the 'human labour' required in the production of data, and argued that the

'datafication' of education has resulted in a shifting of teacher's workload away from traditional teaching practices and towards the production of data. Similarly, Ball (2010) described the effect of 'performativity' in education to "re-orient pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes" (p.126) and cautioned that teachers' experience and understanding of their own work was being distorted into an experience that was "inauthentic and alienating" (p.126). In the next two sections I discuss two consequences of this distortion in our understanding of education: the intensification of competition and the reduction of risk. In the quote below, Juliette (teacher) articulates clearly the ideas I have raised so far: the use of data to define success, the additional labour required to produce it and the inevitable distortion of the process of education into a repetitive process of data-production:

> *Schools are measured by their success in terms of data: league-tables, how many kids you get an A* or 9, how many kids you get sent to Oxbridge or Russell Group. Intrinsically, although it shouldn't be that way, we are governed and shaped by data […] But with that data that we produce, that we attained from our students, there's a question below the surface, which is 'how is that data produced?' and 'what time is given to do that data?' If people want things done properly, you have to have enough time. You have to have enough time to mark it, to moderate it, to input it, to check it. The reality about the education system, in any year group, there's not enough time to do most things. It's very much an assessment cycle: you teach, midpoint assess, re-teach, endpoint assess, and you start again, and again… We're all thinking, 'What is the next assessment? What do I have to do? What do they have to do?'*
>
> (Juliette, teacher)

6.2 Competition or Collaboration

6.2.1 Neoliberalism and Competition in Education

Education is arguably more high-stakes than ever as competition for jobs and degrees intensifies. All pupils reflected on an element of success being when you out-perform a peer; for example, Sebastian (pupil) described an element of success as "competing with classmates [..] getting better scores than them or completing work faster." Measuring your success against others was a repeated theme throughout. Competition existed not only amongst pupils as they vie for the highest grades - and therefore entry into the 'best' sixth-forms or universities - but also between schools as they compete for recognition and for funding. This resonates with other research which highlights the intensification of competition between pupils and between schools and cautions that this disincentives collaboration (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018). In the previous section, I highlighted the distortive effects of an over-reliance on quantifiable measures of success. In this section, I reflect on how this over-reliance fuels the growth of competition and corrodes the achievements of pupils, teachers, and schools.

Neoliberalism describes the application of the ideals of free-market economics to matters of politics and management (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberal ideals are widespread within education in England, if rarely acknowledged (Baird & Elliott, 2018). If neoliberal politics can be thought of as the attempt to apply the logic of free-market capitalism to the public sector, harnessing the power of competition as a tool for improvement (Ball, 1998), then the intensification of competition represents one example of the extension of this ideology into the classroom (Connell, 2013). Pupils are encouraged to compete with each other in the hope that this will raise outcomes. However, while the consequences of a poorly run business making less profit and eventually failing are inconsequential at a societal level, what does it mean for the school-pupil who loses the competition for a successful future?

6.2.2 Competition in schools - toxic success

Pupils in particular reflected on the tensions and conflicts caused by increased competition in education. Pupils spoke about the importance of their friends in enabling

success, resonating with wider literature in which pupils have reported in several studies that they value collaborative approaches to learning (Charalambous et al., 2021; Lord et al., 2015). Some pupils felt most successful when helping another pupil and others when receiving help from a friend. Conversely, some pupils reflected on the "toxic" (Faith, pupil) nature of success in school, in that it can come at the expense of your friends who may have achieved less well. Pupils reflected on feelings of jealously, inadequacy and even guilt when they achieved well, all of which were engendered by an approach to education which they perceived as encouraging competitive-comparison between pupils.

> *The grading system, in my opinion, that's what really makes that. When you're being graded there's a grading system from 1 to 9 and you're gonna be placed on that scale. Being a nine is successful and 1 is unsuccessful. Having that is just something that will make students understand success as being something that you have to do better than someone else and having to achieve what others have achieved and make you jealous of the things that other people have.*
>
> (Ismail, pupil)

6.2.3 Competition between schools

At the moment, systems of accountability in education incentivise gaming the system, prioritising the production of data over the education of pupils (Ingram et al., 2018). In this study, many of the teachers interviewed recognised the conflict they faced between the competing pressures of providing a balanced and rich education whilst maximising measureable indicators of performance, predominantly of their own success.

Although many of the policy-makers that took part in this research had taught, this is not the case generally in their institutions, and they all reflected that their experience of teaching did not reflect the experience of teachers in schools today: *"my last teaching was December 1987, believe it or not. Obviously, school have changed awful lot since then"* (Simon, policy-maker). Policy-makers tended to report very little engagement with schools, and in-particular, school pupils:

I don't have a massive amount of direct contact with schools. It's only occasionally and it tends to be maybe just the odd person, who's involved in either a committee or a research project

(Wendy, policy-maker)

Whilst they all acknowledged the problems associated with solely quantitative and overly competitive accountability systems, they tended to frame their own work and roles in this system as neutral. The quote below from a policy-maker, illustrates both the tension that schools face and the sense that policy-makers are only responsible for implementing a system, not for the actions of those who would 'game it':

If we were all working in a system and we all accepted that we weren't all just going to try and game the system, we're all just going to take it honestly and fairly and will just teach children and do that well. Maybe, if we all did that then then we wouldn't have "the other school down the road always just cheats to get their grades". But we're not actually in that world, we're in a world where there is gaming and everybody is trying to do the best for their students, which is completely understandable. But it does sometimes take away from the true purpose of what we're trying to achieve.

(Ben, policy-maker)

6.3 Passports, Punishments and the Panopticon

As much as students are judged numerically, teachers also are. So, for example, our line-management targets are to do with results: […] 85% Grade 5 to 9. And when you are in this situation where you are being judged for their results, it is very hard to then not pass on the stress and the buck to those students. And I think it sort of suits the teaching agenda to focus on exams and why exams are important. If you've got an exam class, it's a pretty big stick to say 'right, you need to get good grades because otherwise you're not going to successful in the future.' I think sometimes even those words are used, 'you're not going to

be successful in the future.' Because that suits our aim of getting them to co-operate and do what you want them to do, be it homework or engagement in lessons […]. So, I think partly we pass it onto students because it's how we're judged, but I think also partly because it's a kind of… It's not… It's not a lie. I mean it isn't... I think obviously, qualifications are important, but it's something that we tell students to make our job easier in some ways.

(Thea, teacher)

We're turning them into little machines, but for our benefit not for theirs

(Isabelle, teacher)

I guess we, subconsciously, inflict a bit of pressure on the students and then they actually pressure themselves. Even now we're doing our TAGs[2] *and we're doing a couple of extra assessments to give them opportunities.*

(Juliette, teacher)

"you know historically when I think about how the school has approached assessments. It has been let's know exactly where they're at. Let's identify the gaps. Let's tell them that they're behind, and then they'll work hard"

(Ezra, teacher)

These quotes highlight the pressure that teachers feel to maximise student outcomes, often for their own benefit, rather than that of their pupils. Ball (2003) wrote that there was a "kind of values schizophrenia" in which teachers balance their professional values and integrity with the demands of a performative accountability system and this resonates with many of the accounts given by teachers:

[2] Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) are the alternative to formal examinations that are being used to award qualifications in 2021, due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

it takes enormous strength and you could argue foolhardiness, to actually put yourself at a disadvantage in these tables by doing what you know, is best for students, so there's a massive dilemma."

(Harris, teacher)

The irony is that when teachers are put under pressure to achieve results, they tend to teach in a more controlling way and their students show performance impairment – a tension that has been acknowledged but not solved for over 30 years (Flink et al., 1990; Marshik et al., 2017; Reeve, 2009). There have been repeated criticisms of the claim that increased accountability leads to increased educational outcomes, pointing, for example, to the increase of restrictions to examinations for pupils who are perceived as less likely to achieve highly (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

Foucault (1977) wrote that "the judges of normality are present everywhere" (p.307), emphasising the universality of systems of surveillance and examination in society. He went on to emphasise the internalisation of these systems of control, such that the "teacher-judge" (p.307), who is responsible for implementing this system in schools, does so in such a way that they are unaware of the full extent of their role. Teachers' process of negotiation is reminiscent of Orwell's (1936) reflection on working for the imperial police-force: "He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it" (paragraph 7). Teachers wear the mask that emphasises the importance and value of examinations and exist in constant internal tension, illustrated by many of the quotes in this thesis, both from teachers reflecting on their own practice and from pupils who experience the consequences of it.

6.3.1 Accountability and Control

Teachers take up a particular role, both immediately aware of the impact of assessment on the lives and experiences of pupils, whilst also required to balance the requirements of the system-level definitions of success. Not only are teachers the site of this conflict between individuals and systems, but they were also subject to it when they were school pupils themselves, making them both victims and perpetrators. Teachers that I spoke with recognised the need for system-level regulation and accountability*:*

I've worked in schools where there's absolute frauds working there, where, if there was an absence of accountability, the very children we talk about supporting, would suffer.

(Harris, teacher),

but felt that this same system undermines them as individuals and professionals:

You feel like your fate is being controlled by someone else. Even applying for a job, my head teacher writes my reference, she has had maybe two conversations with me, despite the fact I'm a head of Department. Can she actually make an educated reference for me? Whereas actually, someone who teaches next door to me would know better. You feel like you're constantly out to impress someone that sees you as a needle in a haystack.

Isabelle (teacher)

These findings align with recent surveys, which suggest that teachers, although not necessarily working longer hours, are working more intensely, have more directed-time, and feel less able to make choices about their work (Green, 2021). There are significant overlaps between this discussion and ideas raised by O'Neill (2013) in her discussion about the interplay between 'trust' and accountability. O'Neill argued that accountability systems do not replace trust, they merely re-direct it, usually away from individuals that we interact with (such as teachers) towards those that we don't (such as examiners). This echoes Foucault's (1977) assertion that as society has progressed, its tools of surveillance have become more discreet and concealed. Foucault's concept of coercion by observation (p.170) is of particular relevance to teachers who reflect not only on the use of data to evaluate their effectiveness, but also on superficial observations of their practice:

I think the level to which you have students under control is a measure of success for SLT […] they were just in a lesson with me and there was almost pin drop silence for the whole lesson. I actually thought that was relatively

unsuccessful […] we're learning about ethics which is, you know, meant to have a discussion and debate and they weren't doing that. I didn't feel like that was particularly successful whereas somebody walking past would have thought, 'great, she's got them under control'

(Thea, teacher)

The current approach to accountability in education does not incentivise risk-taking and does not tolerate uncertainty (Page, 2017). Teachers in this study reported feeling pressured to maximise student outcomes on exams, whilst recognising that this wasn't necessarily in their best interest. Schools were pressured into giving less autonomy to teachers and restricting pupils' choices. Pupils reflected on the anxiety-inducing nature of high-stakes assessment and reported feeling guilty about success that came at the expense of others. I argue that education is a process which does not necessarily benefit from being made maximally-efficient and requires educators to relinquish a degree of control. Currently, in seeking to ensure quality, accountability measures act to undermine it:

There's so much focus on getting Progress-8 scores that as a result, the teaching becomes relatively poor: you're spoon-feeding to achieve high grades rather than creating someone who can be successful independently

(Thea, teacher).

We will use different types of techniques to assess people, but if I'm brutally honest with you, on the whole, it's pretty traditional still. Because ultimately, they have to sit an exam where they have to write with a black pen, in exam conditions. We are a little bit limited as to how much more time, effort and energy we can put in the other things, when that's not going to be how the student is going to be judged and how I'm going to be judged

(Nathan, teacher)

6.3.2 – Resistance as Privilege

Pupils and teachers in this study reflected on the differing capacities pupils had to resist this controlling influence:

> *Not everybody has that option. A lot of people might not have the money, might not have the time, might not have the resources, to be able to have a second shot.*
>
> (Etienne, pupil).

This is a theme repeated throughout both teacher and pupil interviews, that resistance is a form of privilege and non-compliance possible only for those who had already guaranteed a degree of success and security. For those who were perceived as academically unsuccessful, non-compliance was not an option. Students who are seen as less likely to achieve, either because of perceived ability or prior attainment, are denied access to educational opportunities, even entry to certain examinations. I discuss the role of education and assessment in predicting the future in the next chapter, a process that Hanson's (2002) articulated as the 'signifier precedes the signified', but we can see hints of it here. By prioritising immediate success indicators, against which schools and teachers are judged in the present, schools can deny pupils the opportunity for success in the future.

Every school that I interacted with utilised some form of attainment-setting of pupils. There is a wide range of literature on the practice of setting and streaming in schools, most of which points to the negative impact it has on educational outcomes (e.g. Archer et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2020; Hattie et al., 2015;). Taylor et al. (2020) suggested that attainment setting seemed to be more prevalent in lower-attaining schools. Although between-school comparison of setting practices was not possible in this study, pupils and teachers described an intensification of teacher pressure on lower-attaining pupils or those in lower sets:

> *The low sets, they really give pressure to the students. In foundation, you're at a grade 5 or less. So, they really give us pressure, but when you're in high sets, you don't get stressed that much, but lower sets, yeah…*
>
> (Mohamed, pupil)

Increased accountability increases pressure on lower attaining pupils, restricting and instrumentalising their education. This has the paradoxical effect of reducing the quality of education that they receive and hence their educational outcomes. So, whilst the 'good intentions' of increased accountability are to increase equity, social mobility and provide additional support for disadvantaged and under-achieving learners, in this instance it may in fact do the opposite. Not only do lower-attaining students receive an education that is more exam focussed and more controlling, they are also offered fewer opportunities to other forms of success in school (see Harris's quote below). All participants recognised the importance of having multiple ways of succeeding and most saw a diverse offering as key to not only these broader definitions of success but also to academic success. By restricting access to opportunities outside of the 'core subjects', lower attaining students are not only less likely to succeed academically, they also have fewer opportunities to find success outside of academic qualifications.

> *I think that the people who have suffered, are those that are the most marginalized in society, the students with special educational needs and the lowest attainers [...] They have had such a reduced offering. The education for those students is not fit for purpose […], and it fails them horribly. It fails them dreadfully. […] we have students who will leave school with no GCSE's, currently having a diet of English, maths and science, with two periods of PE. So, in a 30-period week they have 28 periods of English, maths, science, supplementary-English or supplementary-maths and then a solitary double period of PE […] that student is battered by the system, failed by the system, ultimately made, in many instances, to feel worthless.*
>
> (Harris, teacher)

Teachers and policy-makers use assessment in education as a way to reduce uncertainty and increase control. On the one hand, teachers recognise that current metrics are limited and distort our understanding of education, but on the other, they caution against abandoning them altogether. In part, this is because they are an important maker of their own success and because they are tools which can be co-opted for their own purposes but

they also provide a perception of stability and certainty in an otherwise unpredictable environment. Foucault (1977) argued that education is used to discipline individuals and ensure support for the dominant social system. Dei & Simmons (2010) suggested that education defines success as becoming like the dominant culture and that teachers, having complied with the system and therefore been deemed successful, are invested in maintaining this system or risk exposing themselves. Once students have demonstrated a degree of educational success, they have legitimised the system which teachers are a part of (Chiang et al., 2020) and so gain the freedom to resist. This was most evident when talking with teachers about pupil aspirations and pupil definitions of success. There was a tendency for some teachers to dismiss pupils' definitions and to highlight the role of the teacher in teaching pupils how and what to aspire:

> *Must be bloody hard mustn't it, to be ambitious, when you don't have any role models to follow and you come from a home that doesn't necessarily encourage you, and you surround yourself with friends that don't necessarily encourage you? A lack of ambition, a poverty of ambition.*
>
> (Nathan, teacher)

> *You know the kids that are gonna end up in prison. You know the kids that are gonna end up married with kids. You know the kids that are gonna be successes, both academically and professionally […] we have a lot of very apathetic students who don't even know what the word success means.*
>
> (Isabelle, teacher)

Meadows and Black (2018) conducted a survey of 548 teachers across England and found that many of them reported feeling pressure to maximise pupil examination results "both to improve pupils' life chances and to ensure their school performs well on government accountability measures" (p.563). However, although it may seem that these two aims are aligned, the conflicting purposes tend to restrict curriculum choices and decrease the quality of education on offer (Connell, 2013). This resonates with my findings, with teachers reporting pressure to control pupils as well as reflecting on the limited offer for lower-

attaining pupils. Pupils also added to this debate, illustrating that they too are aware of the increase in pressure from teachers that is associated with low-attainment.

6.4 Accountability and Uncertainty

> *With performance-tables-accountability we moved to trying to find some supposedly-scientific way of measuring the effectiveness of schools, the effectiveness of teachers. Just using qualification results is, of course, a pretty hopeless way of doing that, but it turns out to be the easiest thing to do. I think what we've ended up with is that, because we have the data anyway, we use it for an inappropriate purpose, but we haven't really found a much better way*.
>
> (Simon, policy-maker)

Accountability relies on the ability to understand and explain the results and consequences of a system. There is, both from my participants and in the literature, a high level of confidence in the accuracy of judgements made by examinations (Barrance & Elwood, 2018; Chamberlain, 2013; Elwood, 2012). Perhaps it is therefore understandable that we seek to use educational assessments as tools in our systems of accountability (Ozga, 2009), as the results of these measurements is presented as indisputable truth, even when this is clearly not the case (Lillejord, 2020). Yet when examination results become the principle metric to determine success at all levels, it engenders an understanding of education that can be restrictive and demotivating (Adie et al., 2021). Addressing the unreliability inherent in the examination process may be challenging, but this façade of certainty doesn't change the reality, rather it allows us to pretend it doesn't exist. I argue that accountability measures seek to reduce uncertainty in a system. But, by seeking to understand fully the process of education and to control it, there is the risk that we distort it such that it no longer functions meaningfully.

Chapter 7 Education, Exploration and Becoming

But down the road there comes a bright-haired boy

With wobbling courage on his new machine,

Facing a changeful world with eager joy,

Scornful of ancient props on which men lean.

So from the tranquil lucence of the wood,

The sure recurrence of young leaves and wings,

I turn back to the hope and dread of life

To meet again the uncertainty of things.

(Sherman, 1956, p.340)

> *the purpose of GCSE's […] is to explore your interests, find out what you're interested in, find out what you're good at and learn some things that are hopefully going to be interests throughout your life*
>
> Wendy (policy maker)

In this chapter I present a theme which remains 'under-construction', but which began to emerge and develop over the course of this study. As discussed, I have not yet saturated this theme and to develop it further I would need to conduct repeated interviews with pupils and teachers, either side of key transitional moments, such as GCSE examinations, an impossible methodological option within the time constraints of a master's study. However, despite its state as a theory-in-progress, I present it here, both because of its importance to participants and to the steering committee, and also because it illustrates a fundamental aspect of the process of education. As a theme, it complements and extends the theme I presented in chapter 6, adding a longitudinal and temporal element. This theme seeks to illuminate and explore the role of education in the development, construction and negotiation of identity. It explores the tension created by using the past to create the future,

it highlights both the optimism and dread that education can engender in pupils and above all, it emphasises the 'wobbling courage' of children as they confront a 'changeful world' and become themselves.

7.1 Uncertainty and Exploration

> *In your teenage years, you kind of get lost. Because you're trying to figure out, "What should I become in life? Where am I gonna go next? Should I go to college and go to University?" You just become lost. So, I think if you know what you're doing and where you're going in life, or even if you don't, but you still know yourself and you know that you can do something. That could be your version of success.*
>
> (Katie, pupil)

If school doesn't represent an opportunity for pupils to explore, get lost, and in so doing, learn about themselves, where else is this opportunity available to them? There is an element of exciting-uncertainty and discovery that exploration evokes and this was reflected in many of the discussions that I had with participants. Success was framed as a journey - as processual - with the final destination seen as ancillary. I draw three comparisons between exploration and the process of education to illustrate some of the ideas from this research:

1. In exploration, the destination is unknown
2. Exploration is a process not an outcome
3. Exploration is uncertain and risky

Across every participant that I spoke with, a repeated idea was that success can look very different for different people. I have discussed aspects of this idea in both chapters five and six, but I return to it here to illustrate an important feature of the education as exploration metaphor: that it is not always possible to have a predetermined destination in mind. I have, in Chapters 1 & 2, discussed Gallie's (1955) idea of an essentially contested concept as one for which it is not possible to reach a universally shared definition. This is illustrated in chapter

5 by the diverse and varied definitions of educational success provided by participants in this research. I turn, therefore, to the metaphor of education as exploration as a way to illustrate this aspect of the process of education. It suggests that, whilst we may have some sense of where we are going and what we want to achieve, the final destination is still unknown.

From the perspective of pupils in the classroom, uncertainty about the future translated in feelings of both optimism and anxiety:

> *I like having the freedom… I've had friends who say, 'I'm going to be a lawyer. I'm going to be a doctor'. And I can understand them, but I don't know, I feel like it's nice knowing that I'm free, I'm not tied down to having to do one thing that maybe I'm being pushed into. But then there's also the stress of, 'what if I never figure out what I'm going to do? Am I too free? Do I need to have a plan?'*
>
> (Violet, pupil)

However, the idea that education was a one-chance opportunity, and that failure was therefore permanent, was a cause for anxiety:

> *If you fail, you're already one step behind everyone else. That's going to determine how well you're going to do for the rest of your life.*
>
> (Rhianna, pupil)

In contrast, when failure was not seen as permanent, for example in mock exams, this could be a motivating influence, with several pupils reporting that moments of failure in low-stakes assessments, for which they would have a second opportunity, as a positive and motivating experience:

> *if you haven't done well, you want to do well. So, then you try harder next time and do everything you can to see whether you could do better. Success is a very driving emotion. It pushes you forward to try and achieve something that you might not be able to do.*
>
> (Etienne, pupil)

Yeah, I might have gotten bad grades, but I'll tell myself that you still got time. You're still young, like can still work hard to get those grades.

(Yusuf, pupil)

Teachers reflected, on the fact that their pupils in the process of developing their identities:

Teaching kids to pass exams is the boring bit of my job. The bit that I like is the fact that I have a group of 18-year-olds sitting in front of me who are about to start their lives and I get to be part of that process. We don't focus on that anymore.

(Isabelle, teacher)

This was often lost amongst the definitions of success that emphasised progress rather than process. For many teachers and policy-makers, educational success relied what it enabled you to progress onto:

Success, for me as a teacher is that I'm preparing these students, whether they're in year 11, or year 13, I'm preparing them for the next step.

(Georgia, teacher)

A lot of education is almost like enabling you to move on to the next phase, […] allowing you to progress on to the next stage. If you're successful at one point that opens a door, that means you can move on to the next point, and the you, keep going, I suppose. But I don't think I necessarily thought about it like that when I was when I was younger. I think it was more about wanting to do well, and feeling valued.

(Monica, policy-maker)

This perception of success-as-progress translates into a pressure-for-progression. If success is determined by the outcome it devalues everything that occurs in the build-up to the final exam:

They could have been successful over those four years. But then suddenly that was all taken away because of an hour and 45 minutes that defines how our life will be once we leave school. Unless you have an insane talent for art or singing, then you are defined by your GCSE's and A-levels. And it's a lot. Especially because you could mess up, you could just have an off-day, which happens to everyone. But if you happen to have an off-day on this massive exam, then suddenly it's over for you, and you're restricted by how much you can achieve later on.

(Etienne, pupil)

7.2 Emancipation and Becoming

Emancipation literally means coming out of ownership (Chapter 1). All pupils suggested an important element of success was developing independence. I use the idea of becoming yourself to emphasise the idea of becoming self-determining, and in a way, self-owning. Faith (pupil), used the example of the first time she walked to school alone as a maker of success. Stephen described being able to create his own stop-motion videos and post them on YouTube. Many pupils talked about future education or careers. These all were characterised by the idea of pupils' growing independence. This resonates with the OECD's vision for the future of education, which describes a 'compass' to support learners as they navigate through an 'uncertain world' (OECD, 2018). An important element of this compass is 'agency' which they framed as a form of active participation with the capacity to define your own "guiding purpose" (p.4). Even the title of their position paper "The Future *We* Want" (my emphasis), illustrates the importance of shared ownership of definitions of success.

Biesta (2015) called for a weak education in his book the 'Beautiful Risk of Education' where he promotes a view of education that clashes with attempts to strengthen it through accountability measures. He reflects on many similar ideals to my previous chapter. I develop his view by highlighting how uncertainty is different from risk and therefore how it takes Biesta's conceptualisation slightly further. Risk is about the chance that the outcome of an

event or process will differ from the expected outcome, whereas uncertainty implies that the outcome is fundamentally not knowable. Risk is something which can be measured, modelled and controlled, whereas uncertainty is explicitly beyond control. This desire to control often ended up demotivating pupils, who often made the distinction between success and happiness. This is illustrated by Fatima's quote, in which she reflects on how the pressure to succeed is taking away her childhood:

> *Teachers want us to succeed, so sometimes they overdo the work. It's just taking away our childhood, because in the end, when we grow up, and we go to college or university or whatever we decide to do, we're gonna have to push ourselves to do even more work and more work and more…. It's just tiring. We've lost our childhood basically just doing work in school.*
>
> Fatima (pupil)

Participants negotiated their definitions of success with definitions imposed on them by others or by 'the system'. In particular, participants reflected on the drive for quantifiable, externally-defined, metrics of success, which often clashed with their own beliefs and values. Alongside this, pupils reflected on the pressure and anxiety generated by a perception of a 'one-shot' education that prioritised linear progression and competition. This was reflected by teachers' and policy-makers' belief that educational-success was often characterised by what it enabled someone to progress onto. This outcomes-orientated view of education removed space for exploration and uncertainty, which are fundamental to the process of discovering your own identity and becoming yourself.

Chapter 8 General Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis has reported on a research study conducted with pupils, teachers and policy-makers in the English education system. Starting with the question "what does success mean to you?", I have explored the phenomena of success, assessment and identity from the perspectives of these participants. I have discussed two themes. The first proposes educational-assessment and accountability measures as mediators of the conflict between externally defined definitions of success and intrinsic ones and illustrates the importance of having agency to negotiate your own definitions of success. The second theme remains 'under-construction' as I have not sufficiently saturated the themes from which it has emerged. This theme addresses the role of education in identity-formation through the lens of identity as exploration and becoming. Both themes illustrate the tension between the potential for education to be emancipatory or a form of indoctrination and I have suggested the concept of 'uncertainty' as fundamental distinguishing between these purposes. Uncertainty in educational assessment and accountability, enables divergent success criteria, allowing pupils and teachers some power to define and negotiate their own visions of success. Uncertainty when thinking about the future rejects the linear-view of educational progression, allowing space for exploration. It emphasises the processual and dynamic nature of education, if the outcome is uncertain the focus becomes the process.

The themes and discussion presented in this thesis resonate with a growing belief that education is becoming increasingly metricised and restrictive, with accountability measures degrading teachers' agency and incentivising teaching overly-controlling teaching practices. It also engages with influential philosophical debates on the purpose of education, in particular the works of Freire, Sen and Biesta, as it frames the purpose of education as a negotiation between emancipation and indoctrination at opposite ends of a spectrum. Importantly, not only does it engage with these important and abstract ideas, it attempts to illustrate their consequences through the lived experiences of individuals who negotiate this spectrum every day. In this concluding chapter, I offer a final reflection on each of the two themes and suggest possible implications and areas for future research. I then end by presenting a message from pupils in the study.

8.1 Rigour and Limitations

I reflect on the limitations associated with specific methodological choices, including the literature review, recruitment, data collection and analysis, in chapters 2, 3 and 4. In this section, I offer a broader evaluation of the study using four features of a high-quality grounded theory suggested by Charmaz (2014, 2020): credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. I then further reflect on the participatory nature of the study using Hart's (1992) ladder of participation as well as my own framework of engagement, ownership and learning.

4.5.1 Credibility, Originality, Resonance and Usefulness

Credibility refers specifically to the trust readers are able to place in the researcher. This includes explicit discussion of the researcher and their positionality (see chapter 1) as well as detailed descriptions of the research process, and of the data and analysis (chapters 3, 4 and appendices). I have attempted to report this research in an open, honest and transparent fashion, reflecting on my choices and actions. I have centred the discussion around the data and shared all my analysis with both the steering committee and my supervisor.

Originality relies on providing new insights, either through the development of a new theory, or making important contributions to an existing theory. In this research, I have added to a complex debate by grounding the discussion in the experiences of the individuals involved and by drawing comparisons across the English education system. I am unaware of any research which explores perceptions of educational success in this way.

Resonance is a measure of whether the research "represent[s] their research participants' experience, but also provide[s] insight to others" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, p.12). Assessing the resonance of a research project extends beyond the research process. I plan to disseminate the research in schools, through reports and workshops and in academic networks: I have already presented initial findings from the research at three events, all hosted by the University of Oxford and plan to publish at least one journal article. The steering

committee further ensures “resonance” by focussing the research on matters that were important to the participants. Finally, participants regularly reflected on the importance of the questions, meaning this gauge relies on my ability to craft relevant and accurate findings from their contributions. This was echoed by a participant in the steering committee who reflected that the questions coming up in our discussion and the research were, “very important, possibly the most important questions to be asking” (Wendy, policy-maker).

Finally, usefulness relates to the benefits to participants in participating, as well as more widely to researchers and practitioners. I have made some recommendations throughout this thesis and offer some final recommendations at the end of this section. For participants, the usefulness is a particular strength of this study as they reflected on the opportunity the research provided to reflect on and develop their ideas:

> *I found the project very interesting for me personally because it made me challenge my own beliefs about success. I got to define my own version of success and think about how society and the education system defines success.*
>
> (Faith, pupil)

4.5.2 Participation – Engagement, Ownership and Learning

> *I feel like you’ve really taught me a lot about myself in this interview*
>
> (Stephen, pupil)

Given the nature of the research, focussing on individuals’ perspectives, ensuring meaningful participation is fundamental to the research. Using Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation (figure 3.1) to reflect on the degree of participation, it is clear that the highest ‘rungs’ are inaccessible to me as a master’s student as I am required to initiate the research myself. However, both the steering committee and the methods of data collection facilitated a sharing of the decision-making process at different points in the research. Using my own lens to reflect on this, the degree of engagement with the study was excellent. Pupils were

keen to be involved and my contacts in schools who I used to help with recruitment reported that teachers had been very positive about their experience being involved. Additionally, the steering committee participants can feel a degree of ownership, in particular moving forward as they will be involved in dissemination, both through schools and with any articles that are published. However, while participants reported enjoying and learning from the process, it would be naïve to ignore the social pressure to report positively on the process. In the future, developing some mechanism to better gauge participation might be of use. Longitudinal research, which could follow up with participants both to see how their perceptions of success change over time, but also to gauge the impacts, if any, that participation has had, would strengthen my ability to evaluate the participatory nature of the research.

8.2 Success, Assessment and Accountability

Menzies (2013) reflected:

> I hate the distortive effects of the 5 A*-C at GCSE accountability measure. Don't all teachers? Doesn't any parent who has seen the effect it has on their children's education? Doesn't every Head Teacher who feels pressured into compromising their ideals?
>
> (paragraph 1).

I take the discussion on this distortive effect further, both by including the perspectives of children, who are usually left out of the accountability debate, and also by discussing the effect that the reliance on measures has not just on behaviours, but on our understanding of the purpose of education in the first place. Measuring only certain aspects of a system incentivises stakeholders to ignore the rest (Muller, 2019), but I argue that there is a deeper, more fundamental issue at stake here, that by to 'know' all that there is to know about the education process we constrain and dominate it to the point that it is no longer distinguishable from indoctrination.

Developing assessment practices in which pupils don't just respond, they produce and create, gives them the opportunity to negotiate their own definitions of success and balance them with those of their teachers or the education-system. At a system level, developing democratic and intelligent accountability systems must similarly involve giving space for schools and teachers to determine, to some extent, the ways in which success in defined. A system where accountability means responsibility and relies on an ability to justify and explain, rather than a system where accountability means liability and seeks to blame and judge.

8.3 Success, Exploration and Identity

Framing education as a process of exploration and becoming emphasises the processual nature and rejects the idea of a fixed and final destination. Education is an integral element of identity formation, and trying to make this process more efficient risks fundamentally undermining the process. Pupils spoke about the importance of growing independence and autonomy, but of the stresses and anxiety induced by feeling that they were running out of time or that opportunities were increasingly limited at each stage. In order to explore this theme better I have suggested longitudinal studies, either side of key transitional moments, such as GCSE or A-level examinations, which hopefully will shed light on these educational moments, that both define success and are seen as either enabling or restricting depending on whether they are in your future or you past.

8.4 Uncertainty and the purpose of education

Education has the capacity to emancipate or indoctrinate. Emancipation involves becoming independent - coming out of ownership. For education to be emancipatory it must seek to make itself redundant by empowering individuals to be able to carry out, for themselves, all the tasks which education is supposed to do. In the context of this study this means allowing uncertainty such that pupils have some space to negotiate their own definitions of success. Indoctrination, at the other end of the spectrum, fosters dependence and is characterised by a lack of agency in determining what success looks like. If education is

to be emancipatory, it must seek ways to negotiate ownership and control, such that both teachers and pupils have the agency needed to define and measure, to some degree, their own definitions of success.

8.5 Conclusions and recommendations

> *Teachers should encourage students to talk about this topic, about success. Some people, they don't know what they're gonna do in the future. They're like, "I don't have any goals. I don't have any dreams,". If teachers showed students that there's so many options available. It's not just Doctor, Engineer.... there's so many more, that would help students to thrive.*
>
> (Mohamed, pupil)

> *I think that they should obviously have exams, but don't make it the sole reason of your whole five years at secondary school.*
>
> (Katie, pupil)

Throughout this thesis, I have reflected on the importance of a vision of education which navigates between two opposing ends of a spectrum, emancipation and indoctrination. Through a grounded theory analysis of interviews with individuals from across the English education system, I have presented two themes which illustrate the fundamental importance of preserving an element of uncertainty in the process of education in order to allow the negotiation of individual definitions of success. For teachers and schools, this means prioritising discussions about success and the purpose of education with pupils. It also means developing and making use of forms of assessment which allow students to produce rather than just to respond. For policy-makers, this means resisting the desire to eliminate uncertainty and to increase control. Instead, accept and acknowledge uncertainty, particularly when it allows for multiple definitions of success that can be locally or individually co-constructed. For education to be emancipatory, it must allow for individuals to explore, challenge and negotiate their own definitions of success within the broader system.

8.6 Final messages

At the end of interviews, students had the opportunity to 'give a message' to teachers, policy-makers and academics. I wish to end this thesis by sharing Lili's message (below) in which she reflects on the negotiation required, to push and support students, but not in such as way as to impose your own definitions of success upon them. It is this negotiation which, I argue throughout, allows education to be emancipatory rather than indoctrinating. This quote encapsulates the essence of much of this thesis and resonates with many of the messages from students at the end of interviews, providing a concise and poignant reflection with which to end.

> I think it's important for the older generation, not to push us towards a different kind of success than somebody wants. Push us just enough that we are still free to have our own idea of success, but also enough to be successful at what we want to do.

(Lili, pupil)

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics Documentation

A1 - CUREC Confirmation Approval Email

MSc Education CIE CUREC application ED-CIA-21-066 09 December 2020

Dear [redacted]
Title: What does success mean to you? Perceptions from across the English Education system
The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.
I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.
Please continue to follow all current guidance issued by CUREC during the pandemic, notably COVID-19: CUREC guidance on research involving human participants,https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/coronavirus
If relevant please also check the CUREC website for their best practice research guides, https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg
Good luck with your research study,
Keep well and safe,
Yours sincerely,
All good wishes,
[redacted]
Member, DREC
[redacted]
Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
+44 (0) 1865 284093

A2 - Example Consent forms

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

What does success mean to you?
Perceptions from across the English Education system

Purpose of Study:

I am doing this research to investigate different perceptions of success across the English educational system by interviewing pupils, teachers and policy makers. I hope to be able to better understand how the education system influences our ideas of success and, in turn, the ways our ideas of success

influence our decision-making.

		*Please **initial** each box*
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty.	☐
3	I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by authorised people outside the research team. I give permission for these individuals to access my data.	☐
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	☐
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
6	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	☐
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
8	I consent to being audio recorded	☐
9	I consent to being video recorded	☐
10	I understand how audio recordings / videos / photos will be used in research outputs	☐
11 a	I agree to the use of pseudonymised quotes in research outputs	☐
	OR	
11b	I do not wish to be directly quoted	☐
12	I agree to take part in the study	☐
Optional:	I agree that my personal contact details can be retained in a secure database so that the researchers can contact me about future studies.	☐

Name of Participant	dd / mm / yyyy Date	Signature

A3 - Example assent form for under-16s

What does success mean to you?
Perceptions from across the English Education system

Child/Young Person (or if unable, parent/researcher/teacher on their behalf) to circle all they agree with:

- Has somebody else explained this project to you? Yes/No
- Do you understand what this project is about? Yes/No
- Have you asked all the questions you want? Yes/No
- Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand? Yes/No
- Do you understand it's OK to stop taking part at any time? Yes/No
- Are you happy to take part? Yes/No
- Are you happy for your voice to be recorded? Yes/No
- Are you happy to be on video? Yes/No
- Are you happy for photographs or pictures that you submit to be used? Yes/No

If <u>any</u> answers are "no" or you don't want to take part, that's OK! No one will be cross with you.

If you <u>do</u> want to take part, please write your name below

Your name _____
Date _____

Once you have completed this form, please return it to [school contact name here] who will scan it and return it to the researcher. Thank you

A4 - Example recruitment and ethics discussion email chain:

From: Participant
Sent: 11 May 2021
To: Reseacher
Subject: Re: Research on success

Thank you [redacted]. This is very helpful. I will come back soon.

From: Researcher
Sent: 11 May 2021 15:35
To: Participant
CC: Supervisor
Subject: Re: Research on success

Dear [redacted],

Thank you so much for your interest in taking part. I will remove all references to the names of organisations in all my write-ups and just say that policy makers were recruited from policy institutions such as the DfE and Ofqual as well as from examining bodies (or something equivalent). I would give no further details, in particular there would be nothing linking quotes to specific institutions. When institutions are mentioned by name in the interview, these references are removed if that quote will be used.

I hope that helps with the decision-making process. I would be happy to discuss it with you if you would like any further information or had any concerns with this.

Thanks again and best wishes.

From: Participant
Sent: 11 May 2021
To: Researcher and Supervisory
Subject: Re: Research on success

Hi [redacted] and [redacted],
Thank you for this invitation. I have one question at this point please.
From the information sheet, I understand that there will be a pseudonym for the names of the people being interviewed. However how about the organisations please? Will the name of the organisation / work place be identified in the study by name please? And if not, how will work places for the adults be referenced in the study please?
This information will help with the decision-making process.
I look forward to hearing back soon.
Thank you

From: Supervisor

Sent: 10 May 2021
To: Participant
Cc: Researcher
Subject: Research on success

Dear [redacted]

I hope you are well. I am writing on behalf of my Masters in Education student, [redacted] to ask if you would be able to give him 45 minutes of your time for an interview about what success means to you. [redacted] is a physics teacher by background and is working with me as an RA on a project for [redacted].

The interview would focus on his Masters dissertation research, which involves interviews with pupils, teachers and policy-makers on their perceptions of success. If this is not something you can commit to at this time, we would be very grateful if you could pass this request on to a suitable person.

Please see attached an information sheet and research consent form.

best wishes,

A5 - Digital data assessment documentation

Outcome tables given below for brevity.

Privacy by Design Assessment
Project Name/ Processing Activity/Business Practice: What does success mean to you? Perceptions across the English education system

Carried out by:	[redacted]
Role:	Master's Student
Date:	02/03/2021
Approved by:	[redacted]
Role:	Deputy Director of Research
Date:	11/03/2021
Screening Assessment Outcome:	No DPIA Form required
Carried out by:	[redacted]
Role:	Masters Student
Date:	05/03/2021
Approved by:	[redacted]
Role:	Deputy Director of Research
Date:	11/03/2021

Appendix B – Recruitment Documentation and Participant information

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Email to Head Teacher Template:

Email subject: Invitation to participate in research study: "What does success mean to you? Perceptions from across the English Education system"

Dear [Head teacher name],

I am writing to enquire about conducting some research in your school. I am a master's research student at the University of Oxford, supervised by Jo-Anne Baird. In my research study, "What does success mean to you? Perceptions from across the English Education system", I will explore how different stakeholders understand success in education.

The research will take place with approximately 20 students from years 9, 10 and 11 and approximately 10 teachers. Participating pupils will be asked to submit a photograph or picture (or more than one if they want) which represents how they view success in education. Participating pupils and teachers will each be interviewed on teams. Pupil interviews will last about 45 minutes and teacher interviews will last about an hour.

By participating in the research, your school would be contributing to research that will allow us to better understand how educational practices in England shape our perceptions of success.

Oxford University has strict ethical procedures on conducting ethical research with teachers and students, consistent with current British Educational Research Association guidelines. Before beginning the research, I would inform parents/guardians about the research and ask them to return signed consent forms. Throughout the research, students and parents/guardians will be able to refuse to participate at any time.

All participants, including students, teachers and the school, would be made anonymous in all research reports. The data collected would be kept strictly confidential, available only to my supervisor and myself and not used other than specified without the further consent of all involved being obtained. All recordings would be destroyed at the end of the research period, and kept in locked conditions until then. I have an enhanced DBS check from 2018. I have attached copies of the information for parents/guardians and students with this email.

If your school would like to take part in the study, or you need more information about what is involved, please reply to this email or call me on [redacted]

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

Appendix C – Interview guides and notes

These are the initial interview guides that shaped the first interviews. These were adapted over the course of the rest of the study following initial analysis and consultation with the steering committee.

C1 - Initial interview guide for pupils, followed very loosely:

1. Questions surrounding their photos or digital collages (If applicable)
    a. Can you describe the images that you have brought along? What do they show?
    b. What about these images made you choose them?
    c. Is there anything that you wanted to represent that you feel this picture doesn't capture?

2. Questions about success specifically
    a. What do you think it means to be successful in school? What makes you think this?
    b. Can you describe what a successful student is like at your school?
    c. What do you think are the differences in how you perceive success and how your teachers perceive success, if there are any differences?
    d. Do you think that your beliefs about success are different to other pupils in your school? How? Why do you think that is?

3. Questions about education practices
    a. Do you think that your school gives you the opportunity to succeed? Why do you think that?
    b. Do you think the broader education system gives children the opportunity to succeed? Why do you think that?
    c. Do you think that our educational practices influence how we perceive success? What makes you think this?

4. **Thanks**, and final questions
    a. **Thank you so much for taking part in this interview, it has been really lovely talking with you.**
    b. Is there anything that you wish I had asked you about today that I haven't?
    c. Is there anything that you want to highlight from our interview as particularly important to you?
    d. I will be talking to policy makers and teachers, if I could share one message from you, what would you want that to be?

C2 - Initial interview guide for teachers:

"How do practices surrounding assessment impact on beliefs about the purpose of education and definitions of success in education?"

1. Your time at school
    a. Describe your time at school.
    b. Do you think you were successful?
    c. Why?

2. Success as a teacher
    a. What does it mean to be successful as a teacher?
        i. Probe e.g: Do you ever feel like successes go un-noticed?

3. Success as a pupil in your class/school
    a. What does it mean to be successful as a pupil?
    b. Do you feel you have similar perceptions of success to the pupils in your class?
    c. Do you think that our educational practices influence how we perceive success? What makes you think this?

4. **Thanks**, and final questions
    a. **Thank you so much for taking part in this interview, it has been really lovely talking with you.**
    b. Is there anything that you wish I had asked you about today that I haven't?
    c. Is there anything that you want to highlight from our interview as particularly important to you?

C3 - Initial interview guide for policy-makers:

"How do practices surrounding assessment impact on beliefs about the purpose of education and definitions of success in education?"

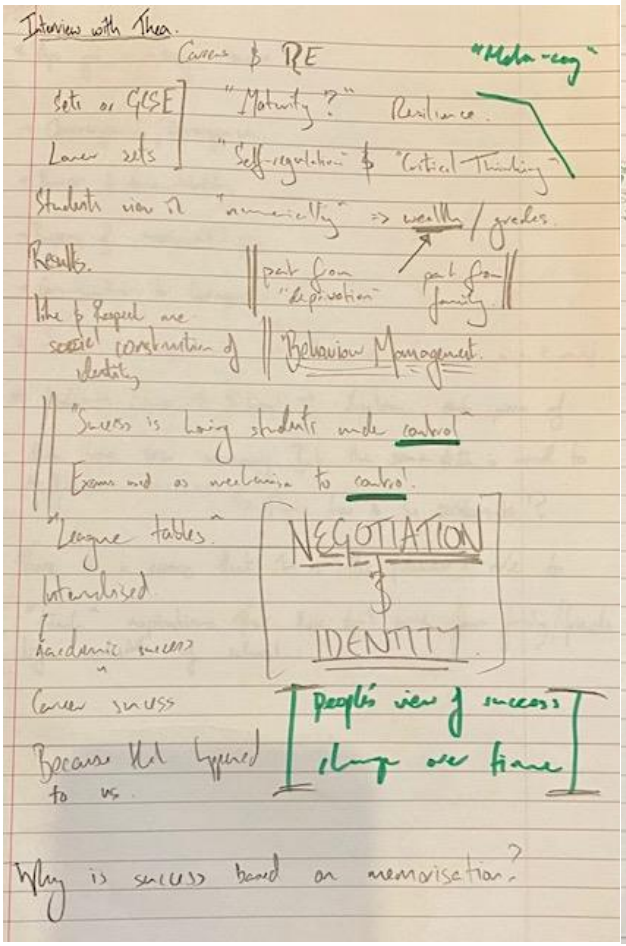
1. Your time at school
    a. Describe your time at school.
    b. Do you think you were successful?
    c. Why?

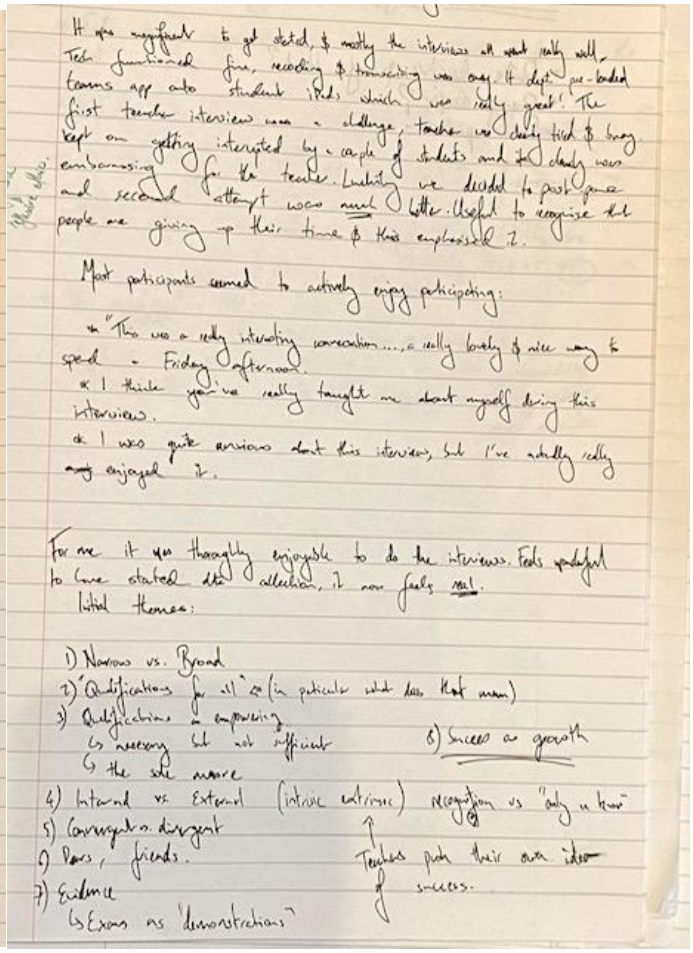
2. Your role now
    a. Can you describe your role now
    b. How did you end up in this role?
    c. What does success look like in this role currently?

3. Success in education
    a. What does it mean to be successful in today's education system?
        i. (Probe) Do you feel you have similar perceptions of success to your colleagues/institution?
        ii. (Probe) Do you feel your institution has a role in determining what success looks like?
        iii. (Probe) Is it possible for all pupils to succeed in education?

4. **Thanks**, and final questions
    a. **Thank you so much for taking part in this interview, it has been really lovely talking with you.**
    b. Is there anything that you wish I had asked you about today that I haven't?
    c. Is there anything that you want to highlight from our interview as particularly important to you?

Appendix D – Example Interview summary




It was significant to get started, & mostly the interviews all went really well. Tech functioned fine, recording & transcribing was easy. It didn't pre-loaded teams app onto students iPads which was really great. The first teacher interview was a challenge, teacher was clearly tired & busy. Kept on getting interrupted by a couple of students and it clearly was embarrassing for the teacher. Luckily we decided to push on and second attempt was much better. Useful to recognise that people are giving up their time & this emphasised it.

Most participants seemed to actively enjoy participating:

* "This was a really interesting conversation ... a really lovely & nice way to spend a Friday afternoon."
* I think you've really taught me about myself during this interviews.
* I was quite anxious about this interview, but I've actually really enjoyed it.

For me it was thoroughly enjoyable to do the interviews. Feels wonderful to have started the collection, it now feels real.

Initial themes:

1) Narrow vs. Broad
2) "Qualifications for all" (in particular what does that mean)
3) Qualifications as empowering
   - as necessary but not sufficient
   - the sole source
4) Internal vs. External (intrinsic extrinsic)
5) Convergent vs. divergent
6) Success as growth
7) Recognition vs "only in town"
8) Peers, friends.
9) Evidence
   - Exams as "demonstrations"

Teachers push their own idea of success.

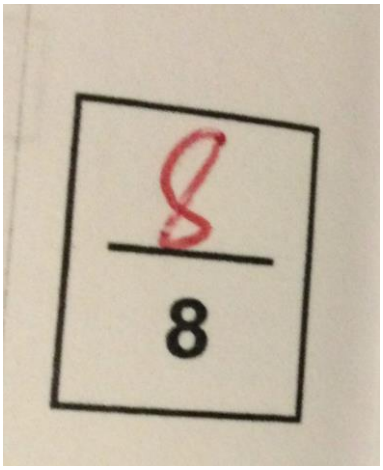
Appendix E – Details on analysis and coding

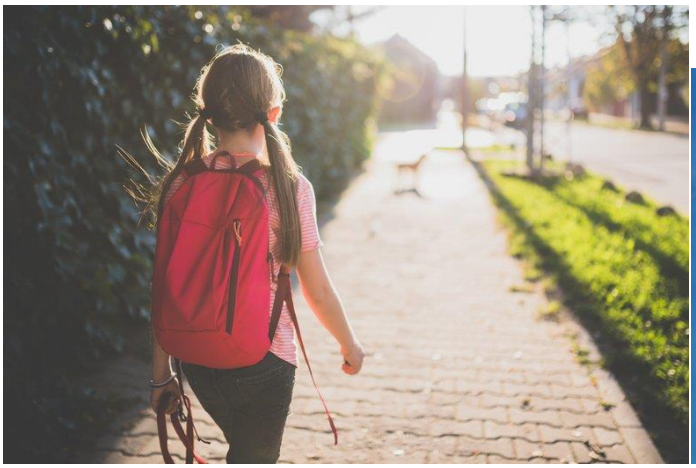
Overall, I generated 126 codes and made 2206 references. Below is a sample section of the NVivo generated codebook, which illustrates some of the important codes that came up during the analysis.

Name	Description	Files	References
Time the past and the future	Broad parent category - references to when success was linked to either the past or the future.	25	300
barriers and platforms	Exams/qualifications are seen as barriers to success if they are in the future or platform on which to build success when they are in the past	12	17
exploration	Education should be exploratory	15	56
Identity	Linking success and identity	17	99
independence and control for yourself	Linking success to growing independence	10	22
necessary but not sufficient	Exams and qualifications are a necessary but not sufficient definition of success	3	3
Non-academic success	Success that is explicitly not academic	9	15
people processing or people changing	Exams/qualifications can be used either to process (sort) people or to change/develop people	5	8
permanence	Some labels in school are permanent, such as exam results	3	4
powerlessness	Feelings of powerlessness	2	2
pressure and anxiety	Feeling of pressure or anxiety linked to exams, assessment or definitions of success	13	21
process and outcome	Contrasting success as process or outcome	20	31
Teaching success or aspirations	Teachers describing their role in teaching students what or how to aspire	4	9
Trying to impose certainty on the future	Education and particularly assessment as a means to impose a degree of certainty on the future.	7	13
Uncertainty and Accountability	Broad parent category – references to how accountability measures seek to understand or control practice or education generally.	25	492
Accountability restricts how you teach	Feeling like teaching choices are restricted by accountability measures.	10	28

Name	Description	Files	References
Exams are the purpose of education	Suggestion that exams/qualifications are the purpose of education	15	48
Datafication	Understanding individuals are different whole picture stuff	16	28
Assessment dominates	Reference to the domination of assessment in experiences of education	15	57
Academic success and exams	Academic forms of success means exam results	14	41
Success is being better than others	Referencing the competitive nature of success	18	45
success is different for less less privileged	broader definitions of success are possible when you reach a minimum level of exam success	7	21
success is more obvious in hindsight	Reflecting that things that felt important at the time now seem less so, and things that were seen as relatively unimportant at the time can have lasting influence.	4	8
success is overcoming adversity	Describing overcoming adversity as an important marker of success	6	10
external internal	Describing the clash between success as defined by yourself or by others.	16	75
negotiation	who defines success, power of making judgements	10	33

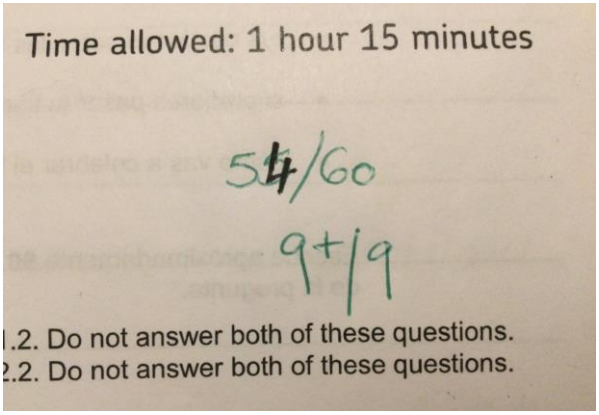
Appendix F – Example photos from the photo-voice project





Year 11 – Predicted Grades

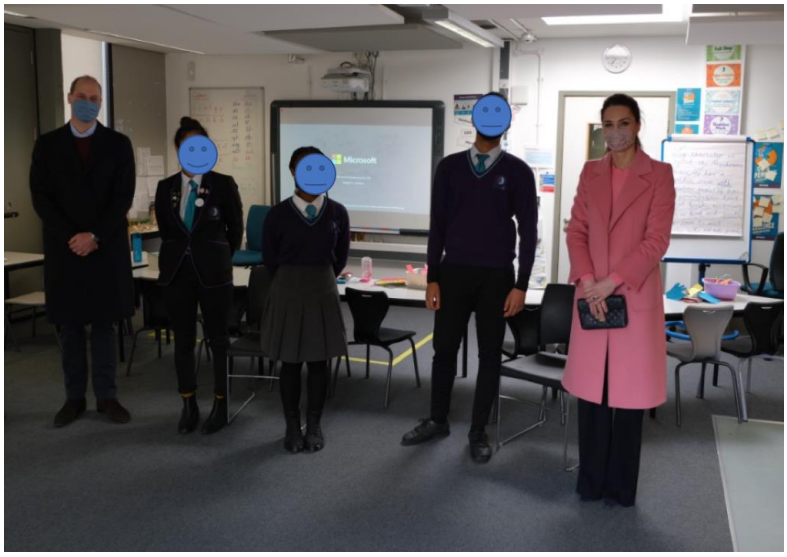
Teacher	Subject	Predicted Grade
[redacted]	Art	7
	Biology	6
	Chemistry	8
	English Language	8
	English Literature	8
	Geography	8
	Maths	7
	Physics	7
	Spanish	7+

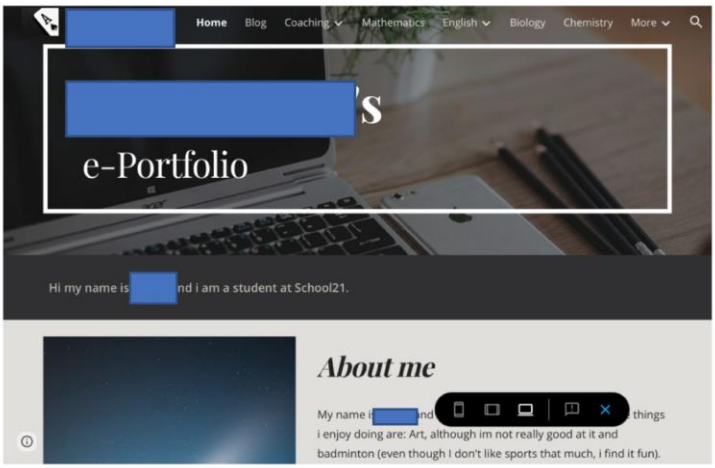

Time allowed: 1 hour 15 minutes

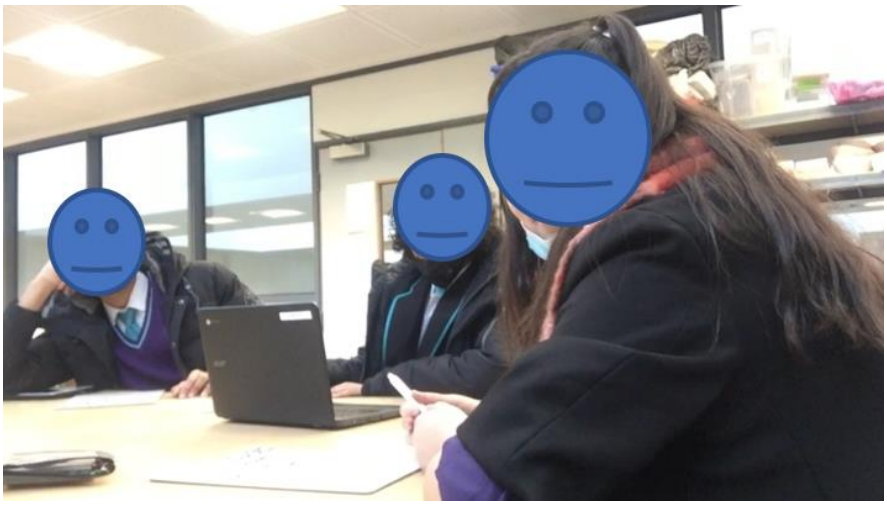
54/60

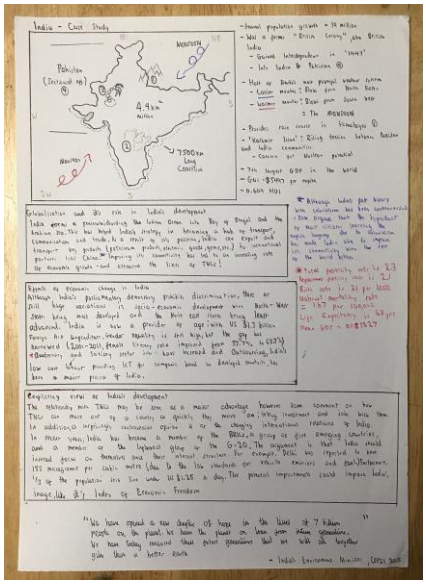
9+/9

1.2. Do not answer both of these questions.
2.2. Do not answer both of these questions.



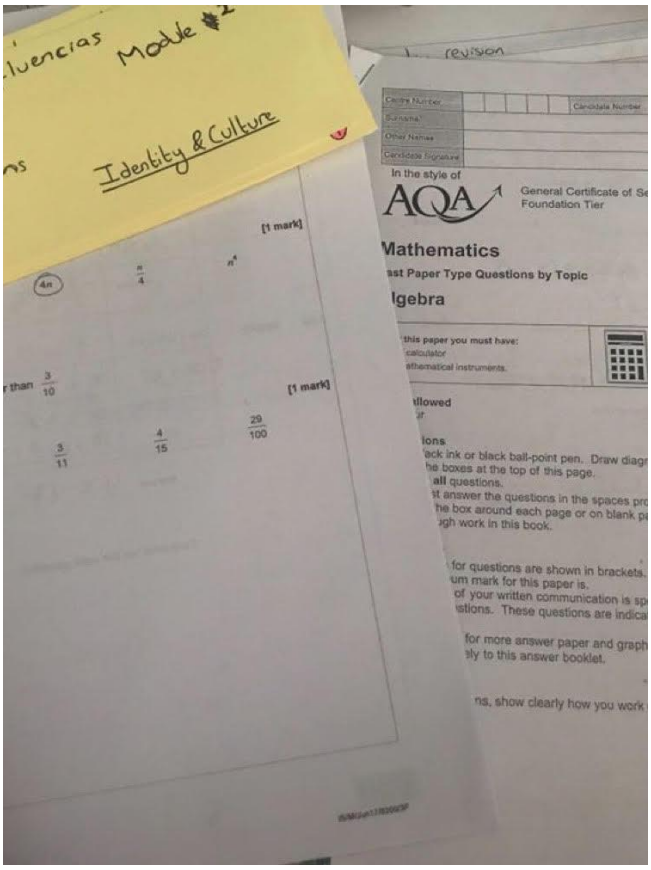


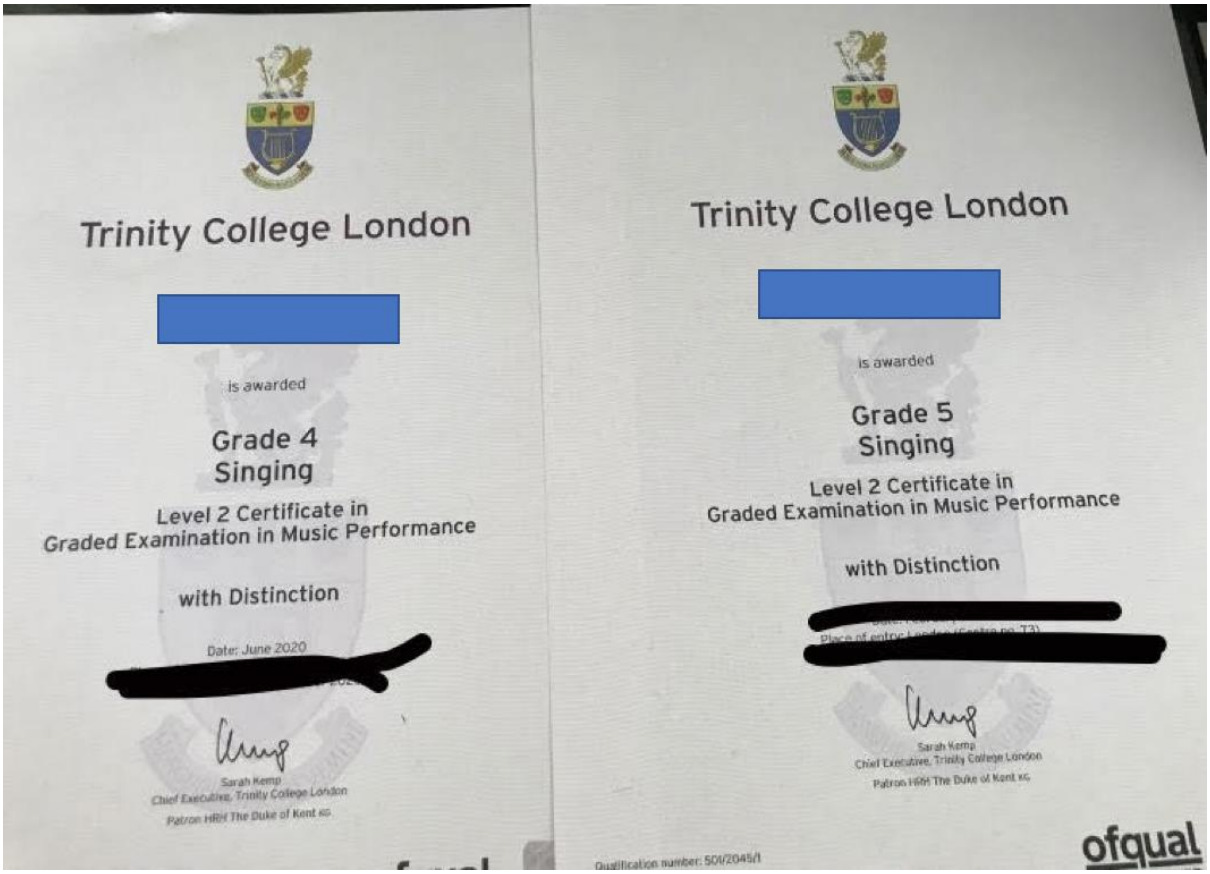


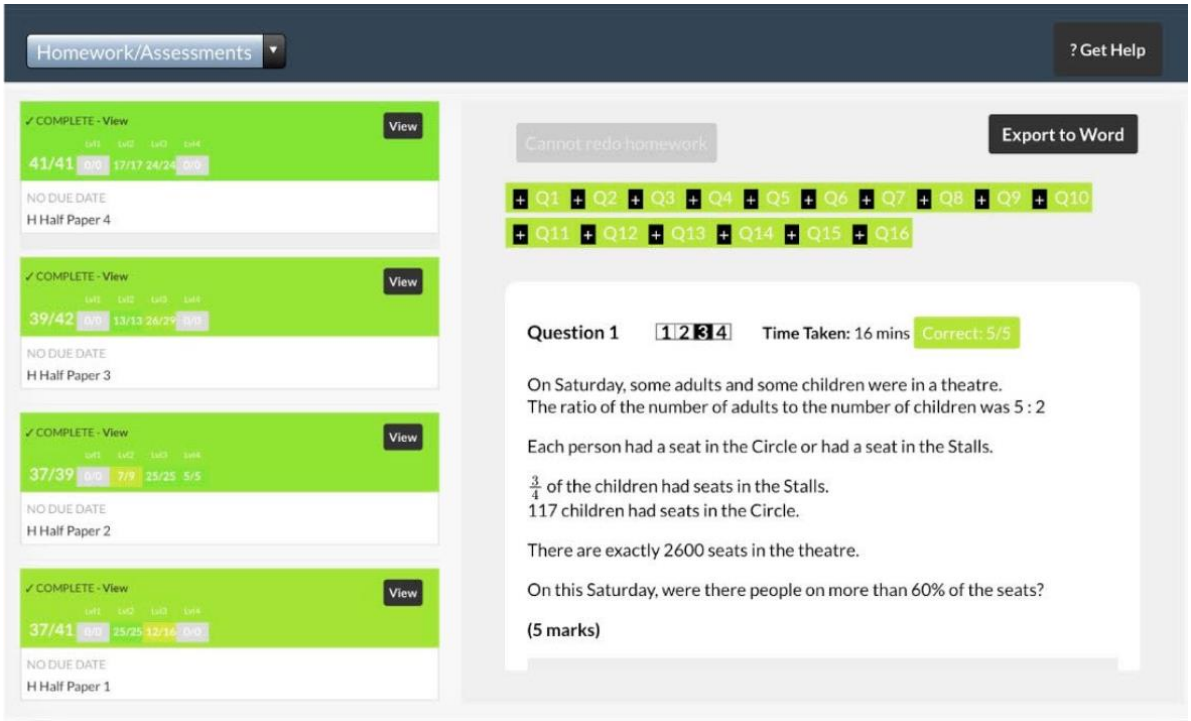


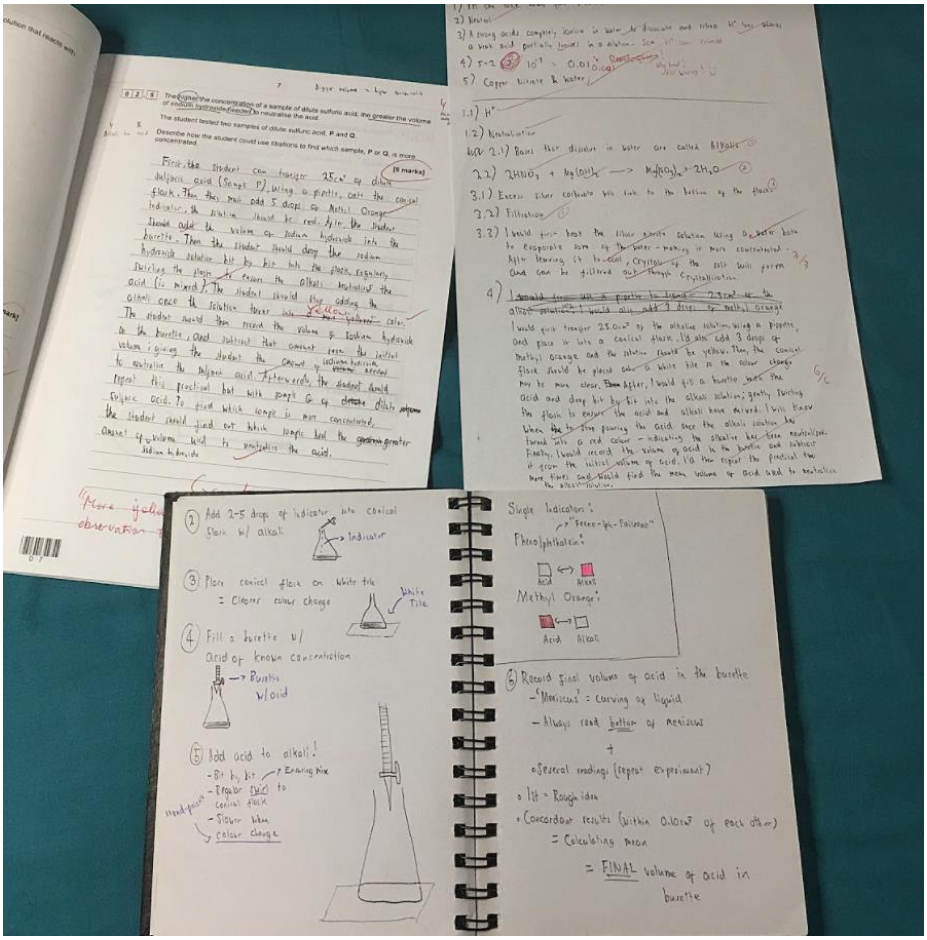
2011 GCSE Spanish Listening Higher

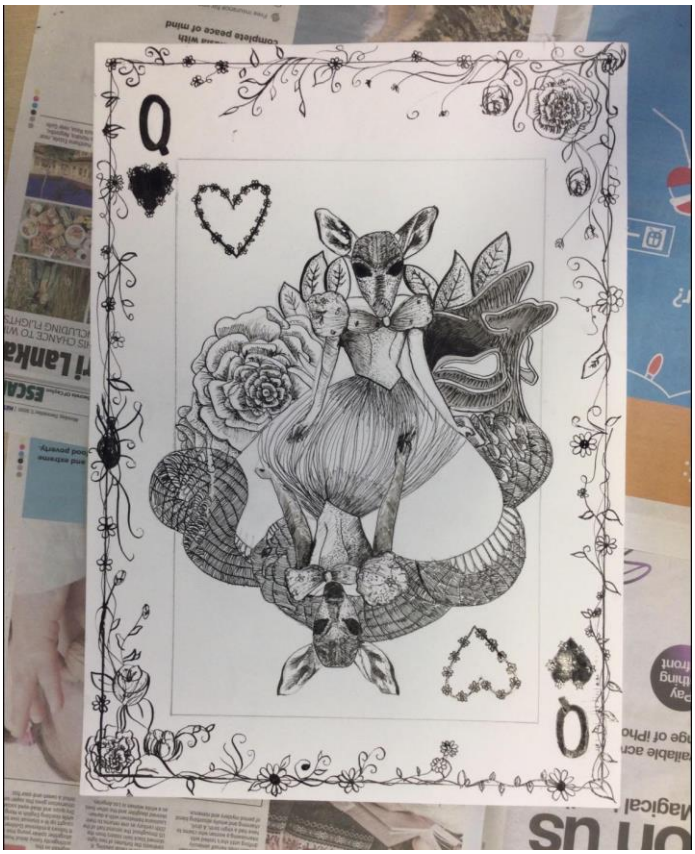
Total points 26/29 ?

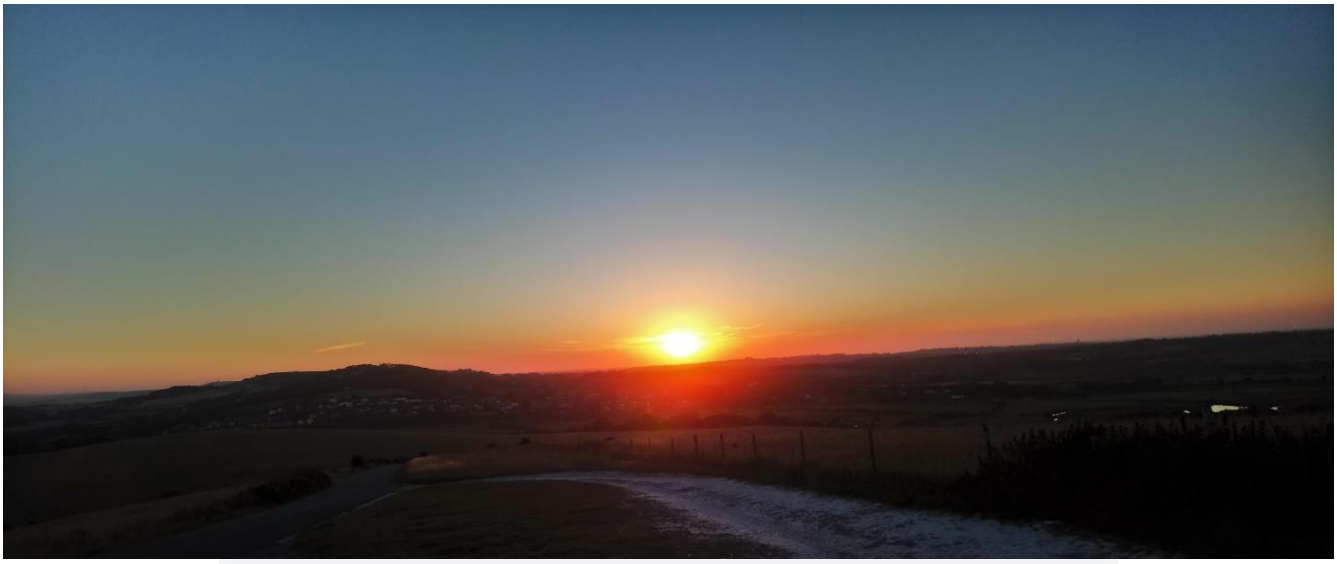

Identity & Culture
Mathematics
Algebra
AQA


Trinity College London
[redacted]
is awarded
Grade 4
Singing
Level 2 Certificate in
Graded Examination in Music Performance
with Distinction
Date: June 2020
[redacted]
Sarah Kemp
Chief Executive, Trinity College London
Patron HRH The Duke of Kent KG
Trinity College London
[redacted]
is awarded
Grade 5
Singing
Level 2 Certificate in
Graded Examination in Music Performance
with Distinction
[redacted]
Sarah Kemp
Chief Executive, Trinity College London
Patron HRH The Duke of Kent KG
Qualification number: 501/2045/1
ofqual


Homework/Assessments
? Get Help
✓ COMPLETE - View
View
41/41
NO DUE DATE
H Half Paper 4
✓ COMPLETE - View
View
39/42
NO DUE DATE
H Half Paper 3
✓ COMPLETE - View
View
37/39
NO DUE DATE
H Half Paper 2
✓ COMPLETE - View
View
37/41
NO DUE DATE
H Half Paper 1
Cannot redo homework
Export to Word
Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4 Q5 Q6 Q7 Q8 Q9 Q10
Q11 Q12 Q13 Q14 Q15 Q16
Question 1
1 2 3 4
Time Taken: 16 mins
Correct: 5/5
On Saturday, some adults and some children were in a theatre.
The ratio of the number of adults to the number of children was 5 : 2
Each person had a seat in the Circle or had a seat in the Stalls.
3/4 of the children had seats in the Stalls.
117 children had seats in the Circle.
There are exactly 2600 seats in the theatre.
On this Saturday, were there people on more than 60% of the seats?
(5 marks)







Analysis: Weeping Woman, Picasso, 1937

WORD BANK:
Word Bank:
Multiple Viewpoints, Emotion: Pain/ Grief/Sorrow, Angular Shapes, Guernica, Flat Colours, Cubism, Portrait, 2D, Straight Lines, Contrast Curve Lines, Geometric Shapes, Spanish Civil War.

DESCRIPTION
The portrait uses line to create geometric shapes and individual line to imitate hair strokes. There is a contrast between the 2 colour schemes, cool and warm tones, warm tones reflecting life and cool reflecting the loss of life. The warm colours are more pastel rather than bright. Your attention is immediately drawn to the conflicting colors followed by the angle.

Initial Reactions
When I first looked at this image it really stuck out due to the abnormality of it, the irregular structure of the face, the multiple viewpoints and I was unsure of what message this image was portraying.

HOW IS IT TRANSFORMATION
This links to transformation as the traditional idea of the human anatomy has been altered, although it doesn't have realistic human features it is evident that it is meant to show a face.

ANALYSIS
The image is based on a woman holding her dead child after a Nazi bombing during the second world war on Spanish civilians. In the photo we see multiple viewpoints that could each be portraying stories, there is a juxtaposition between the first and second viewpoints. The viewpoint with the eyes and warm colour could represent the woman before the war when she still had her child, in particular the use of the colour yellow representing joy. The second viewpoint with the nose facing the right and more cool colours could depict the pain of the woman after the war and the loss of her son. Also, the harsh geometric could reflect the harsh reality of the loss.

JUDGE & EVALUATE
My opinion of this piece has changed from my initial reaction after analysis it made me see the deeper meaning behind it.From this I will take the multiple viewpoints and contrasting colour.

Appendix G – Details on the steering committee

G1 - Steering Committee Information Sheet

Dear Potential Participant,

Thank you for showing interest in taking part in the pilot study of "What does success mean to you? Perceptions from across the English Education system". After having completed the pilot study you will be invited to join a steering committee for the main study. The aims of this steering committee are as follows:

1. **To feedback on your experience of the pilot study**. In particular, to give feedback on whether the interview process allowed you to express your views comfortably.

2. **To give input into the design of the main study**. As the researcher, I am committed to your active participation in the research process and, as such, I would like your input into whether you feel the research questions are important and relevant to your context, and if not, how we might change them

3. **To give input into the data analysis of the main study.** For the purposes of confidentiality, I will not share personal data with you from the main study, but I will share the research data and ask for your input into my process of analysis. Through this, I hope that we can ensure the research remains relevant to your context and that you can help hold my accountable to the process.

If you join the steering committee you will, of course, be able to withdraw at any time. The time commitments of the steering group will **three meetings** each of which will be **one hour**. These meetings will be attended by me and other participants who have agreed to take part in the steering committee. The steering group will include one teacher, 2 or 3 school pupils and one policy maker.

If you have any questions or concerns about the steering committee, please feel free to contact me by email at [redacted] or by telephone on [redacted]

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

G2 – Example Steering Committee Agenda from first meeting

What does success mean to you? Perception across the English education system.

First steering committee meeting plan

Introduction and Rationale

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this steering committee, which will meet three times (including this meeting) over the course of the rest of this study. Your input to the pilot study was really valuable and I am excited to continue to be able to work with you and I hope that you will enjoy the process and these meetings.

The purpose of this group is to try and make sure that the research, as much as possible, investigates issues which you feel are important. I hope that in joining these groups that you feel like you are able to control a part of the research process. The broad topics of the three meetings are as follows:

> **1st Meeting (23/04):** Reflecting on the pilot and planning the main study
> **2nd Meeting (May/June)**: Review of the study progress - data collection and initial analysis
> **3rd Meeting (September)**: Final presentation of results and planning for dissemination

---

Agenda

1. **Introductions –** 10 mins

   We will have some time to introduce ourselves to each other and I will briefly outline the protocols for the discussion:

   a. To introduce yourself, could you please share your first name and what you believe it means to be successful in school/education today.

   b. The main protocols for discussion are:
      i. Cameras can be on or off depending on how you feel most comfortable
      ii. Please use the raise hand function to indicate if you have something to say
      iii. When you have finished speaking, please check if anyone has their hand raised and pass over to them.
      iv. Remember to give space to all others in the group
      v. Use the chat only for quick comments, not to have side conversations

vi. I will try to keep us to time as much as possible, apologies in advance if that means we miss some contributions.

2. **Acknowledgement and confidentiality** – 5 mins

I recognise that you are giving up time and contributing your ideas to this project and so I would like to acknowledge your input in whatever way you feel most comfortable with. Some suggestions would be to name you in the acknowledgements section of my master's thesis and on any other reports that come out of this. Another possibility is that if there is the opportunity to write an article for publication, I would welcome your involvement in the process and if you were involved would include you in the acknowledgements or the list of authors if that felt appropriate.

A decision does not have to made now, but I wanted to raise it so that you can think about it.

3. **Reflections on participating in pilot –** 20 mins

   a. How was the process?
      i. I would love to hear your reflections on taking part in the interview and if you took photos/images.

   b. How much did it reflect issues and ideas that are important to you?
      i. Are the questions that I asked relevant and important to you?
      ii. What have I missed?

4. **Review of initial findings from pilot –** 15 mins

   a. [redacted] to 'present' initial findings – 5 mins

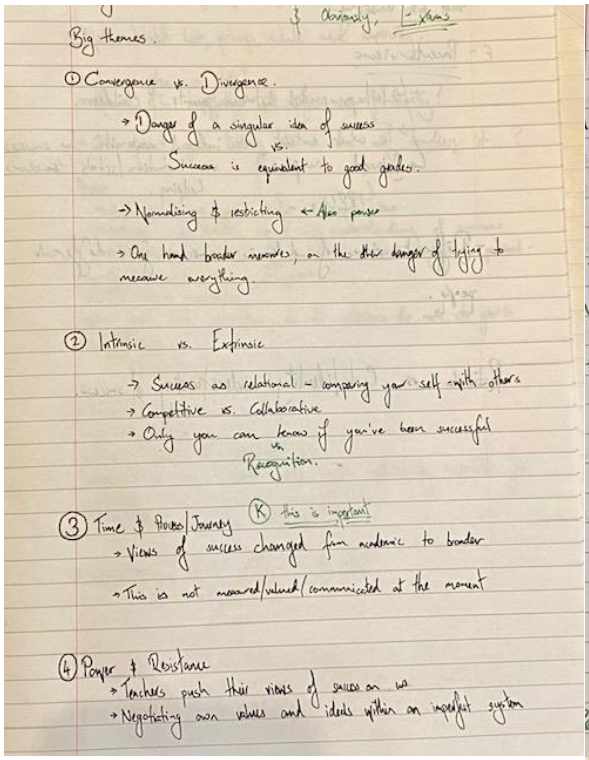
   b. Feedback and discussion – 10 mins
      i. Do the initial findings fit with what you felt came out of our interview?
      ii. Are there any ideas that are missing or that you think should be investigated further?

5. **Plan going forward –** 10 mins

   a. [redacted] to 'conclude' plan for first stages of the main study - any adjustments to the process or the content

   b. Setting a date for May – ideally week of the 24th of May

G3 - Example Steering Committee notes



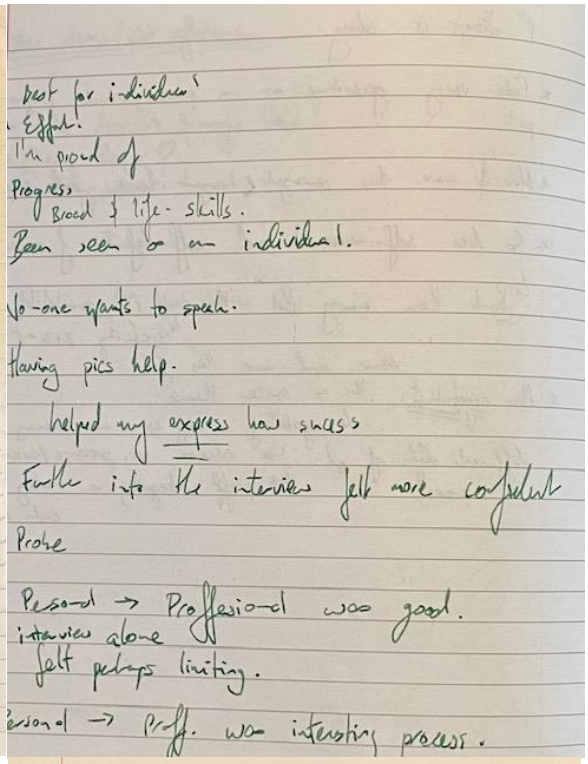
Big themes.

① Convergence vs. Divergence.
- → Danger of a singular idea of success vs. Success is equivalent to good grades.
- → Normalising & restricting ← Also power
- → On hand broader measures, on the other danger of trying to measure everything

② Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic
- → Success as relational - comparing yourself with others
- → Competitive vs. Collaborative
- → Only you can know if you've been successful vs. Recognition.

③ Time & Process/Journey (K) this is important
- → Views of success changed from academic to broader
- → This is not measured/valued/communicated at the moment

④ Power & Resistance
- → Teachers push their views of success on us
- → Negotiating own values and ideals within an imperfect system



best for individuals
Effort.
I'm proud of
Progress
Broad & life-skills.
Been seen as an individual.

No-one wants to speak.

Having pics help.

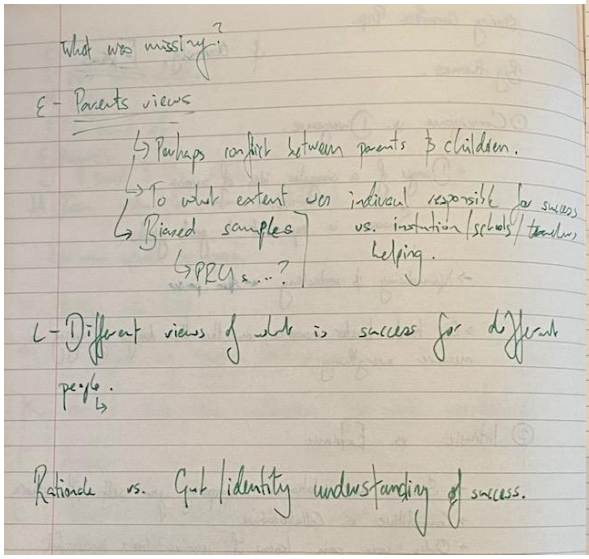
helped my express how success

Further into the interview felt more confident

Probe

Personal → Proffesional was good.
interview alone
felt perhaps limiting.

Personal → Proff. was interesting process.

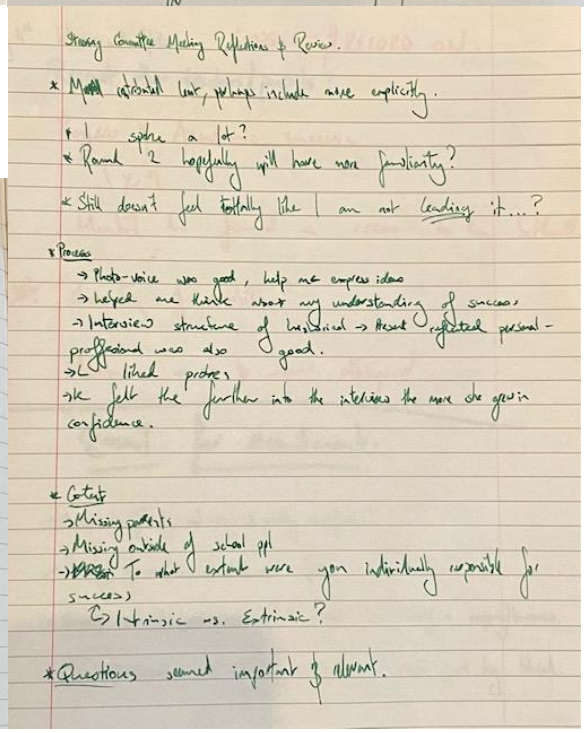


Which was missing?

E - Parents views
- ↳ Perhaps conflict between parents & children.
- ↳ To what extent was individual responsible for success vs. institution/schools/teachers
- ↳ Biased samples
- ↳ Helping.
- ↳ PRQs...?

L - Different views of what is success for different people.

Rationale vs. Gut/identity understanding of success.



Steering Committee Meeting Reflections & Review.

* My [illegible] last, perhaps include more explicitly.
* I spoke a lot?
* Round 2 hopefully will have more familiarity?
* Still doesn't feel totally like I am not leading it...?

* Process
- → Photo-voice was good, help me express ideas
- → Helped me think about my understanding of success
- → Interview structure of historical → present reflected personal - proffesional was also good.
- → I liked probes
- → It felt the further into the interview the more she grew in confidence.

* Content
- → Missing parents
- → Missing outside of school ppl
- → ~~Missing~~ To what extent were you individually responsible for success?
  - ↳ Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic?

* Questions seemed important & relevant.

Appendix H - Note on quotations

Throughout this thesis, I present quotes from interviews. These are taken from transcripts of interviews which were initially made using teams' transcription function which I then corrected using the audio recording. When I present these quotes, I have often removed words and pauses, such as uh, like, kind of, you know, to keep the quotes more readable. If I have removed words or phrases which are more substantial that this, I signal this with a […]. Finally, I whilst I have most left grammatical errors, I have occasionally corrected these where I felt that it impacted on ease of understanding the quote. Overall, I have tried in every instance to keep the quotes close to the original wording and to ensure that the meaning is not changed. An example of an original quote and it's adapted version is shown below in box 5.1.

Original Quote	Published Quote
you feel like your fate is being controlled by someone that… like even when I was applying for job, my head teacher, she writes my reference. She maybe has had two conversations with me, despite the fact I'm a head of department, does she? Can she actually make an educated reference to me? Whereas, actually, probably quite like a co-, like someone who teaches next door to me would know better and you feel like you're constantly, you know, out to impress someone. That sees you as like, I don't know, as a needle in a haystack.	You feel like your fate is being controlled by someone else. When I was applying for job, my head teacher wrote my reference, she maybe has had two conversations with me, despite the fact I'm a head of department. Can she actually make an educated reference for me? Whereas actually, probably someone who teaches next door to me would know better. You feel like you're constantly out to impress someone that sees you as a needle in a haystack.

[Figure A.1 – Adjusting quotes for the write-up]