Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE:

A Case Study in England.

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Abstract

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is widely viewed as a pivotal milestone for young people in England, with its outcomes shaping future educational and professional opportunities. Despite its high-stakes nature, the perspectives and experiences of the students – those directly navigating this landscape – often remain underrepresented in educational research and policy discussions. This study seeks to amplify student voices and extend beyond the predominant narratives centred on test anxiety and student well-being to capture a more holistic view of their GCSE journey.

Through semi-structured interviews, this study centred on students' emotional and behavioural responses towards GCSEs. Data analysis primarily drew from 22 Year 11 and 12 students from a comprehensive suburban London school, complemented by insights from five educators, field notes, and a reflexive journal. A specially designed timeline was used for Year 12 participants to aid memory recall during interviews. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed as the analytical strategy, yielding three salient themes: the omnipresence of stress in students' GCSE experience, the positive value of exam preparation, and the tension between curriculum depth and breadth. This study also reveals factors that could enhance students' GCSE experience and capture their aspirations and hopes for the future GCSE system.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of direct student engagement, valuing their articulate and invaluable feedback. While debates around the utility of GCSE persist, this research advocates for their reform rather than elimination. Drawing from the rich tapestry of student experiences can guide future policy and practice, fostering a GCSE experience that is both rewarding and sensitive to student well-being.

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GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
A-level	Advance level qualifications
DfE	Department for Education
Ofqual	The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, generally taken by young people aged 15 or 16 at the end of their secondary school education. GCSE is widely regarded as a momentous life event for young people, marking their first meaningful assessments (K. Brown & Woods, 2022; Denscombe, 2000). GCSE results are commonly required for further study or training, such as A-levels, apprenticeships, and university applications (UCAS, 2023). Furthermore, as an essential evaluation metric for secondary school accountability measures and a focal point for educational reforms and policy discussions (DfE, 2023b; Elwood, 2013), GCSE is broadly regarded as "high stakes" for its stakeholders.

Given the profound influence on students' lives, it is crucial to heed their perspectives and experiences regarding GCSE attentively. The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1863, para.2) once said: "The secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil." So, what does respecting students the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 12, states that children's views must be respected, and adults should listen and take their opinions seriously on issues that concern them, including education (UNICEF, 1990). Given the UNCRC, it is not only a matter of best practice but also a legal obligation in England to actively seek pupils' input in educational settings on matters that affect them, considering their age and understanding (DfE, 2010; Lundy, 2007).

While the significance of the student voice is undeniable, they are often overlooked in discussions about educational policy (Elwood, 2013). In the 2015 GCSE reform consultation, a mere three of 179 responses were from young people (DfE, 2016). Despite this limited student feedback, the 2017 GCSE reform removed non-exam assessments for many subjects, a

decision not aligned with the preferences expressed by many GCSE students in Northern Ireland and Wales. Specifically, 39.1% and 28.0% of 1,358 respondents from these regions, respectively, favoured only modular courses (units with individual assessments), and over half expressed a preference for a choice between modular and linear options (all assessments at the end; Barrance & Elwood, 2018). Yet, the broader trend shows students' opinions being marginalised. In a recent Ofqual survey, the input from 224 students made up just 0.03% of that season's 5,349,250 exam entries, assuming eight subjects per student (Ofqual, 2022a, 2022c; YouGov, 2023). This disparity highlights the urgent need to better integrate and prioritise the student voice in educational decisions.

Multiple studies have highlighted the importance of considering students' perspectives on high-stakes examinations. Elwood et al. (2017) revealed how students aged 16 to 18 adeptly reflected on the Irish Leaving Certificate, providing educators, policymakers, and researchers with valuable insights for assessment enhancement. Turning our attention to England, during the 2020 GCSE and A-levels cancellation in England due to COVID-19, Mccarthy (2022) consulted four pupils from a non-academically selective school in southeast England. Though limited in number, their voices highlight the often neglected yet pivotal role students play in informing fairness in education. Such first-hand student accounts offer a depth of understanding beyond mere numerical data.

Despite the intention to revise GCSE content aiming to enrich the curriculum for students and improve their readiness for future education or employment and acknowledging the value of consulting young people on their perceptions of GCSE, there remains significant scope for improvement in actively seeking and incorporating student voice within the GCSE framework to a greater extent. As Cook-Sather (2006, p.383) said:

“Change is a big idea. To genuinely engage not only students’ voices but also their entire beings, we need to be open to change, willing to change. Also, what students say and what we do will change over time. None of these are one-time things; they are ongoing… they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education.”

Chapter 2 Literature Review

In Chapter 2, the concept of washback is explored, outlining its varying interpretations and impacts. This chapter further investigates exam-induced stress and anxiety and the complex interplay between testing, motivation, and test preparation. Furthermore, it reveals insights into teachers' experiences under accountability pressures and their potential influence on students' learning and exam experiences. The researcher's motivation for this study is discussed, laying a groundwork for a comprehensive exploration of students' GCSE experiences.

2.1 Understanding Washback in Education

Washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993), or backwash (Biggs, 1996), can be succinctly described as the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Cheng & Watanabe, 2004). This term featured prominently in language testing literature, while general education or educational assessment commonly reference similar studies under the terms "impact studies" (Hamp-Lyons, 1997) or "evaluation studies" (Johnson & Shaw, 2019). Despite the implication of its name suggesting a reverse influence (i.e., teaching and learning affecting testing), Pearson (1988) posited that washback propels in a forward direction, with testing driving the processes of teaching and learning. Interpretations of washback diverge greatly, with perceptions of outcomes as either beneficial or harmful, largely hinging on an individual's focus or perspective. Both viewpoints, along with the mitigating factors of washback, are briefly outlined in the following subsections.

2.1.1 Positive, Negative, or Both?

Popham (1987, p.680) advocated for "measurement-driven instruction," suggesting that well-designed high-stakes educational achievement tests can shape instruction and drive academic improvement. This concept carries positive connotations of washback effects, which may resonate with the philosophy behind assessments such as the GCSE. Frederiksen and Collins (1989) introduced “systemic validity,” referring to tests that promote changes in curriculum and teaching to cultivate the cognitive traits they intend to measure. Likewise, Messick (1996), exploring washback as a consequential dimension of construct validity, urged a seamless transition from learning to testing and advocated for optimal positive washback, reinforcing the positive perspective.

On the other hand, Vernon (1961) warned that exams might distort curriculums, neglecting content deemed less vital for passing. Shepard (1990) raised concerns about the alignment between curriculum and testing, linking it to unethical practices such as favouring multiple-choice over essay tests. Linn (1983) discussed the risk of teaching to the test, especially in high-stakes situations, potentially limiting essential skills development. These insights focus on adverse washback effects, such as a narrowed curriculum and teaching to the test (Hamp-Lyons, 1997).

The interpretation of washback effects as positive or negative depends on the evaluator's perspective and context. For example, assessments such as the GCSE might be seen as promoting progress through clear standards or as restrictive, leading to a narrow focus on test-specific content. Messick's (1996, p.241) definition of washback encapsulates this bidirectional nature of washback, ‘‘the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that

promote or inhibit language learning'', reflecting the nuanced role of high-stakes testing in shaping educational experiences.

2.1.2 Mediating Factors Influencing Washback

The influence of a test on learning environments extends beyond the test itself, including aspects such as students' motivation and teachers' aspirations (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Alderson (2004) highlighted the significant role of "the teacher factor" in washback, where responses to the same test can vary due to different teaching styles and curriculum interpretations. Wall's (1996) comprehensive research with about 300 classroom observations and nearly 100 teacher interviews revealed that exams significantly impacted lesson content and teachers' test design. Such outcomes arose from factors like resistance to methodological changes, confusion over textbook principles, and broader challenges like the scarcity of proficient English teachers and political instability. Alderson (2004) argued that although it is sensible to aim for positive washback, the influence is limited compared to teachers' decisions in preparing students for tests. Therefore, more attention should be directed to the teacher factor to truly understand washback, including their beliefs, values, and professionalism. This complex nature of washback emphasises the multifaceted interplay between the test, teacher, and broader educational context.

On the other hand, Johnson and Shaw (2019) emphasised the importance of examining the "extent and direction of washback," including how beneficial it is for all stakeholders, not just those inside the classroom. They argued that test developers should consider how assessments impact everyone involved, such as parents, examination boards, and politicians, and recognise the factors that influence the intensity of washback. These factors can include variations in teachers' responses to the test, the perceived stakes of the test (with higher stakes

leading to changes in behaviour), the availability of alternative tests such as exam re-sits, perceived test demands, and the resources available to meet those demands. Other factors, such as participants' perceptions, values, and characteristics concerning the test, can also affect washback (Green, 2007a). By taking a broader view, these approaches encourage a more comprehensive understanding of washback and its varied impacts.

Navigating the intricacies of washback effects uncovers a complex interplay with factors such as teacher interpretations and learner attitudes, highlighting the need for deeper exploration into how washback may significantly influence GCSE preparation and outcomes. As we shift our focus, we will explore the emotional impact of GCSE testing, particularly its role in inducing stress and anxiety among students.

2.2 Exam-Induced Stress and Anxiety

Exam-induced stress and anxiety represent one significant aspect of washback effects in education. While terms like stress, worry, and anxiety are often used interchangeably, they can be differentiated. Stress can be seen as an external trigger or a subjective experience, while test anxiety is a specific response to examinations, involving cognitive and physiological reactions (Putwain, 2007). In the subsequent subsection, the term utilised in the original source is employed to denote stress or anxiety related to exams.

2.2.1 Understanding Exam Stress

Denscombe's (2000, p.359) study characterised GCSE as a “new and distinct source of stress” among 15- and 16-year-olds in England. Using large-scale questionnaires followed by focus groups and interviews, the research emerged from a broader study of health-related risks but found that students ranked exams among significant threats to their health. They

perceived GCSE as their first pivotal examination and a milestone, irrespective of their educational plans post-16. These observations lead to several questions: Is it not crucial for students to value GCSEs and strive to excel in them? Could the abrupt rise in workload be attributed to an absence of incremental challenges before the GCSE? Considering their prevalence in adulthood, when should students learn to cope with stress and sudden workload increases?

In response to these questions, Harris et al.'s (1995) longitudinal study of year 10 GCSE students revealed a significant shift in learning pace and style, with new skills required and contrasting demands between coursework and public examinations. The urgency to perform and manage social, work, and family lives created unfamiliar stressors, highlighting why GCSE was the first significant exam for students and offering a deeper perspective on why students perceive GCSE as their first significant examination. Furthermore, pressures from teachers, parental expectations, and self-imposed success pressures were crucial dimensions of GCSE-related stress, accompanied by unanticipated workloads and the absence of the joy of learning (Denscombe, 2000).

Furthermore, Putwain's (2009) work focused on the stressors impacting GCSE students. 34 students in North England were interviewed, with students reporting feeling pressure from themselves, teachers, and parents. Introjected motivation was pronounced among participants, where the drive for success was to avoid negative judgements. Factors such as anticipation of exams, preparation, lower-than-expected marks, and increased workload also contributed to students' stress. Notably, this study intentionally focused on students who self-identified as finding examinations stressful and anxiety-provoking. Nonetheless, this study is valuable for understanding how these students navigate GCSE and provides a significant reference for adults seeking to support students.

Roome and Soan (2019) explored the GCSE experiences of six students, revealing stress and symptoms such as feeling depressed and sleeplessness, accompanied by a dip in confidence and self-belief. Stressors included a lack of understanding of the GCSE's gravity as their first external examination, knowledge gaps, an overwhelming number of subjects with extensive learning materials, a perceived lack of academic and emotional support from schools, and pressure from family and peers, and additional pressure exerted by the school to do well in GCSE. In addition, the study highlighted the nuanced role of social influences in the GCSE experience. Parents and family often had a dual role, encouraging or stressing students. Friends could motivate or add pressure, while teachers' support varied among students, sometimes contingent on individual initiative. Some students reported that deliberately avoiding undue pressure from families and teachers assisted in stress management. These insights highlighted the complex social factors that influence students' GCSE experiences.

2.2.2 Test Anxiety: A Deeper Dive

Test anxiety, associated with diminished academic performance and adverse effects on self-esteem (Hembree, 1988), offers valuable insights into students' GSCE experiences. Recent research by Putwain et al. (2021) highlighted its complex dimension. Firstly, “Worry” is a cognitive dimension marked by apprehensive thoughts about personal performance. “Cognitive Interference” follows, characterised by distracting thoughts during a test. The affective-physiological dimension includes “Tension”, indicating emotional unrest, and “Physiological Indicators”, such as headaches due to test stress. Statistics from Putwain and Daly (2014) suggested that an estimated 16.4% of GCSE students in England experience high levels of test anxiety, translating to nearly five students in a typical class of 30. This prevalence

highlights the significance of understanding test anxiety in its varied forms. Factors such as individual traits, academic ability, and assessment specifics further complicate these experiences (Howard, 2020). Understanding the multifaceted nature of test anxiety is crucial as we further explore students' experiences.

Anxiety surrounding tests and assessments is not confined to the GCSE stage; it can manifest earlier in a student's academic journey. In their influential work, "I'll be a Nothing", Reay and Wiliam (1999) investigated the anxieties of 10- and 11-year-olds facing SATs, a national assessment. Their research highlighted the profound impact of these high-stakes exams on young children's self-esteem. Based on interviews with 20 pupils and observations in a South London primary school, they observed an increased focus on test preparation and a growing worry as SATs approached. One pupil, Norma, voiced her concerns: "It seems like I'll get no points or I won't be able to do it, too hard or something… what if I get stuck here..." (Reay & Wiliam, 1999, p.349). It is worth noting that the school's pupils typically achieved slightly below the national average, potentially influencing their perceptions of such exams. Similar trends appear beyond the UK context. Zeidner and Schleyer's (1999) research involving 1,488 elementary and junior high school students in Israel lends an international perspective to this phenomenon, using questionnaires and end-of-year assessments. In their study, higher levels of test anxiety were identified among "regular" students, presumably those with moderate to low intelligence, in contrast to their intellectually gifted counterparts. Their findings implied that these "regular" students, possibly with diminished academic self-efficacy and fewer cognitive resources, might perceive academic tasks as more daunting.

Zeidner and Schleyer's (1999) study provided additional insights into group effects on academic self-concept and test anxiety, thus deepening our understanding of the complex factors contributing to test anxiety. Delving further, their study encompassing 1,780 gifted

students from elementary and junior high schools revealed the influence of class composition on test anxiety and academic self-perception. Intriguingly, gifted students in exclusively gifted classes displayed heightened test anxiety and diminished academic self-concept compared to those in mixed-ability classes. Although the research took place outside high-stakes assessment settings, its implications cannot be dismissed. Indeed, it suggests a nuanced relationship between group dynamics, individual differences, and student anxiety within academic contexts. Reflecting on these insights, it is conceivable that similar dynamics could be at play amongst GCSE students, highlighting the potential importance of classroom composition and its role in shaping student experiences during these crucial exams.

Chamberlain et al. (2011) interviewed 19 A-level students from the South of England. These students detailed two prominent forms of test anxiety: "pre-exam anxiety" and "exam-day anxiety". "Pre-exam anxiety" was prompted by factors such as a daunting revision workload, teacher pressure, and unexpected mock exam results. Such feelings might mirror the experiences of GCSE students, adding another layer to their academic journey. Moreover, family dynamics, such as parents expressing displeasure at perceived insufficient studying, distractions like noisy siblings, or parents overlooking the intensity of revision schedules, exacerbated this anxiety. Despite rigorous revision, many reported sleep disturbances and a constant sense of "study guilt", hindering relaxation and leisure time. "Exam-day anxiety", in contrast, was linked to issues like exam scheduling complications, prolonged pre-exam waiting, and perceived tight exam durations. Extended waits before exams instigated anxiety-filled peer discussions, diminishing students' exam confidence. Yet, many students viewed this anxiety positively, associating it with better exam outcomes. Considering the high academic calibre of these students, owing to the college's leading exam scores, one must ponder if this might have swayed their perception and handling of exam-related stress.

Test anxiety is indeed intricate and multifaceted. While research suggests that lower-ability students might face heightened anxiety levels (Hembree, 1988; von der Embse et al., 2018), numerous elements converge. Factors like student self-image, coping strategies, the value attributed to exam outcomes, interactions with educators and family, and various exam-specific aspects collectively mould the test anxiety experience (Howard, 2020). Similar complexities could be envisioned within the GCSE landscape. Next, we will delve into how school accountability frameworks interlace with stress, deepening our comprehension of student encounters in this high-stakes exam environment.

2.2.3 Stress in the Context of School Accountability

Perryman et al.'s (2011) landmark study, "Life in the Pressure Cooker," portrayed the significant stress on teachers catalysed by school league tables, a sentiment that likely permeates the preparation for GCSE exams. This extensive two-and-a-half-year case study, conducted in four English schools, shed light on the ramifications of educational policies. Although school performance tables, introduced in 1992, intended to elevate the proportion of students achieving five A*-C grades in GCSE exams, they inadvertently cultivated a stressful ambience for teachers. Such stress was particularly conspicuous in the English and Maths departments, with the amplified pressure traceable to a 2007 policy change that mandated the inclusion of these subjects in reported GCSE pass rates. Teachers felt a decreased autonomy among the amplified league table scrutiny, primarily due to the need to modify their teaching techniques based on external expectations and perceived waning pedagogical creativity.

Nearly a decade on, the situation remained challenging, which could resonate with the experiences of teachers preparing students for the GCSE exams in the current study. Perryman

and Calvert (2019, p.6) indicated that the prevailing accountability pressures within education are major deterrents for educators. They examined the correlation between initial teaching motivations and subsequent decisions about remaining or exiting the profession. Despite their initial enthusiasm for a long-term teaching career, the current school environment imbued a sense of “deprofessionalisation” among educators. This feeling was marked by an increased focus on administrative tasks and metrics over genuine teaching. This environment and the overarching target-driven culture have led many to consider exiting the profession reluctantly. Similarly, Berryhill et al. (2009) postulated that accountability policies often leave educators feeling inept, with many feeling they cannot impact student learning as mandated by such policies, potentially leading to burnout. This sense of ineffectiveness might be particularly pronounced when preparing students for high-stakes tests like the GCSEs.

Meadows and Black's (2018) study expounded upon English teachers' pressures to enhance student test outcomes, akin to those for GCSEs, to fulfil government benchmarks. Their research underscored the potential ethical dilemmas during GCSE and A-level assessments, largely perceived as reactions to accountability protocols. Changes in 2016 accountability measures shifted focus to student progress and could have alleviated the stress of solely achieving higher grades. Despite inherent biases in their methodology, the insights garnered provide an invaluable perspective on this issue.

Burgess et al. (2018) emphasised the reciprocal relationship between teacher and student stress, suggesting a cascading effect where educator anxiety could ripple through to students, potentially influencing GCSE preparations and experiences. The concept of stress contagion is further supported by Oberle and Schonert-Reichl's (2016) study, which discovered significant correlations between teacher burnout and students' physiological stress response. The study, which measured teachers' burnout and collected 406 elementary school students'

cortisol samples – an indication of stress level – revealed substantial variances in students' morning cortisol levels across classrooms, linked directly to high burnout levels in teachers. This association highlights the potential for classroom stress contagion, where teacher-induced stress significantly impacts student stress responses.

Furthermore, Hall et al. (2004, p.801) elucidated a condition termed “SATurated Pupildom,” reflecting the domineering influence of National Curriculum Tests on student identity and educational perspectives. Their work articulated that under considerable public and institutional pressure to demonstrate pupil achievement, teachers were compelled to enforce a high-stakes testing culture. This culture privileges narrowed measures of academic success, often at the expense of broader, more inclusive educational practices. Such a condition could be mirrored in the GCSE context, where students may be engulfed by the pressures of their exams and the looming significance these hold for their futures.

Denscombe's (2000) research showcased student awareness of the strains their teachers faced, a sentiment that might resonate among GCSE candidates in this study. This perception magnified their exam-related anxieties. Further emphasising this point, Connor's (2001) research within southern England's primary schools revealed a sophisticated student-teacher dynamic. A distinct group of 25 students, drawn from a pool of 15 schools, appeared to exhibit an unusual level of stress and anxiety. Tracing the source of this unease revealed the potential influence of teacher stress, possibly derived from targets, league table standings, or performance-based pay. Regardless of the exact stressors, students recognised the significance their teachers assigned to test results. This awareness subsequently amplified their perception of these tests' significance, thereby echoing the teachers' concerns and contributing to an amplified sense of stress and anxiety.

These studies reveal the connection between accountability pressures on teachers and their subsequent effects on students' exam stress levels. The following section will extend this discussion into test motivation, specifically in the context of students' experiences with GCSE.

2.3 The Role of Motivation in Educational Engagement

The direction and magnitude of motivation, governing choices, persistence, and effort (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021) can significantly contribute to students' commitment to GCSE preparation. Delving into fundamental theories helps us understand the dynamics of this critical aspect of GCSE experiences.

2.3.1 Unravelling Student Motivation: Key Theories

The theories of motivational psychology have greatly shaped our understanding of student learning. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) outlined a motivation continuum from intrinsic motivations (engaging from interest or satisfaction) to extrinsic motivations (for rewards or avoiding punishments) and amotivation. SDT posits that motivation peaks when students feel competent, autonomous, and goal-oriented (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Conversely, adverse experiences like public humiliation can be severely demotivating. Furthermore, "amotivation" stems not from disinterest but incompetence or helplessness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Vallerand (1997) identified four sources of amotivation: self-doubt, questioned strategy effectiveness, overwhelming effort, and helplessness. These elements significantly influence student motivation, thereby affecting learning outcomes.

Atkinson's (1957) risk-taking theory links behaviour to drives for success or failure avoidance, depending on the motivational state and perceived outcomes. Wigfield and Eccles (2000) further developed this into the expectancy-value theory (EVT), positing that motivation

and performance are influenced by beliefs in achievable success and task value. For example, a confident student who values mathematics will be more motivated and likely to perform better. In contrast, those who feel success is unattainable or the task unvalued may lack motivation to invest effort. For example, a student confident in and values maths is likely more motivated and performs better, unlike those who see success as unattainable or the task as worthless.

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory centres on individuals' confidence in their capabilities, evolving through success, skill acquisition, social learning, and emotional feedback. Weiner's (2019) attribution theory explains how interpretations of success and failure influence future behaviour. Attributing failure to uncontrollable factors stalls progress while linking it to effort enhances it. Emotions are involved; blaming failure on lack of skill leads to shame, whereas lack of effort induces guilt.

Goal-orientation theory distinguishes between mastery-focused and performance-focused students, with the former driven by learning's intrinsic pleasure and the latter by competition or grades (Ames, 1992). Goal-setting theory adds to this by emphasising specific and challenging goals for enhancing motivation, with difficulty relative to individual ability and experience (Latham & Locke, 1991). Hattie (2009, p.164) highlighted the ineffectiveness of vague “do your best” goals, arguing for more challenging and personalised goal setting to clarify success definitions and guide meaningful behaviour and outcomes.

Additionally, self-worth theory asserts that individuals are driven to safeguard their value, especially during potential failure (Covington, 1992). For example, students appearing indifferent to academic achievement might seek alternative self-worth sources like athletics to mitigate self-esteem risks. De Castella et al. (2013) found that even seemingly disinterested students value peers' perception of their competence. Their study revealed that when self-

esteem is at risk, students use strategies such as defensive pessimism (setting low expectations) and self-handicapping (making pre-emptive excuses) to shield their self-worth and control others' impressions.

Exploring key motivational theories unveils a complex framework shaping student learning and assessment, including at GCSE. While not always overtly referenced, these foundational concepts permeate contemporary educational research, serving as both underpinning and springboard for understanding motivation. In the next section, these theories continue to influence and illuminate the intricate factors that govern students' engagement and performance.

2.3.2 Unveiling the Complexity of Student Motivation

Examining the rich tapestry of motivational psychology, it becomes evident that student motivation is a nuanced and multifaceted phenomenon. A pivotal domain within this sphere concerns individual characteristics, such as a student's interest in school subjects, attitudes towards their relevance, and perceptions of learner autonomy (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Hattie, 2009). The connection between subject matter and motivation emerges distinctly in Mizutani et al.'s (2011) study. Drawing from a substantial New Zealand sample, it focused on a high-stakes national assessment system across Mathematics, Japanese, French, and History. The study revealed that Mathematics exhibited a stronger washback effect on motivation than language subjects, enlightening our understanding of subject-specific motivations at the GCSE level. On the other hand, Barrance and Elwood's (2018b) qualitative research involving GCSE students from 38 schools across Northern Ireland and Wales highlighted the importance of autonomy throughout the GCSE journey. By examining interactions with the GCSE syllabuses, this study highlighted students’ desire to contribute to

specification development at the national level, emphasising autonomy's role in academic motivation.

The broader environmental context can also significantly shape motivation. Radel et al. (2010) highlighted teachers' profound influence on motivation, showing that students taught by teachers with different perceived motivations reacted differently. Participants exposed to a lesson by an allegedly paid teacher expressed less interest and persistence than those instructed by a supposedly voluntary teacher. The study found that students' judgments about their instructor's motivation, based on teaching approach and positivity, shaped their engagement. These findings emphasise the need to understand teaching strategies within the GCSE environment.

Regarding exam design, Wise and Smith (2016) discussed the complex link between motivation and assessment structure in the context of the GCSE. They observed that intricate or essay-type questions might reduce motivation and noted the crucial role of motivation in test validity. To enhance motivation, they recommended emphasising the importance and outcomes of exam performance, a point also supported by Johnson and Shaw (2019). Moreover, Xie's (2015) study on a high-stakes English test in China revealed that students' effort was influenced by the weight of exam sections. Recognising an exam's validity was also found to increase learning and preparation, underlining the central role of motivation in examinations, which is crucial for the GCSE context. However, Harlen and Deakin Crick's (2003) systematic review also warned of potential downsides of high-stakes tests such as the GCSE, including anxiety and a narrowed focus.

Howard (2020) posited that fear appeals, which stress the adverse outcomes of failing crucial exams, might ironically lead to student demotivation. Notably, while primary school students could develop apprehensions due to continuous mentions of National Curriculum

Tests (Hall et al., 2004), GCSE students frequently viewed fear appeals as threatening, leading to increased anxiety (Putwain & Roberts, 2009). Putwain & Remedios's (2014) research on Year 11 GCSE students in England highlighted that over-reliance on fear appeals could notably dampen motivation and overall academic performance. This detrimental impact was linked to a decrease in intrinsic motivation. The study echoed the sentiments of self-worth theory, suggesting that the emphasis on avoiding failure rather than seeking success could be damaging. Howard's (2020) insights stressed the need to adopt success-centric strategies in education and underlined the crucial role that parents and teachers play in fostering a supportive learning environment.

The myriad facets of motivation undoubtedly play a vital role in shaping the academic journey, particularly in the context of GCSE. This exploration aims to clarify the dynamics influencing student motivation. Subsequently, the focus will shift to another essential component: exam and test preparation.

2.4 Exam and Test Preparation

In education, how students prepare for exams directly impacts their performance and emotional and behavioural responses. Ma (2017) provided foundational definitions in this domain, categorising test preparation through three terms: coaching, teaching to the test, and test preparation. In this review, "exam preparation" refers to the specific process for comprehensive exams such as the GCSE, requiring deeper understanding instead of the general term "test preparation". Extending Ma's (2017) perspective, this study views exam preparation as a mechanism to enhance academic performance and nurture mental well-being. The forthcoming subsection delves into the specific challenges and intricacies of preparing for exams such as the GCSE.

2.4.1 Dynamics of Exam Preparation Strategies and Their Educational Impacts

Students' strategies for GCSE readiness are multifaceted. Barrance's (2019) study revealed varied approaches that GCSE students employed. The research encompassed surveys of 1,600 GCSE students, focus groups with 128 students, and multi-cohort studies across Northern Ireland and Wales. The investigation revealed diverse methodologies, including home-studying methods and memorising essays. Such strategies, however, are influenced by socio-economic and educational contexts, such as parental education levels.

Furthermore, Putwain (2009) highlighted the value of mock exams and past paper practice in GCSE preparations. The role of recognising patterns in mock exams, especially in subjects like science, emerged as a valuable aspect of the preparation process. Additionally, teachers' incorporation of past examination questions during lessons bolstered students' familiarity with exam structures and question types. This approach aligns with the strategies identified by Ma (2017) in the context of high-stakes English language tests, whereby teachers used stress management techniques, such as sharing personal success stories and incorporating breaks, to foster resilience and mental well-being among students. Such strategies could be further investigated within the GCSE context, considering their potential to enhance understanding, exam familiarity, and student well-being.

Daly et al. (2012) investigated the "stretch and challenge" policy's impact on A-level qualification in England, focusing on the perceptions of 39 students and 27 teachers through interviews. All participants emphasised the importance of training for exams, often through the frequent use of past papers and mark schemes. Students found mark schemes valuable in directing their studies, while teachers considered explaining these schemes crucial. However, some students expressed concern that this focus detracted from a deeper understanding of

subjects. Transitioning further from the specific context of GCSE and A-level assessments, Green's (2007b) study on IELTS test preparation confirmed this sentiment, suggesting narrow test preparation does not necessarily lead to improved test results, hinting at the risk of superficial learning.

Lastly, in a distinct educational setting, Damankesh and Babaii (2015) researched the test preparation and test-taking strategies of 80 Iranian male high school students, focusing on high-stakes English assessments. Traditional test-preparation methods, such as rote memorisation and grammar exercises, led mainly to measurement-driven learning. In contrast, test-taking strategies cultivated mental and linguistic skills, utilising intelligent guessing and reasoning techniques. These strategies enhanced cognitive functions and intellectual thinking. While this study was conducted outside the GCSE context, its insights offer potential avenues for refining GCSE preparation approaches. The study's findings revealed a stronger positive correlation between test-taking strategies and achievements than with test-preparation strategies, suggesting that a broader, more effective approach to exam preparation could benefit GCSE students.

With this understanding of the general dynamics, the following subsection will delve deeper into the positive impacts of test preparation, emphasising its significance in the context of GCSE students.

2.4.2 The Positive Value of Test Preparation for Students

This subsection extends the insights of section 2.4.1 to explore the multifaceted value of GCSE exam preparation. Crocker (2005) emphasised that test preparation is a tool for academic success and fosters life skills, which can be beneficial in GCSE and beyond. Despite potential adverse washback effects (discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2), thoughtful test

preparation can be empowering when thoughtfully implemented. Crocker (2005) suggested practices such as encouraging positive attitudes and problem-solving strategies that serve as tools for lifelong learning.

Optimising Exam Readiness: Familiarity, Managing Anxiety, and Developing Essential Skills

The practice of utilising mock exams and past examination questions can contribute to better preparedness for GCSE students (Putwain, 2009). These methods expose students to the structure and conditions of the actual exams, providing them with valuable experience that can mitigate stress and boost confidence (Daly et al., 2012; Ma, 2017; Putwain, 2008).

Concurrently, test anxiety remains a prevalent challenge among GCSE students, necessitating targeted strategies. Research indicated that individualised techniques such as focused preparation and concentration are pivotal for those grappling with high test anxiety levels (Kondo, 2007; Putwain & Daly, 2014). Putwain and Symes (2018) explored the relationship between test anxiety, effort, and exam performance among GCSE students, revealing that increased effort can serve as a compensatory mechanism to counterbalance the adverse effects of anxiety. Also, in the GCSE context, Putwain (2009) substantiated the role of targeted preparation in mitigating the detrimental effects of anxiety on memory on exam performance, even for students with specific challenges such as dyslexia, through practice and familiarity with examination formats.

On the other hand, Damankesh and Babaii (2015) emphasised the significance of test-taking strategies in fostering intellectual thinking applicable beyond the classroom. Putwain's (2008) research involving GCSE students and educators in England elucidated that students' stress and anxiety stem from the demands of assessments that necessitate proficiencies and knowledge extending beyond their initial capacities, emphasising the need for comprehensive

strategies that encompass effective workload and time management, revision methods, and study skills. Additionally, this study indicated that integrating these skills could be invaluable for students facing socio-economic disadvantages, complementing classroom instruction and fostering student confidence.

The Role of Rote Learning, Memorisation, and Active Retrieval in GCSE Preparation

Rote learning involves using repetition techniques to acquire new knowledge that prioritises recall (Bhattacharya, 2022). The approach towards high-stakes examinations, such as the GCSEs, could raise concerns regarding the reliance on rote learning (e.g., Zohar & Alboher Agmon, 2018), that such an approach may lead to surface learning, hindering genuine understanding of the material or students engaging in critical thinking (Hay, 2007; Subramaniam, 2008). This potential superficial knowledge acquisition could also undermine the validity of assessments.

However, past research shed light on the value and intricacies of rote learning. Battino (1992) highlighted its merits, arguing that learners who employed such a method acquired foundational knowledge to approach related problems confidently. Grove and Lowery Bretz (2012) suggested that rote and meaningful learning represented endpoints on a continuum of learning, suggesting that rote learning could be a stepping-stone to deeper understanding. . Xu (2022) challenged the view that memorisation is a superficial form of learning, highlighting its role in generating new meanings through repetition. Additionally, Pilotti et al. (2022) underscored the importance of memorisation skills in academic performance. The study suggested that retention, achieved through methods such as memorisation, forms a crucial foundation for complex cognitive activities in higher education.

Beyond rote learning and memorisation, the “testing effect” offers another perspective, whereby long-term memory is enhanced through active retrieval practice instead of mere re-study (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). This effect shows broad applicability, benefiting diverse learning domains, from foreign-language vocabulary to simple facts and information organisation, in various educational settings, including higher education and classrooms (Benjamin & Pashler, 2015). Emmerdinger and Kuhbandner's (2019) and Glaser and Richter's (2023) study supported the applicability of this effect across different learning domains and emotional states. While these studies did not directly target the GCSE setting, the universality of the testing effect suggests its potential applicability and benefit for GCSE students, highlighting the importance of structured exam preparation.

In the context of the GCSEs, rote learning and active retrieval hold potential benefits. When used thoughtfully, it could provide a foundation for learners to interpret and apply the knowledge in different situations, going beyond memorisation and paving the way for deeper understanding and comprehension.

Aspirations and the Role of Test Preparation for GCSE Students

The research conducted by Brown and Woods (2022) revealed that GCSE students often associate examination success with broader life goals, such as further education, career opportunities, and overall life success. As such, the value of test preparation emerges as a critical factor in helping students reach their aspirations.

Lumby's (2011) study offered a different dimension to this context. Conducting case studies across various educational institutions and interviewing a large sample of Year 11 and Year 12 students, the research discovered that students often found education intensely enjoyable. Critical factors in this enjoyment included a sense of achievement and, in some

instances, a greater degree of freedom in Year 12. Notably, the feeling of preparedness for a successful future and personal growth was noted, with some students articulating that education had “sculpted me into a better person” or increased confidence (Lumby, 2011, p.255). These findings imply that robust test preparation is not only about academic advancement but also contributes to a positive learning experience that builds character.

As competition for university placements and employment opportunities intensifies, particularly in challenging economic climates, the significance of achieving good grades becomes even more pronounced (Barrance & Elwood, 2018a; Elwood, 2012). Consequently, robust test preparation becomes a means to pass an exam and a pathway to fulfil students' ambitions and navigate an increasingly competitive landscape. The insights from Brown and Woods (2022) illustrated that the importance of test preparation goes beyond mere academic achievement; it is an integral part of enabling students to realise their aspirations, build confidence in their abilities, and secure a firm footing in their future endeavours.

The insights from these studies underscore the vital role of test preparation for GCSE students, not merely for academic success but also for holistic development and future aspirations, prompting my research into students' GCSE experiences.

2.5 From Personal Experience to Research Inquiry

2.5.1 Personal Motivation and Position

As a secondary school teacher, I have always held self-reflection and feedback from colleagues and students in high regard to refine my teaching methods. Annual action research projects stand as a testament to my commitment to valuing student perspectives, as they are directly affected by my teaching approach. GCSE's influence on my curriculum decisions is

unmistakable. Our curriculum aligns closely with the GCSE specification, attempting to address various factors such as governmental accountability, parental worries, student feedback, and my aspiration for their success. I have charted a coherent assessment path from Year 7 to Year 11, intending to ensure comprehensive coverage while retaining adaptability in the early stages.

Additionally, being a mother has also shaped my educational views. Observing room for more challenges in my children's primary education led me to consider the grammar school entrance exam as a potential tool for motivation. This journey imparted valuable lessons in discipline, goal-setting, and embracing challenges, which proved especially beneficial for my daughter in building resilience in her mathematical endeavours. Despite not entering a grammar school, they have continued to thrive academically. These combined roles of educator and parent have fuelled my intrigue about the GCSE experience from a student's perspective, providing the impetus for this research endeavour.

2.5.2 Research Questions and Study Contributions

Driven by personal intrigue, my research diverged from conventional studies that often focused on test anxiety and well-being. Instead, it targeted a broader understanding of the GCSE experience from students' perspectives, emphasising the “student voice”, a critical aspect of education. The study explored the following key questions:

- How did students' emotional and behavioural responses to the GCSE evolve throughout their journey?
- What were students' perceptions of the GCSE, and how did their emotions and behaviours affect them?
- What factors could have enhanced their GCSE experience?

The research aimed to make several contributions to education. First, it delved into students' perspectives against a complex socio-environmental landscape such as the post-Covid era, teacher strikes potentially due to accountability stress and exhaustion, and rising children's mental health referrals (Ball et al., 2023; Bell, 2018; Skopeliti & Otte, 2023). Second, it integrated views from both Year 11 and Year 12 students, comparing those preparing for exams with those who have completed them, allowing the identification of common trends and differences. Finally, enriched by teacher insights gathered through interviews, my perspective as a teacher in the same school provided a unique lens to interpret the data. This multifaceted approach aimed to foster a holistic understanding of the GCSE experience, informing future educational practices and policies.

Chapter 3 Method

3.1 Study Design

This research engaged in an iterative design process, enriched through continuous self-reflection and scholarly supervision. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews served as the primary method for data collection, providing "rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings" (May, 2011, p.131). The study unfolded in my workplace, which eased logistical concerns and leveraged my established rapport with the participants. Nonetheless, this context also presented ethical dilemmas that necessitated cautious navigation, details of which will be discussed in section 3.5.

A timeline was designed for Year 12 A-level students to aid memory recall during interviews. Focus groups and journal entries from Year 11 GCSE students were initially considered for data collection. However, focus groups were rejected due to their potential constraint on sharing sensitive information, while journals were dropped to avoid adding to student workload and stress during an already taxing period.

The primary analytical emphasis was on student data, supplemented by interviews with a few educators for additional context. Pilot interviews were conducted for methodological refinements. Field notes and a reflexive journal were also utilised for data analysis. These tools provided additional layers of interpretative richness, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the emotional and behavioural dimensions of GCSE experiences.

3.2 Participants

3.2.1 School Characteristics

The study sample was drawn from a comprehensive, co-educational, and non-denominational school in a suburban region of London, England. The school serves students in Year 7 through Year 11, with an attached sixth-form centre catering to Year 12 and 13 students enrolled in A-level courses. At the time of data collection, the school had approximately 850 students enrolled in its secondary division (around 170 students each year group) and about 200 in its sixth-form centre. A standard class in the secondary division consists of 30 students, though GCSE classes of elective subjects tend to be smaller. Each year group is overseen by a head-of-year responsible for students' pastoral needs. Additionally, the school has two distinct departments dedicated to supporting students with special educational, emotional, and behavioural needs.

The school has received a "Good" rating in its most recent Ofsted inspection. Academic performance indicators, specifically GCSE and A-level results, exceeded the national average for England in the past two years. Similarly, Progress 8, Attainment 8, and the proportion of students achieving Grade 5 or higher in English and Maths GCSEs were also above the national average, albeit closely aligned with local authority averages. GCSE students at this school typically take 9 to 10 subjects.

The unique challenges to ensure complete anonymity posed by the shared educational environment between researcher and participants were acknowledged (Elliot, 2023). Careful measures were taken to use broad or blended descriptors for participants to maintain as much anonymity as possible. To protect the school's and participants' identity, this study does not disclose gender and employs a mixture of pseudonyms.

3.2.2 Recruitment

22 students (11 students from Year 11 and 12 respectively) and five teachers and school leaders participated in the study. After obtaining the headteacher's consent, email invitations were sent to all eligible students. The aim was to recruit approximately 10 students from each year, considering data analysis time constraints and the impending GCSE exams. However, there was no upper limit set for recruitment; the objective was to capture a broad spectrum of student experiences.

While purposive sampling was initially considered, ethical complexities and time constraints in obtaining additional student data (e.g., family socio-economic status) rendered this approach less viable. The initial poor response – only four students expressed interest – necessitated a more hands-on approach to recruitment. I personally invited students, striving to select a varied sample of GCSE subjects studied and gender. Recruitment and interviews occurred concurrently to maximise efficiency, which spanned from February to April and the GCSE exams commencing in early May.

For teacher recruitment, direct invitations were deemed more effective due to their busy schedules. A purposeful sampling strategy was adopted, targeting teachers of varied experiences, responsibilities, and subject areas. For recruitment materials, see Appendix A.

3.2.3 Participant Descriptions and Context

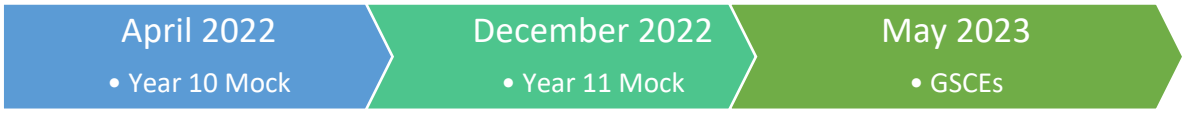
Year 11 Students (15-16 years old)

Incorporating Year 11 students is pivotal for capturing authentic, real-time perspectives on the GCSE experience. This cohort had recently completed their mock exams and was in the

preparatory phase for formal assessments. They also had Year 10 mock exams, thereby offering longitudinal insights into the examination process (see Figure 1).

This cohort marked the first to sit for the actual GCSE examinations after two years of COVID-19 cancellations. This reintroduction of exams, coupled with a return to pre-pandemic grading standards, introduced a unique set of pressures and complexities (DfE, 2023c). Additionally, they experienced multiple teacher strikes in the lead-up to their GCSE exams (DfE, 2023a). These strikes, motivated by unions' calls for better pay and working conditions, potentially added another layer of stress and uncertainty (Roberts, 2023).

Figure 1. Year 11 GCSE Key Examination Dates



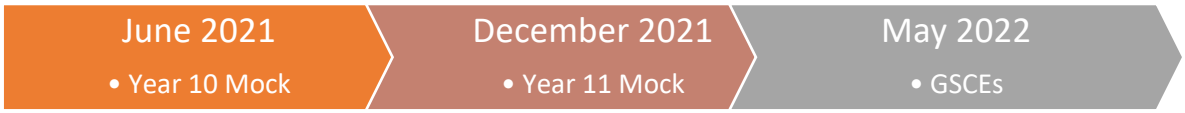
Year 12 Students (16-17 years old)

Including Year 12 students offers valuable insights into the post-GCSE experience, enriching the study's depth and context. All participants had studied GCSE at the school, ensuring a consistent educational context comparable to the Year 11 cohort. Entry to the sixth form is competitive, typically requiring an average GCSE grade of 5.5 or 6.5 and a minimum grade of 6 or 7 in selected A-level subjects. Given these stringent entry requirements, it is implicit that the Year 12 participants had achieved relatively high academic performance during their GCSEs.

During the data collection period, these students had recently completed their Year 12 A-level mock exam. Unlike previous cohorts, their academic journey had been punctuated by pandemic-related scheduling changes, altering the timing of their GCSE mock exam (see Figure

2). Additionally, they were the first cohort to undertake the GCSE examinations after they had been cancelled for the preceding two years due to COVID-19. Various support mechanisms were put in place to mitigate the effects of these disruptions, including generous grading, coursework adjustments, and the provision of advanced information to guide exam focus (Ofqual, 2022b).

Figure 2. Year 12 GCSE Key Examination Dates



Teachers and School Leaders

Five teachers and school leaders from various subjects and roles were interviewed to provide insights into the school context. To ensure confidentiality, specific subjects and responsibilities of the individual teachers are not disclosed; however, the following characteristics were encompassed:

- **Diversity of subject areas:** Teachers represented core and non-core subjects, extending from scientific disciplines to the humanities.
- **Variety in assessment types**: Interviewees encompassed instructors of subjects evaluated through both written and practical GCSE examinations, or a hybrid thereof, shedding light on the array of examination formats confronted by students.
- **Multiplicity of teaching experience:** The sample incorporated early-career teachers (those within their first two years of service) with seasoned educators with two or more years and, in some instances, exceeding a decade of experience. This

heterogeneity yielded insights spanning diverse levels of expertise and instructional philosophies.

- **Range of professional responsibility:** Interviewees included teachers with no additional responsibilities and those who held positions such as head of department or head of year, as well as key stage assessment responsibilities, thus offering a balanced representation of teaching and leadership roles within the school.

By encompassing these characteristics, the interviews with the teachers and school leaders contributed to gaining a holistic understanding of the educational context and further enriched the findings of the study.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Procedure

Upon receiving ethics approval and the headteacher's formal consent, eligible Year 11 and Year 12 students were invited via email and teachers in person. All participants received an information sheet prior to their interviews; parents were additionally provided with an opt-out form via email approximately two weeks in advance, with read receipts requested for confirmation. Information sheets were reviewed before obtaining the participant's signed consent to ensure informed and voluntary participation. Participants were explicitly reminded that they could withdraw at any time.

Four pilot interviews were initially conducted, allowing the interviewer to trial the interview schedule and develop transcription expertise, setting the stage for the remainder of the data collection process. All interviews were conducted in vacant classrooms, which was both practical for the research process and an environment familiar to the students. Before each interview commenced, the information sheet was reviewed, and the relevant consent

forms were signed. Upon confirmation of consent, the interviews were voice-recorded. Each session was concluded by thanking the participants for their valuable contributions to the study. Subsequently, immediate reflections were recorded, serving as field notes for later data analysis.

For Year 12 participants, a timeline highlighting key GCSE milestones was distributed via email and in printed form approximately two weeks before the interviews. Students were asked to spend about 10 minutes completing the timeline and bringing it to the interview. Additional details about this tool will be elaborated upon in section 3.3.3.

3.3.2 Pilot Study and Interview Schedule Development

Pilot Interviews and Refinement

The initial phase of this research included the administration of four pilot interviews involving one teacher, one Year 11 student, and two Year 12 students. These interviews served as an important exploratory avenue to identify methodological limitations and enhance the study's rigour. The preliminary findings indicated issues such as the presence of leading questions and instances of premature interruptions.

The literature on interview techniques was consulted to rectify these shortcomings. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) highlighted the value of allowing periods of silence to let the participants fully engage with the questions and formulate in-depth responses. Similarly, May (2011) and Robson and McCartan (2016) provided strategies for enhancing question open-endedness and eliciting detailed replies. These literature insights guided a systematic revision of the interview schedule, where potentially leading questions were replaced or rephrased to yield more comprehensive participant responses. This refinement process was further

enriched by examining the interview schedules in Brown (2020), Godfrey-Faussett (2021), Putwain (2009, 2011), and Roome and Soan (2019).

The pilot interviews were incorporated into the final data set, given the rich insights obtained and the relatively minor changes to the interview schedule for subsequent interviews. Only one new question was introduced, which spontaneously arose in two of the three student pilot interviews.

Final Interview Questions

This high-level summary outlines the interview schedule tailored for Year 11 participants; the schedule for Year 12 participants varies slightly to account for their distinct experiences. After the warm-up protocols, the interview was guided by the following questions to ensure consistency and coverage. It was also designed to allow for natural conversation, facilitating the emergence of unanticipated yet pertinent insights and enriching the depth of the data. For all interview schedules, see Appendix B1.

1. Self-Perception Post-Mock Exams
    - “How did your Year 11 mock exams go?”
    - “How do you feel about yourself as a learner now?”

2. Emotions and Behaviours Pre-GCSE
    - "How do the approaching GCSE exams make you feel?"
    - “Do they change how you study/revise?”

3. Stakes of GCSE and Future Plans
    - "How important do you think GCSE is?"

- "What is your plan after GCSE?"

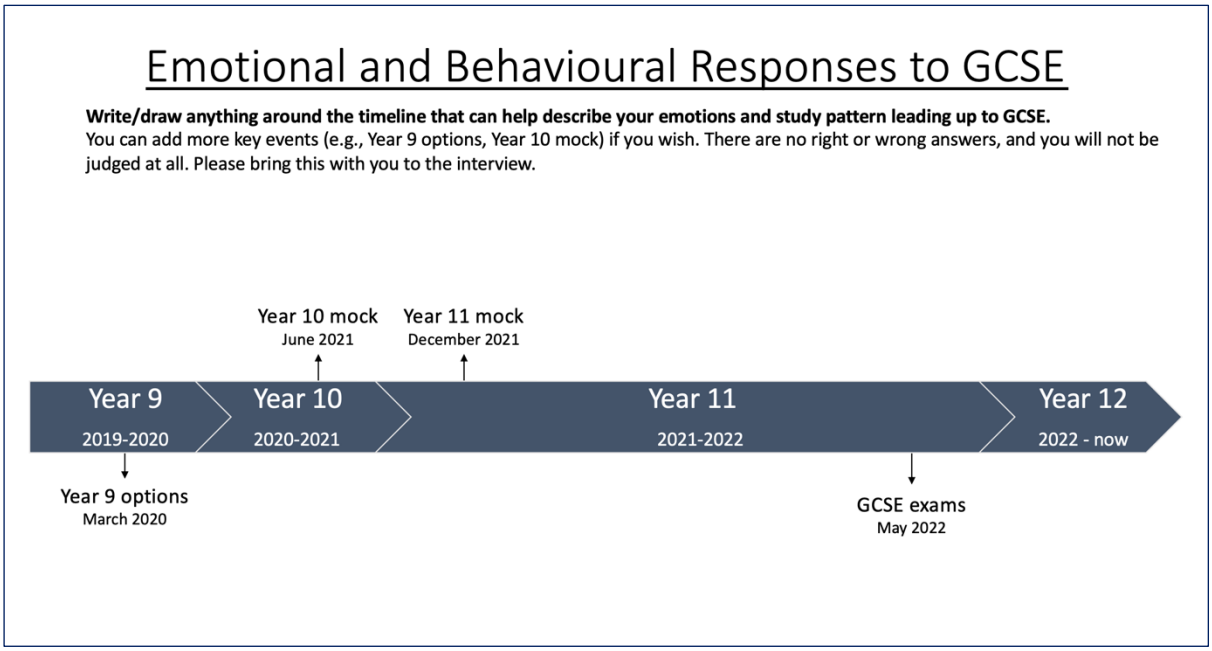
4. Reflective Questions
    - "If you didn't have to do GCSE, would you have chosen your subjects/revised differently? Why?"
    - "If you had a magic wand to change one thing about GCSE, what would it be?"

5. Concluding Remarks
    - "I've asked all my questions. Do you have any questions, or is there something else you want to discuss?"

3.3.3 Timeline Memory Aid for Year 12 Participants

A concern in interviewing Year 12 students was their potential difficulty recalling GCSE experiences due to the lapse in time and a shift in focus towards A-levels. The use of memory aids in qualitative research was explored to mitigate this issue. Drawing inspiration from Chen (2018) and Sankaran et al. (2020), who found the effectiveness of visual timelines in healthcare contexts. A timeline was designed for this study with more visual space for Year 11 compared to other major milestones, aiming to direct participants' attention to that crucial year in alignment with the research questions (see Figure 3). This completed timeline was frequently referenced during interviews to stimulate discussion and aid recollection (see Appendix B2).

Figure 3. Year 12 Timeline Memory Aid



3.3.4 Interviews, Field Notes, and Transcripts

Following the pilot phase, subsequent interviews were conducted utilising the finalised interview schedule (detailed in section 3.3.2) and observed previously outlined procedures. The interviews ranged from 20 to 50 minutes and were timed to avoid lesson disruption. Immediately after each interview, I allocated 15-20 minutes to jot down any immediate thoughts and observations (see Appendix B3). These notes served not only as field notes but also as a valuable reference during the data analysis phase. All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word's dictate and transcribe function. Each transcript underwent at least one manual review while listening to the original audio recording to ensure textual accuracy and the faithful capture of participants' tones. Grammatical inaccuracies in participants' speech were retained in the transcripts. However, stumbling or redundant expressions, such as the frequent use of "like", were edited for clarity in quotes presented in the results section, as illustrated below:

Table 1. Example of Transcript Editing

Original	Edited
"So **like** the first mock we've done basically in a secondary school. **So, like** you just get a lot of **like** pressure from your teachers,"	"So the first mock we've done basically in a secondary school, you just get a lot of pressure from your teachers."

3.4 Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

3.4.1 Rationale for Using RTA

The approach to data analysis was fundamentally shaped by the study's aims and my unique position as the sole researcher and teacher in the educational setting under investigation. Given this dual role, rigour and reflexivity in data analysis are of paramount importance. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), as described by Braun and Clarke (2022), emerged as the most appropriate analytical strategy after reviewing various methods, resonating closely with the research objectives. This approach provides a critical framework that encourages and necessitates scrutinising my research practice, process, and underlying assumptions. To facilitate this practice, I kept a reflexive journal to document various stages of the research journey, including any doubts and discoveries (see Appendix B4). Details about how rigour and flexibility were practised will be elaborated upon in the ensuing discussion of the data analysis process.

3.4.2 Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive Framework

In alignment with an experiential-inductive approach, this study focused on the subjective experiences of GCSE students. This orientation supported the values of attending to individual experiences with genuine curiosity and served as the epistemological foundation of the research. By adopting this stance, the study acknowledged that the understanding of emotional and behavioural responses to GCSEs is intrinsically linked to the students' own sense-making and lived experiences. This viewpoint lent coherence and rigour to the methodological choices and ensured fidelity to student perspectives. The study integrated additional contextual layers by building on prior literature, such as washback effects, test anxiety, and learning motivation, enriching our comprehension of GCSE responses within a broader academic milieu.

3.4.3 Data Analysis Process

The data analysis was conducted following the six-phase procedure of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022), facilitated by using the NVivo software for data organisation and coding.

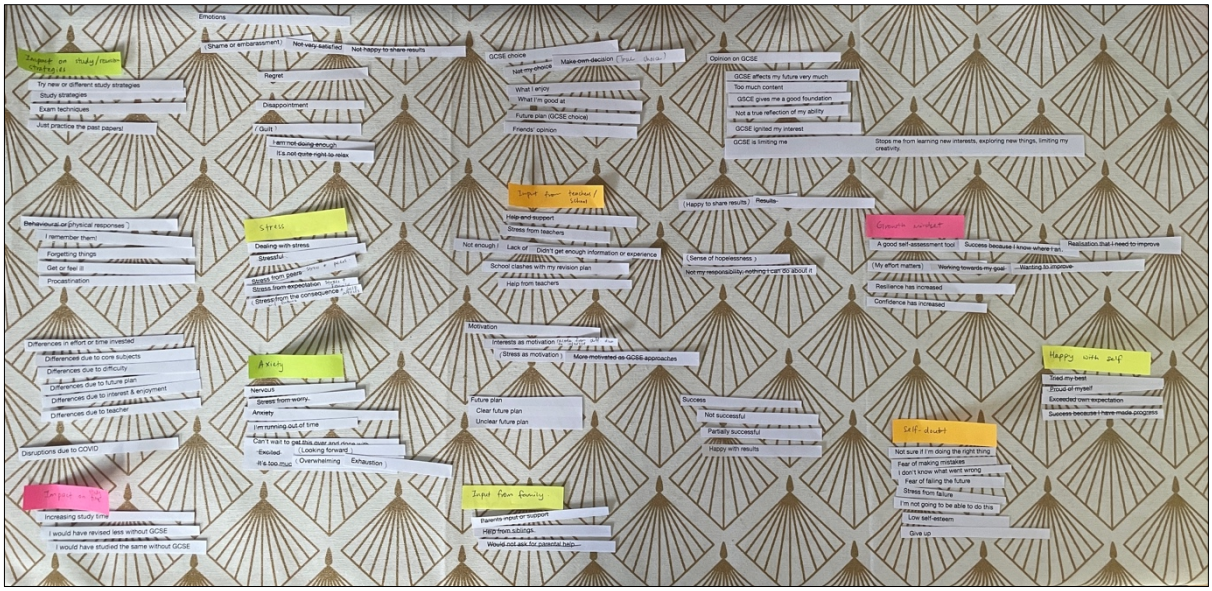
Phase One: Familiarisation

The initial phase involved a deep immersion in the data set, including multiple readings and audited reviews of each interview transcript. Engaging in critical distancing and questioning was crucial as this allowed for a reflexive stance. Notably, my dual role as a researcher and a teacher in the participating school occasionally generated conflicting emotions, which were diligently recorded in my reflexive journal. This reflective practice helped maintain focus and integrity in line with the study's philosophical assumptions.

Phase Two: Coding

The coding process primarily employed inductive methods, supplemented by some deductive coding informed by Chapter 2 literature. Each transcript underwent a rigorous coding process whereby initial codes were identified and subsequently refined through iterative rounds. The coding sequence was structured from participant 1 to 22, then from 11 to 1, and finally from 22 to 12. This approach disrupted routine sequencing for analytical depth and facilitated balanced coding attention. The codes were also printed and cut into strips so I could engage with the data differently (see Figure 4 & Appendix C1).

Figure 4. Coding Strips

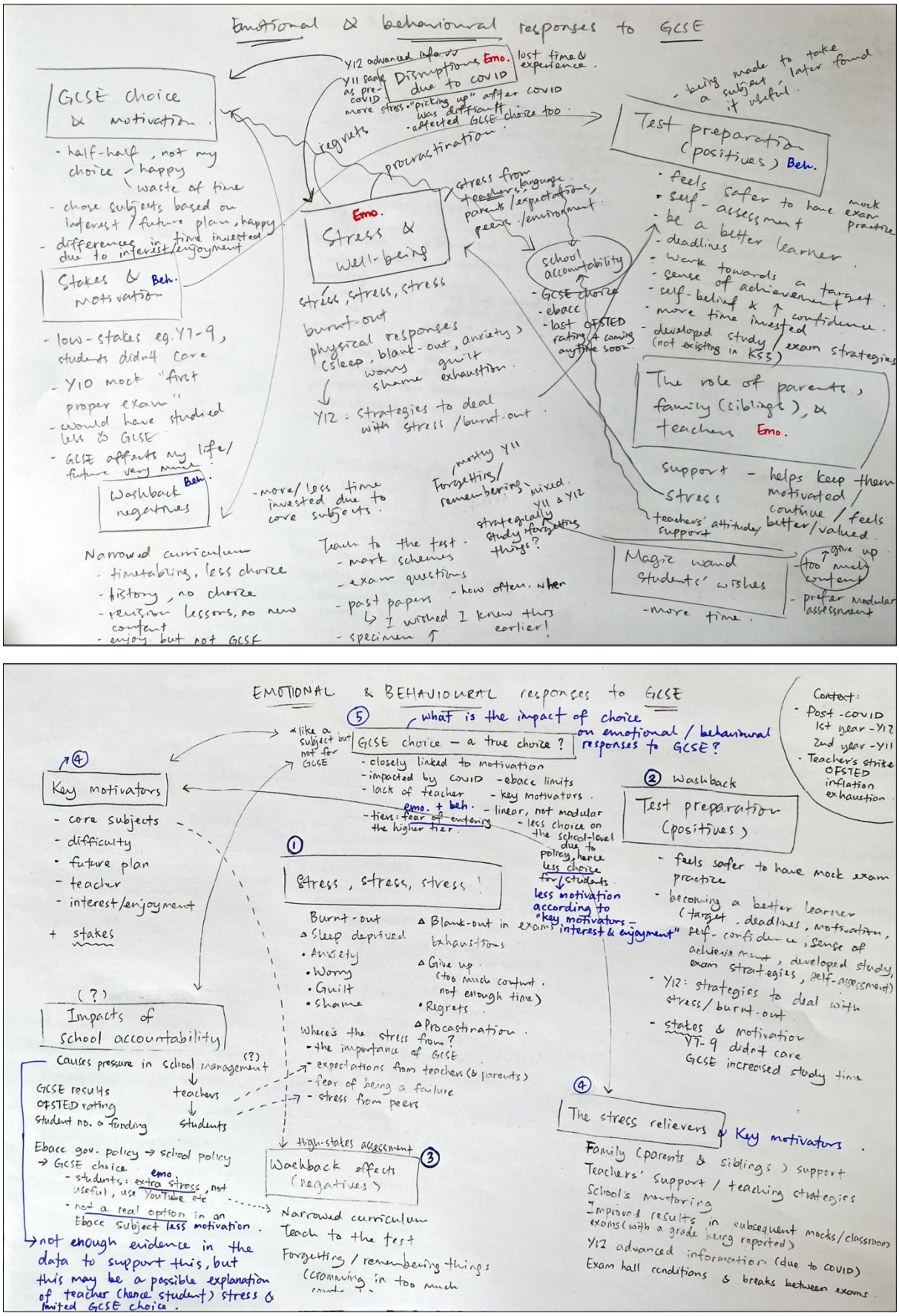


Phases Three to Five: Themes Development and Refinement

The subsequent phases encompassed the generation, review, and refinement of initial themes. This involved clustering codes with similar meanings, supported by the creation of thematic maps (see Figure 5). The overarching narrative sought to amplify students' voices in their GCSE experiences. Initially, five themes and various subthemes were identified. However,

upon further review, one theme was discarded due to insufficient evidential richness, leaving four themes intact (see Appendix C2).

Figure 5. Thematic Maps



Phase Six: Writing Up

The final phase involved synthesising the remaining themes into a coherent narrative. Despite the initial emergence of four themes, the eventual count was reduced to three, guided by scrutiny of the data and reflective practice. The writing process was not linear but involved iterative returns to prior themes and chapters for refinement. Quotes were cross-verified against their original context and audio recordings to ensure fidelity. Field notes and my reflexive journal were instrumental resources throughout this phase, providing additional layers of context and assisting in the continual alignment with the study's philosophical orientation.

This recursive approach was guided by a focus on enabling the students' voices to emerge as clearly as possible in recounting their experiences with GCSEs. Feedback from academic supervision was incorporated at various stages, contributing to the methodological rigour and conceptual depth of the analysis.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

3.5.1 Guiding Principles

The study's ethical framework is grounded in three core principles: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee were also followed, specifically pertinent to young people, teachers, and in-school settings. See Appendix D for ethics documentation.

Respect for Persons: Consent and Data Handling

Prioritising individual autonomy, the research consulted the university's guidelines on competent youths (University of Oxford, 2014) to enable meaningful youth participation (Elliot, 2023). Informed by literature indicating the communicative competencies of 14 to 18-year-olds (Barrance & Elwood, 2018a; Elwood, 2013; Elwood et al., 2017; Mccarthy, 2022), the study endeavoured to continuously monitor consent, as recommended by Punch and Oancea (2014). This approach sought to facilitate voluntary withdrawal at any point and aimed to mitigate concerns related to power dynamics and implicit coercion.

Ethics approval was granted by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford (reference: EDUC_C1A_2223_087), and the school headteacher's formal consent was obtained. All participants consented to be quoted. Data were initially stored with anonymised identifiers, later replaced by pseudonyms in this final report. All audio recordings, transcripts, and scanned consent forms were stored securely on the university's OneDrive, accessible only via Microsoft authentication for enhanced security measures. After confirming secure storage, original audio files were deleted, and paper consent forms were shredded.

Concern for Welfare: Emotional and Psychological Safety

Participant welfare was diligently safeguarded, focusing on emotional well-being and power dynamics. For instance, when a student became visibly emotional, the interview was paused per the university's protocol for handling participants displaying psychological distress, allowing the individual to end the discussion and receive appropriate support (University of Oxford, 2014). Efforts to counterbalance power imbalances included building trust through non-leading questions and a warm-up period before interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Justice: Equitable Treatment and Access

In adherence to the ethical principle of justice, all Year 11 and eligible Year 12 students were invited to participate to offer every student an equitable opportunity to contribute to the study. I sought to maintain a receptive listening approach throughout the interviews to encourage open dialogue (Elliot, 2023). Genuine curiosity and a non-judgmental approach were also prioritised to ensure equitable treatment of all participants.

Feedback from the participants indicated that many found the engagement meaningful. For instance, Matthew (Year 12 student) described the experience as "very therapeutic". Daisy (Year 11 student) expressed gratitude for the opportunity to speak freely, noting, “Thank you for listening”. Wilson (teacher) commended that the interview had “very interesting questions”, suggesting that participants had a positive research experience.

3.5.2 Anonymity vs. Power

Gordon (2019) raised the ethical tension of anonymity in research: It can empower participants through free expression while potentially silencing them by withholding attribution. In response, I sought to balance protection for participants and preserving their voices (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Initially, pseudonyms were selected as a protective measure for participants and the institution involved. However, during interviews, some students were keen on attributing their perspectives to their real identities, leading to a re-examination of the ethical quandaries surrounding anonymity. Despite the complexities, pseudonyms were retained as a safety measure. Nonetheless, the willingness of some to forgo anonymity serves as a point of reflection, underscoring the evolving nature of ethical considerations in educational research.

3.5.3 Addressing Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest arose from my position as a teacher at the research site. Given my employment, there was a potential subconscious inclination to present the school favourably. To ensure research integrity and counteract bias:

1. I removed identifiers from the data, ensuring anonymous and unbiased analysis.
2. Reflective journaling was consistently employed, aiding in the management of potential biases.
3. Teacher participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy; however, their feedback would not alter data interpretation.
4. I designated specific days for research, including scheduling interviews on non-working days only. This separation underscored the distinction between my research and teaching roles, curbing the inadvertent influence of one on the other.

Chapter 4 Results and Discussion

Three prevailing themes were identified through thematic analysis. Theme 1, "Stress, Stress, Stress!" explores the omnipresent sensation of stress. Theme 2, "The Significance of Test Preparation", assesses the multifaceted role of tests, and Theme 3, "Narrowed Curriculum", delves into the challenges of depth versus breadth in the curriculum. Alongside these themes, the chapter also uncovers student coping strategies and voices their aspirations for the GCSE system. Together, these elements provide a well-rounded perspective on their GCSE journey.

4.1 Theme 1: Stress, Stress, Stress! – An Inescapable Reality of GCSE.

The term "stress" reverberated repeatedly in the GCSE students' academic journey, manifesting across cognitive, affective, and physiological dimensions during this critical educational period. Notably, despite designing open-ended interview questions to elicit a wide range of responses, the recurrence of stress was distinctive.

4.1.1 Understanding Student's Anxiety

Putwain et al. (2021) outlined four key dimensions of test anxiety – Worry, Cognitive Interference, Tension, and Physiological Indicators – illuminating students' multifaceted challenges in GCSE experiences. This section delves into their personal experiences within this framework.

Worry (Cognitive Dimension)

Students described a pervading sense of worry about achieving satisfactory grades. This worry resonates with the existing literature, such as Putwain (2007), which emphasises the cognitive aspects of stress, including intrusive and persistent worries. Such fears stretch beyond immediate results and linger on doubts about future aspirations. Students' concerns are voiced below:

> I was worried that I wouldn't get the grasp of it in hand and in time and that I wouldn't pass my exams… not being able to [go to] a good sixth form, get a degree and do all those things, really.
>
> (Yahan, Year 12)

> Usually when I'm thinking about [the exam], I'm starting to worry about what's gonna happen… what do I do now, and what do I have to revise? Am I doing enough? … on the day of the exam as well, while sitting the exam [for my GCSE community language], it was also very nerve-racking.
>
> (Natalia, Year 11)

Cognitive Interference (Cognitive Dimension)

Cognitive interference is characterised by blanking out and self-pressure during tests, including distracting thoughts and mental disorganisation. Through students' first-hand accounts, the tangible and immediate impact of cognitive interference on both performance and well-being during exams becomes vividly apparent:

> I was one of the best in the class in English… when I got to the exam, I think I just put too much pressure on myself, and I started panicking… I stopped because my brain didn't want to work... I was asking God… "Please help me", and then I went to cry, but I didn't cry.
>
> (Matthew, Year 12)

Tension (Affective-Physiological Dimension)

Tension is a prominent feature in students' exam experiences. Insights into "pre-exam anxiety" were given by Chamberlain et al. (2011), revealing how an intense revision workload and teacher pressures lead to sleep problems and a perpetual sense of “study guilt”:

> It's really hard to fall asleep sometimes… I wake up really early… even though I'm tired, my brain can't shut off… I go to sleep, and then there's thoughts like… all of a sudden, ‘Oh God, I need to revise this or I need to do this’.
>
> (Beatriz, Year 11)

Even after dedicating three hours to study daily after school, adding about two hours for homework, and committing about five hours each weekend day, Emily is haunted by an unease that keeps her from genuinely relaxing:

> When you stop revising and you try to relax, you just have guilt of not studying. In the back of your head, you just can’t really fully relax, coz’ in the back of your mind, you’re still thinking about studying.
>
> (Emily, Year 11)

Physiological Indicators (Affective-Physiological Dimension)

The physical symptoms described by the students add a corporeal dimension to their experiences of test anxiety or exam-induced stress. These symptoms range from subtle ailments to pronounced disruptions in the daily lives:

> I feel really ill sometimes, like out of stress. Or just like particularly depressed or even more tired. Even if I sleep well, I’m just still exhausted.
>
> (Alicia, Year 11).

> I feel like I start to get quite a few more headaches and feeling a bit more sick around the time [of my GCSE exams].
>
> (Milos, Year 12)

Beyond these symptoms, students reported further physical manifestations, including stomach aches, persistent fatigue, and even vomiting. Such physiological responses are not merely uncomfortable; they serve as distressing reminders of the underlying emotional pressure. Such manifestations further complicate the challenges of managing academic stress effectively.

4.1.2 The Complex Emotional Journey and Behavioural Responses to GCSE Stress

As students navigate the GCSE landscape, they encounter a myriad of emotions, leading to diverse behavioural outcomes. This section, through students' narratives, offers a glimpse into the multifaceted experiences during GCSE preparation.

From Distraction to Self-Doubt

For many students, the GCSE journey is marked by self-doubt and internal struggles. Milos (Year 12) encapsulated this sentiment, admitting he "wouldn't be good enough". His concern resonates with Daisy, who highlighted her struggle with focus:

> Sometimes, I get very easily distracted. The idea of GCSE still stresses me out… I'd like to think that I'm doing the right revision... But I still feel very stressed and confusing whether or not I actually know what I'm doing is correct.
>
> (Daisy, Year 11)

Emily further amplified the effect on mental well-being:

> My mental health, it definitely decreases it. Because... you think that your whole worth is just dependent on the grades that you get. So when you're not reaching those grades... you think 'that's it'. It's like over, all that effort is for nothing, and then you start doubting yourself... if what you're doing is right? Or if what you're aspiring to do in life is even right?
>
> (Emily, Year 11)

Another student shed light on the relentless pressures of the GCSE timetable and the weight of anticipation:

> The tight schedule with GCSEs, like how everything is so cramped up... feels like you're running out of time.
>
> (Natalia, Year 11)

Pressure and Avoidance

For some, the pressure culminates in resignation to their limitations, leaving subjects aside and prioritising what is perceived as vital for their future:

> After everything I revised, I just leave geography on the side, and I barely touch it… It's too late for me to even try… I've left it for too long… It's more important that I get the subjects I want to use in the future.
>
> (Saul, Year 11)

Saul's approach highlights a nuanced response to academic strain, employing strategic behaviour by deliberately prioritising subjects based on his future aspirations, thereby asserting his agency amidst academic pressures. Saul's decision echoes sentiments in psychological theories such as Atkinson's (1957) risk-taking theory, where individuals choose paths that minimise failure, and Wigfield and Eccles's (2000) expectancy-value theory (EVT), reflecting his assessment of future benefits. This preference aligns with the self-worth theory, suggesting that students sometimes evade potential failure areas to preserve their self-worth.

Saul's narrative on the fear of failure resonates with the accounts given by many students. This observation prompts pivotal reflections: Why are setbacks internalised as failures? Can we reframe these experiences, guiding young individuals to view setbacks as foundational building blocks for success? What transformative implications could such a shift in perspective hold for students' journeys through GCSE and beyond?

Confronting Academic Shame

In this study, embarrassment emerges as a multifaceted and often concealed stressor for students, extending beyond academic hurdles to envelop identity, self-worth, and social comparison. Here I focus on Alison's (Year 12) narrative as an illustrative example of many of the interviewees' experiences. Reflecting on her early grades, Alison's feelings of inadequacy arise from comparisons with peers and familial expectations:

> I was getting [grade] 3s for a few subjects and my parents, my mum wasn't pleased… There was a temptation to hide it a bit… It's embarrassing.

Her peer's success only augmented his self-doubt:

> Just everyone around me is doing way better… I knew [a friend], she got all 9s for the mock. And I wasn't even doing anywhere near that.

Even after successfully transitioning to the sixth form, Alison's embarrassment persisted:

> Oh, no. I'd be hiding it a bit. I sometimes just bumped up a grade.
> ((a shared moment of laughter))
> [Now,] I just tell them the truth… but I'm still equally ashamed.

Having been Alison's teacher for a few years, I witnessed a significant shift in her academic path. She began in my Foundation tier class, where the maximum achievable grade was 5. Later, she transitioned to the Higher tier, where grade 9 is the pinnacle, and impressively secured a grade 7 in her GCSE for my subject. This progression was emblematic of her unwavering dedication and keen receptiveness to feedback. However, despite her remarkable advancement across several subjects, Alison felt her accomplishments were overshadowed. Tearfully, she confided that she felt she was not measuring up to her top-set peers or meeting

target grades. It was only upon my reminder of her success in my subject that she expressed pride, indicating that she had internalised a broader narrative of inadequacy despite pockets of distinct success. It was apparent that she believed her improvements went unnoticed, compounded by not meeting certain expectations set by others, like those of a high-achieving older sister.

Alison's experience resonates with other students who also expressed academic shame in this study, emphasising the influential role of teachers, parents, and adult mentors in spotlighting student progress. When students such as Alison are mired in self-doubt or unable to see their own accomplishments, the onus is on these key figures to shine a light on their growth, going beyond overt achievements to acknowledge smaller milestones. Harlen (2012) noted that feedback is instrumental in shaping students' self-efficacy. It is often more judgemental than formative in high-stakes settings, eroding students' interest in learning and their capacity to use past experiences for future learning. Therefore, educational figures are collectively responsible for providing task-centred feedback that uplifts rather than diminishes, particularly in assessment-focused environments.

The Challenge of Procrastination

On the other hand, the interviews unveil a critical yet often overlooked aspect of exam preparation: procrastination. Although procrastination among students is not surprising, Ibrahim's (Year 12) account was particularly striking. He described it as a continual struggle with self-discipline and self-disappointment:

> I want to revise, I sit down to revise, my books are there, and then I'm there on my phone… I know what I need to be doing, and I know I'm not doing that… When it's revising, I can't, I can't focus on it.

> [Deadlines,] I could never meet them. And then it was like, that built up, I don't meet them, and the next time, and the next time.

This alarming cycle of self-sabotage and dismay is more than a motivation issue; it raises questions about the ability to confront future challenges. A study by Gadosey et al. (2021) that explored the interaction between anxiety, hope, and exam preparation underscored the complexity of procrastination, linking it to emotions far beyond mere delay or avoidance. These reflections bring to the forefront the necessity of addressing procrastination more deeply in educational contexts.

Hidden Stresses: Behind the Brave Front

Drawing from my intimate knowledge of Beatriz (Year 11) as her teacher for the past five years, her story is especially poignant. While often appeared joyful and optimistic to me, her unexpected emotional outpouring during the interview unveiled a side previously concealed. Notably, she would frequently come to school early or stay back late, seeking opportunities for open-hearted conversations about matters personal to her. But even with our history and her usual candour, never had I seen her reduced to tears until the interview. The stress that she described about her GCSE experience was compelling:

> I'm very nervous about it... I feel like because of how my grades don't really change, so, why revise?... It's a constant reminder that the GCSEs are coming… It's very pressurising. The teachers will remind me… I already know this, why are you telling me again? And then I get home… your parents will remind you. And even all over social media… "GCSEs are coming", "Colleges, apply now". It's just like, everywhere.

Adding to the depth of her stress, Beatriz revealed:

> Our parents won't let us out… with GCSEs, it takes a bit of our teenager, you know, to be a teenager… [During weekends,] I'll usually stay home… my parents want me to revise.

Her deep-rooted anxiety had grave effects on her physical health:

> Before my [year 11] mocks, I got quite sick... I don't usually get sick at all… I vomited, and it was really bad for a week.

Beatriz's story underscores the need to recognise that even students who appear most engaged and connected may harbour deep-rooted anxieties.

4.1.3 Teacher Language: Friend or Foe?

In line with earlier research, stress from various sources such as parents, teachers, and peers has consistently been identified as a recurring theme through the analysis of data (e.g., Connor, 2001; Denscombe, 2000; Hall et al., 2004; Roome & Soan, 2019). However, within this study's context, the language teachers used became prominent. Though not initially the focus of the interviews, and despite students expressing appreciation for the support from their teachers, their narratives about teacher language sparked my interest. Their vivid descriptions of how they perceive and feel about their teachers' words offer deeper insight, illuminating a novel perspective on how words intended to encourage can transform into fear appeals. This qualitative exploration adds a fresh layer to previous studies, most of which employed quantitative approaches, enriching the existing understanding of this dynamic (see, e.g., Putwain et al., 2016; Putwain & Remedios, 2014; Putwain & Best, 2012; Putwain & Symes, 2011).

Student Perspectives: "You can do this. I know you can do this".

Teacher language, particularly those words and expressions intended to motivate students, may ironically have an adverse impact. While intended to enthuse students, these encouragements sometimes take the form of pressure, intensifying stress and having an inadvertent demotivating effect. A student encapsulated this sentiment:

> You just get… a lot of pressure from your teachers… Just encouragement, but it turns out to be a bit more… like, 'You can do this, I know you can do this', but that just puts more pressure on the student.
>
> (Jacqueline, Year 12)

Another student further described the anxiety induced by teachers' constant countdowns to exams, emphasising their lack of effect:

> What teachers often say to me in form every day, 'Oh my God, you've got 60 days', whatever how many days, like a live countdown, as a target. So, live countdown every day, 65 days, 64 days, 63. It's just, I don't really care!
>
> (Alicia, Year 11)

Some expressed frustration and a lack of understanding from teachers:

> I get that you want me to revise, but every day telling me that there's 65 days left and that it should be revising, if I haven't, I'm going to fail. It's not gonna help me… It makes me really mad… because we already know; we are not only constantly reminding ourselves, our parents are reminding us.
>
> (Beatriz, Year 11)

Beatriz's words allude to a complex emotional struggle experienced by many students, hinting at a potential misalignment between teacher intent and student perception. The constant reminders, meant to motivate, instead become a source of stress and anger. Feeling misunderstood and unduly pressured creates a barrier to positive engagement with learning.

Nevertheless, not all students perceived these strategies in the same light:

> They were constantly saying you need to be revising… It was a bit annoying, and so that just motivated me to stay focused.
>
> (Matthew, Year 12)

> Mr. Bee is quite an aggressive guy. And he'd just be telling us, 'By Easter, you have to start working properly.'… Eventually, it got past Easter, and I'm still saying, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to start probably doing it next week" … It didn't affect me too much.
>
> (Daryl, Year 12)

The student narratives illuminate the complex relationship between teacher language and its varied impact on student well-being. Burgess et al.'s (2018) research lends additional context, which indicates a reciprocal link between teacher and student stress. This relationship accentuates the cascading effect of teacher language on students' emotional well-being. The need to focus on emotional and psychological health extends beyond academic outcomes, affecting multiple aspects of student life. The narratives also highlight the diversity in how students perceive teacher language, emphasising the need for tailored educational communication for effective pedagogy.

Teacher Perspectives: Navigating Fear Appeals and Motivation

The teacher interviews revealed that their collective emphasis was undoubtedly on fostering positive learning outcomes:

> Being comfortable, being independent, enjoyable, and relaxed… independence is the main word I'd use to describe what I want the atmosphere in my classrooms to be like.
>
> (Leon, teacher)

> They have an interest and their willingness to do that. And whatever the ability is, that they are happy to do that.
>
> (Alisha, teacher)

> It's about… give them enough hints and enough little bits of information for them to make those links and that so they can actually apply their knowledge to a range of answers, not just pre-prepared ones.
>
> (Adam, teacher)

The teachers' objectives are clear, but herein lies the issue: the delicate balance between instilling fear and motivating in the educational sphere. Many teachers shared the recurring challenge of inspiring students who seem indifferent to all forms of support. For instance, Wilson mentioned a student who disengaged from his course entirely. Alisha recounted an example where, despite collaborating with another colleague to involve parents in a student's motivation, the parents declined, insisting their child would do well even without their GCSEs. While these might be unusual cases, they depict teachers' broader struggles concerning fear-based motivation.

Teacher stress driven by accountability and focused on GCSE performance is not new. Perryman et al.'s (2011) study elucidated the significant stress teachers experience due to league tables, which may affect teacher language in this high-pressure milieu. The described pressures by the teachers in this study often aligned with the focus on academic progress, notably concerning Progress 8 measures (see DfE, 2023). Teachers' confidence in student outcomes hinted at some stress relief, but their professional aspirations still weighed heavily:

> I guess you put pressure on yourself. And if you haven't done as well as others [departments], then you sort of criticise what you're doing… I've certainly put pressure on myself to do better this year.
>
> (Wilson, teacher)

Moreover, while teachers are acutely aware of the imminent pressures of GCSEs, actual fear appeals were notably missing from our discussions. This omission could suggest two possibilities: that the topic did not naturally arise during our conversations or that teachers might not always recognise these fear appeals as stressors amidst their manifold duties.

In this context, the conundrum lies in how teachers can effectively motivate students in an environment dominated by external pressures and high-stakes exams. Exacerbating this intricate challenge is the concept of "SATurated Pupildom", as outlined by Hall et al. (2004). This term describes the scenario where students become so intensely engrossed by exam pressures that it markedly impacts their emotional health and shapes their views on education. Such heightened exam-related stress resonates with findings by Harris et al. (1995) and Denscombe (2000), who highlighted that student identify GCSEs and their associated workload as significant stressors. This emphasises the need for early interventions, improved study skills, and structured opportunities for students to confront and learn from challenges. Nevertheless, educators cannot bear this weight alone; lightening their burden is imperative. Concurrently, parents could be better empowered to participate actively in their children's academic journey, fostering resilience and skill development.

4.2 Theme 2: A Double-edged Sword – The Significance of Exam Preparation

Building on Theme 1's focus on ubiquitous student stress, Theme 2 delves into the dual nature of test preparation as both a stressor and a potential tool for mastery. Crocker (2005) highlighted that test preparation extends beyond academa to include essential life skills. This view is echoed by Year 12 students in our study, who saw exams as not merely academic hurdles but also avenues for life skill development. Many Year 11 students also recognised this,

while others simply described it. The subsequent subsections delve into a comprehensive analysis, providing a nuanced understanding of the dual nature of exam preparation – stressful yet potentially enriching.

4.2.1 Test Preparation: Transformation and Benefits

Mock Exams: Acclimatisation and Reflection

The transition from mock exams to actual GCSEs may serve as an acclimatisation period, which aligns with Putwain's (2008) research emphasising the value of exam practice in honing study skills, revision methods, and time management. This period seems to mitigate the stress and anxiety associated with high-stakes formal assessments. For instance:

> It was not a lot of stress [leading up to the GCSE exam] because we were being prepared. For example, in Year 10, we got to basically perform for mock exactly as we would do in Year 11… that helped to relieve stress… because I already knew what I was doing.
>
> (Olivia, Year 12)

Moreover, mock exams served as an invaluable tool for self-assessment, aiding students in identifying their areas of weakness. For example:

> I just think it gave me an understanding of what to improve on. There's always like something to help me. I always look back on it, and I'm like, "Okay, this is why I need to work on".
>
> (Ridwan, Year 11)

The impact of mock exams extended beyond the students to also include parents, further heightening their significance:

> I had a lot of regrets after [my mock exams]. It was a shock, and my parents said, "You know, this is the last try", and I never had that sort of talk with them. But it's a good pressure. I don't feel scared… it is my time to do it.
>
> (Lewis, Year 11)

This observation finds resonance with Wise and Smith (2016) and Johnson and Shaw (2019), who suggested that the prominence of an assessment could amplify motivation or dedication towards exams. While high-stakes exams may trigger concerted efforts in revision, a prevalent observation in this study was that students reported they rarely engage in such targeted preparation in Years 7, 8, and 9, likely due to the absence of high-stakes exams that carry the weight and immediacy seen in GCSE years. Among the few who engaged in such preparation, their efforts were frequently deemed ineffectual or lacking structure. For example:

> Year 9 was probably the period where I did the most studying, volume wise, but… it wasn't [effective].
>
> (Gemma, Year 12)

In light of these findings, the potential implications of the "testing effect", which posits that active retrieval enhances long-term memory rather than mere re-study (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006), merit further exploration within the GCSE context. While the scope and methodology of mock exams may differ, their potential to involve active retrieval could align with the principles of this effect. The significance of mock exams was also observed in Daly et al.'s (2012) study concerning A-levels. Both students and teachers valued the utility of past papers and mark schemes as preparatory tools, echoing the sentiments of GCSE students in this study.

Evolution of a Learner and Motivation

The significance of exam preparation seemed to have gone beyond merely acquiring academic proficiency. For several students, receiving their grades served as an important realisation, leading to a more conscientious approach to their studies. For example:

> So, in all honesty, I did nearly no revision for [my Year 11 mocks]… I knew I'd done bad… but it was a good wake-up call that, you have to do the work to get the results… I think they're a good show of what I could do in the future.
>
> Daisy (Year 11)

> [I'm] a lot more… engaged in what I'm doing… before I didn't know how serious school was… but now, I'm trying to improve on it… After my first mock in Year 10, my grades were horrible. So then, I was like, "Oh yeah, I need to change this". And that's when the turning point happened. I don't want this to be my results in GCSEs.
>
> (Natalia, Year 11)

Natalia's "turning point" echoes Lumby's (2011) findings on the transformative power of education. Her newfound dedication and desire for improvement mirror the sentiments of students in Lumby's study who felt education had "sculpted [them] into a better person" (Lumby, 2011, p.255). This connection underscores the profound personal growth tied to educational experiences.

In a similar vein, several students' narratives revealed improved resilience and self-efficacy as they approached their GCSEs, such as:

> I'm getting a lot more confident now... Usually, when I come across questions, I'd look at it and I'll give up… now, when I apply myself, and I look at the question, I read it properly, I can understand it... I'm a lot more motivated. Maybe even if I don't get it right, I get a few marks here and there.
>
> (Saul, Year 11)

> I knew I could do better… My Year 11 mocks and my in-class assessments [gave me confidence]. I could see improvement basically in all my subjects… I have a few times with maths and English [, where I studied but my results were bad]… my response to it? Oh, nothing… I revised… then I look back at it, and I'm like, oh, this is silly mistakes.
>
> (Yahan, Year 12)

Furthermore, a recurring theme in the dataset is that GCSE preparation is not solely focused on doing well in the immediate term. The GCSE subjects students elected frequently corresponded with their future educational and vocational ambitions, establishing an implicit link between academic preparation and long-term aspirations. This observation aligns with Brown and Woods's (2022) findings, which noted that students frequently associate their GCSE outcomes with prospective life pathways. Matthew exemplifies this more explicitly. Despite grappling with burnout and test-related anxiety, his narrative encapsulates the motivation that derived from long-term objectives:

> I think coz' I wanted to do Medicine. I was looking… towards the future… GCSEs is a stepping-stone to the future, and so I need to do well on this if I want to be any type of thing in the future.
>
> (Matthew, Year 12)

Adapting and Improving Strategies

The pathway to the final exams was marked by moments of introspection and strategy modification. These students' stories are emblematic of the development of critical skills and the importance of strategic adaptation, reflecting Damankesh and Babaii's (2015) insights into the enhancement of cognitive functions and intellectual reasoning. A student remarked on the transformation in his approach:

> I feel like my study became a bit more efficient… I started to develop different methods that would help me remember stuff more.
>
> (Gemma, Year 12)

Similarly, Yahan embraced a rigorous approach and balanced this intensity by setting aside a dedicated break:

> I read the information once. If I don't grasp it immediately, read it again and again… I will read two or three pages at a time. If I don't understand a bit, I'll read it… I don't sleep until I understand the concept fully. And then on Saturday, I just take the day off… [Before the Year 11 mocks,] I would just read the information, and that's it.
>
> (Yahan, Year 12)

Recognising and Overcoming Stress

Matthew's Year 12 journey sheds light on the intricacies of stress management. Faced with mental fatigue, panic, and cognitive disruption during his exams, Matthew encountered multiple instances of burnout in the lead-up to his GCSEs. Despite these challenges, he appeared to gain invaluable insights into his limitations. He mentioned, "I know my breaking points", which suggests that these experiences while challenging, led to a more nuanced understanding of his stress levels and how to manage them:

> It's taught me to prevent this from happening. It wasn't very nice feeling… I know what are my breaking points.
>
> (Matthew, Year 12)

Matthew's introspective self-awareness was not a commonly reported experience among other Year 12 and was notably absent in the accounts of Year 11 students. This disparity may stem from Year 12 students' post-exam reflections, contrasting with Year 11 students still in

the exam preparatory phase. This temporal difference illuminates how the exam preparation or reflection stage may influence self-awareness and coping strategies, thereby complicating the uniform application of stress management interventions within the GCSE context.

Relishing the Challenge of Exams

While many students experienced a range of negative emotions in the lead-up to their GCSEs, there were isolated cases of individuals who expressed a positive attitude towards exams, viewing them as opportunities they look forward to rather than challenges they dread, such as:

> I'm quite positive [about my forthcoming GCSE exams] because I like testing myself... I like being tested. I like exams.
>
> (James, Year 11)

> I feel excited because... You want to get it done and over with and see the grades you get.
>
> (Raphael, Year 11)

These cases, though outliers illustrate that exam experiences are not universally negative and can vary considerably among individual students.

4.3 Theme 3: Narrowed Curriculum – The Dilemma in GCSE

The data highlights a prominent theme among students and teachers: the concept of a "narrowed curriculum". This idea encapsulates the phenomenon where the GCSE curriculum and its preparation focus predominantly on revision, exam practices, and a reduced spectrum of topics, often at the expense of broader knowledge acquisition.

4.3.1 Depth vs Breadth: Striking a Balance in GCSE Choices

Prioritising Exam Drills

Past paper practice and familiarity with mark schemes have emerged as a highly valued study method among students. This dominant examination-focused approach underscores the significance of these tools as pivotal in their revision strategies. Ibrahim relayed insights from a high-achieving friend in Business:

> When they give you content, you can literally just paraphrase what they give you… That got me a whole of a grade [higher].
>
> Ibrahim (Year 12)

Despite facing disruptions, Olivia managed a commendable performance during her GCSEs, attributing her success largely to repetition and familiarity with the format:

> Despite [the disruptions due to COVID], I still performed decently during GCSE… Just revision, to be honest. Past paper, model answers… You have 12-markers, 8-markers [mark schemes].
>
> (Olivia, Year 12)

The importance of past papers and understanding the examination technique was echoed by other students, emphasising the transformative role of past papers:

> I realised that the way I was studying before was a bit ineffective… I wasn't doing a lot of past paper questions. And I realised that's a major part. You need to know the structure, the technique and stuff like that.
>
> (Ridwan, Year 11)

> The past papers are a major game changer… I… managed to pull really, really good grades because of them.
>
> (Milos, Year 12)

However, the curriculum's focus on preparing students for exams can restrict the depth and breadth of their education. While research shows that exams can be an effective way of learning materials (e.g., Benjamin & Pashler, 2015; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006), it might also limit students from a rounded learning experience. Highlighting this issue, Hammad mentioned:

> After they finished the syllabus for the course, they would basically... revisit the topics that people were struggling on… What they didn't explain to us in GCSE was... they should just tell you that there's a specification... Just give you exam papers and questions to do. That's it.
>
> (Hammad, Year 12)

This revision over content acquisition focus was also shared by educators. For instance:

> My teaching theory is... I do papers, papers, papers, papers with them. Only papers... they know what examiners are looking for.
>
> (Alisha, teacher)

Additionally, striking a balance between structured learning and creativity proves challenging. Two students highlighted such constraints during their GCSE courses:

> Art, you're given a set of themes... It's not a free subject; it is supposed to be creative… English is very limiting. It takes [away] enjoyability of creativity and reading books.
>
> (Saul, Year 11)

> The mark scheme is my main criticism... In history, you can't really broaden your approach... in maths, you can't do other methods.
>
> (Daryl, Year 12)

Perceived Value and Difficulty: Shaping Subject Choices

GCSEs, foundational for academic advancement, may inadvertently divert students from subjects they genuinely cherish. The perceived value of specific subjects could guide students towards those believed to offer enhanced future opportunities. Notably, core subjects, namely English, Maths, and Sciences, were particularly highlighted by students in this study. For example:

> "I don't focus on French. I focus on... the main subjects like science and maths… Because I feel like they're more important... Because they can get you more places and... you can go to more places in life with science and maths than French."
>
> (James, Year 11)

Lily further described the perceived hierarchy of subjects:

> I prioritised my core subjects a lot more... Because I think core subjects are really important, or if they're going to look at your core subjects first because, you know, maths, English, and the sciences are high-ranking subjects in my opinion.
>
> (Lily, Year 12)

These sentiments echo Cuff's (2017) research, which identified enjoyment, usefulness, and difficulty as the three main drivers for subject choices, with perceived difficulty perhaps being the least dominant. An intriguing observation was the influence of individual strengths on students' perceptions of subject difficulty, whereby students were amenable to engaging with challenging subjects if they found them pleasurable or deemed them vital for future goals. However, for some students, the perceived challenge posed an obstacle. For instance:

> I considered doing subjects like… music... thinking it would be easy. But then I thought, "No, I don't want to fail music."
>
> (Yahan, Year 12)

Similarly, Emily underscored the tension between genuine curiosity and the anxiety surrounding assessments:

> If I didn't have to take a GCSE exam, I would be keener on learning some subjects. Because some subjects you want to discover, but we really don't want to be tested on them due to their complexity. Learning it is different from being tested... like with computing.
>
> (Emily, Year 11)

In the context of the English educational system, the emphasis on core subjects observed in this study is understandable, as such subjects are closely associated with students' future trajectories and school accountability metrics (DfE, 2014, 2023b). Nonetheless, it is intriguing that other core subjects under the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) – a modern foreign language (MFL) and geography or history – did not garner similar attention from students in this study.

Schools' evaluations under the EBacc measures hinge on the number of pupils taking GCSEs in core subjects and their respective performances, potentially influencing curriculum decisions (DfE, 2019). For instance, Brown and Woods (2022) found students feeling restricted in subject choices due to the EBacc's implementation. In the school studied, GCSE subject choices seemed to reflect this trend. Specifically, students on the "Triple Award Science" track (studying three sciences separately), often chosen based on past academic performance, must opt for both a language and geography or history. On the other hand, "Combined Science" students (studying all sciences collectively) have the liberty to pursue or forgo the additional EBacc subjects.

Although comprehensive explanations for this trend are beyond the scope of this study due to limited data, insights from Parrish and Lanvers (2019) are illuminating. Their findings suggested that while schools might encourage academically successful students to take up MFL

to enhance their attainment profiles, such practices might inadvertently foster external motivations and potentially hinder optimal learner outcomes. Notably, their research indicated that genuine choice or its absence (mandatory study without selection based on past performance) was tied to increased intrinsic motivation, underscoring the significance of autonomy in education. In essence, the curriculum, shaped by perceived values and difficulty of subjects, appears to influence students' academic choices and potentially narrow their experiences in the broader educational landscape.

4.3.2 Curriculum Overload: The Unseen Strains of GCSE Choices

Transitioning the focus from the curriculum's depth to its breadth reveals another pressing concern: curriculum overload. Pursuing a well-rounded education brings the risk of overextension, primarily because students are mandated to undertake a substantial number of subjects. The testimonies from this study elucidate the complex repercussions of this issue.

Lily's commentary captures the challenges of a vast subject spectrum. While a broad range of subjects affords certain academic freedoms, the obligation to select an extensive number amplifies stress:

> It's good that they give students a very broad choice of subjects. I don't feel like it's necessary to pick so many because you're already doing English... the three sciences… maths, that's already seven and then... to pick another four is quite annoying. I wanted to do history, RP, and Mandarin, but... the extra fourth one like food tech, it was just extra stress for no reason.
>
> (Lily, Year 12)

This overload was also evident in content. Many students resorted to focused learning strategies centred on GCSE specifications and past papers to navigate the expansive scope of the GCSE curriculum. Hammad's reflection is a pertinent example:

> It pressurises you too much. Sometimes, GCSE is... ridiculous about how much you had to do. What really made it a bit easier and manageable for me was the fact that we had advanced information. If we didn't have that, I'd be mad. There's too much to cover.
>
> (Hammad, Year 12)

When asked about teaching beyond the core GCSE content, Adam's response sheds light on a classroom dilemma. The extensive breadth of the GCSE syllabus might constrain opportunities to explore subjects beyond the core content:

> I've not had [classes] recently where we've been able to do that... we're so heavily focused on getting in the GCSE and making sure they do so well.
>
> (Adam, teacher)

Simultaneously, balancing a vast array of subjects can be daunting, and Mia captured the essence of the dilemma many students face:

> For GCSE, I do ten subjects. And I find that to be quite a lot because I never know when should I be doing each one, trying to create [a] timetable… I can't… I tend to forget subjects that I don't like.
>
> (Mia, Year 11)

Collectively, these narratives underscore the weight of the GCSE's expansive curriculum in terms of the quantity of subjects and their content, presenting challenges for both students and teachers.

4.4 Unearthing Stress Relievers During GCSE Exams

After identifying the three primary themes, I decided to delve deeper into stress-relieving factors, prompted by the contrasting narrative emerging from students about supportive actions by teachers and parents. Although not universally echoed across the dataset, these insights offer a counter-narrative that merits exploration.

4.4.1 The Multifaceted Comfort: From Carpets to Compassion

The Surprising Comfort of the Exam Hall Carpet

Two Year 12 students unexpectedly expressed a fondness for the exam hall carpets in separate interviews. Their shared sentiment provided both amusement and intrigue. Ibrahim distinctly remembered the hall, not for the exams but for the carpets. He remarked:

> The one hall that I can remember… they put carpets on... You come in, and it feels so comfortable.
>
> (Ibrahim, Year 12)

In contrast to his expectations, the comforting carpets made the overall atmosphere less daunting. Conversely, while Yahan approached his exams bolstered by thorough revision, he also drew a surprising amount of solace from the carpeted environment:

> The exam hall was nice. There was carpet on the floor. I really like the carpet on the floor; it just made it really comforting.
>
> (Yahan, Year 12)

It seemed that for Yahan, the carpet was not just a minor detail; it shaped the supportive ambience he experienced during his exams.

Before encountering these students' particular remarks about carpeting, I had not fully appreciated the depth of the insights from Wise and Smith (2016), who have previously underscored the criticality of the physical environment in testing situations. They assert that the presence of distractions (e.g., due to noise, extreme temperatures, or nearby instructional activities) can detrimentally affect a student's focus and concentration. These students' accounts brought to life the real-world implications of such observations. Their reflections underscored the significance of seemingly minor environmental details in the testing context.

Group Effect and Support Outside Usual Environments

Gemma's narrative is particularly illuminating when considering methods to alleviate exam-related stress. After an unforeseen move in Year 11, her original school's steadfast support enabled her to sit her GCSEs at a temporary host school outside London. Notably, Gemma, a consistent high achiever, found solace in this new setting:

> Outside of London, I feel like they're a lot less competitive than in London? ... I was really happy coz' I get to be in a learning environment again, and I was still on top of the class ... it kinda helped me to relax... It felt like less pressure was on me... it gave me more confidence throughout my exams.
>
> (Gemma, Year 12)

While Gemma's narrative offers an isolated account and should not be broadly generalised, this pressure relief aligns with findings from Zeidner and Schleyer (1999) study, which observed that gifted students in homogeneous settings felt more test anxiety and a lowered academic self-concept than their peers in mixed-ability classes. Gemma's experience, thus, magnifies the pivotal role both environment and group dynamics play in shaping a student's academic

performance and moderating the stress and anxiety they might feel, especially in places where the spirit of competition is intense and ever-present.

Teacher's Encouragement and Exam Techniques

As explored in Theme 2, the role of well-structured test preparation can enhance students' exam readiness and serve as a stress-relieving strategy. While fear appeals were a recurring theme, the dataset also revealed instances of teachers offering a balanced mix of encouragement and tactical exam preparation. Beatriz's account highlights the warmth of a teacher who not only provides resources but also actively joins in the preparation process:

> I think it's the teacher [the main factor for my motivation]… Mr See… he encourages us and doesn't keep constantly reminding us and pressuring us… he also gives us revision sheets and mind maps... And we do planning [together] instead of writing exam questions by yourself… which I think is very effective.
>
> Beatriz (Year 11)

Lewis echoed a similar appreciation for the supportive nature of educators:

> So I have mentoring from Mr Dee every Friday, which is good… I ask him certain questions, and he makes me feel better… It's not just about getting into the sixth form; it's about maximising my potential, knowing that I can.
>
> Lewis (Year 11)

These narratives underscore the invaluable role teachers play in imparting knowledge and fostering confidence and resilience during the crucial exam period.

Parental Support: Guiding through Encouragement and Realism

Students' experiences during their academic journey are multifaceted. While teachers are the standard bearers of formal education, parents often play a crucial role in managing stress and burnout. Among the students who managed to combat these challenges during GCSE revision, parental guidance, marked by encouragement and clear expectations, was instrumental. This observation was inconsistent across all narratives, but its impact was palpable where it emerged. Hammad's account offers insight into this support system. His parents observed his struggle and offered perspective:

> I got burnt out a few times... my parents… they had a chat with me, "Okay. We see you working... So even if you get a grade that isn't really good, at least you tried for it..." So that's what they told me, and I was like, okay, I just relax a bit.
>
> Hammad (Year 12)

Lewis's narrative resonates with this theme but also highlights a different approach. His parents confronted his lacklustre effort and performance in the mock exams head-on, demonstrating both candour and compassion:

> My parents… they're saying you're good enough, but you're not putting in the necessary work to get the results, which is only my mistake. It makes you feel so you have to do it now.
>
> Lewis (Year 11)

Ridwan's (Year 11) story serves as another testament to parental support but stands out for his exceptional positivity. While many students recounted stress and challenges, Ridwan's interview was permeated with an uplifting tone. He credited his parents with helping alleviate stress through their support:

> I just talked to my family about it… And then, obviously, as parents, they give you advice, and it always makes me feel better.

Ridwan's enthusiasm for studying was evident, such as:

> I'm looking forward to increasing more hours that I'm going to be working out… I wanna revise. I always have a myth, "Do well, revise, hard work", and then you get your result.

Despite acknowledging the demands of GCSE – "it's not fun" – he saw them as worth the effort:

> If you really did put your time and effort into it, you will get good results out of it.

Ridwan's positive approach even extended to encouraging his friends:

> I have seen… friends that really like, "Wow, GCSE is coming up," ... And I am like, "… you know, I have been putting the effort in, so I know I am going to be fine… You have to start revising this."

Ridwan candidly revealed that a wake-up call after his Year 10 mocks prompted him to realise his potential. He then used resources such as his parents' reminders and set targets to help him revise. His unique story underscores a possible connection between parental involvement and positivity. However, this should be interpreted within the context of his individual experience.

4.5 Students' Magic Wand: Imagining a Different GCSE System

Endowing each student with a symbolic "magic wand" at the culmination of their interviews unlocked a cascade of imaginative solutions and heartfelt desires concerning the

GCSE system. From logistical adjustments to emotional ameliorations, the students' wishes painted a vivid tapestry of the multifaceted challenges they navigate.

4.5.1 Student Wishes for GCSE Alterations

Adjustments in Content and Exam Quantity

The volume of content and exams weighed heavily on many students, both in terms of the number of subjects and the multiple exam papers for each one. Saul (Year 11) described the struggle succinctly, saying, "*Content and papers. A lot of content... so much more things to remember*". Alicia (Year 11) expanded on this sentiment, wishing for a curriculum "*more focused on each thing*" rather than a cursory overview, highlighting her six exams for just the sciences.

The relevance of certain GCSE subjects in preparation for A-levels was also questioned. James (Year 11) pondered the utility of his GCSE choices concerning his potential A-level studies, hinting at a misalignment: "*Most of the time, you don't really use the subjects that you choose*". Similarly, Milos (Year 12) believed that fewer subjects should be mandatory, reflecting on the stress of choosing an additional, unnecessary subject, calling it "*extra stress for no reason*".

Lastly, Natalia (Year 11) captured the emotional strain students faced due to the compact schedule and mounting anxiety as exams approached. She wished "*to be more relaxed, coming towards the exams*".

Yearning for Optimised Timelines

One prevailing wish among the students was to recalibrate the academic timeline, giving them ample space to digest and assimilate the vast swath of the GCSE curriculum.

Yearning for extended revision periods, Lewis (Year 11) candidly expressed, "*The time… probably do it later in the year… It's more time to revise.*" On the other hand, Lily (Year 12) touched on the idea of an earlier introduction to pivotal GCSE topics. Reflecting on the curriculum in the junior years, she mentioned, "*For some of the subjects, they should introduce the importance in Year 7… or Year 8... it could have introduced more stuff because there was a lot of time.*" However, extending the GCSE curriculum to earlier years would further narrow the overall secondary curriculum.

Illustrating the sheer magnitude of subjects they grappled with, Daryl (Year 12) whimsically imagined a scenario of cloning himself. His jest, "*Oh, I can just clone myself multiple times, coz' I have so much stuff... This one would focus on the easiest language… And then the rest can do the harder ones*," beautifully captures the overarching sentiment – the overwhelming desire for more time, or even multiple selves, to navigate the intricate terrains of GCSE preparation.

Rethinking Assessment Structure and Exam Priorities

Emily (Year 11) ardently wished for more subjects to implement non-exam assessments (NEAs). By sharing her personal experience, she noted, "*By doing [an NEA], I really like the subject way more... it really just helps you know more things that you could actually use in a real exam*". The distribution and structure of exams were recurrent themes. Some preferred distributing exams throughout the year instead of bunching them at the end. Daisy (Year 11) shared, "*Maybe instead of it being one month of pure exams... you can do your paper once and at the end of Year 10*". Ridwan (Year 11) offered another perspective, highlighting the weightiness of revising vast content for a consolidated examination. He

emphasised the challenges of the current format, noting, "*You're having to revise a lot of content, which is like 9 GCSE... that's a lot to do at the end of the two years*".

The weight and significance placed on the GCSEs were also challenged by some students. Beatriz (Year 11) questioned the pressure-cooker atmosphere created by both societal and academic circles. She mused, "*Even though it's important, make students feel like it's okay to get less than a grade 7... even if we're happy with a grade 6, some teachers will put you down saying that it's a bad grade, that you need 7s, 8s, and 9s*". Delving deeper into the ramifications of such a deterministic system, Raphael (Year 11) aspired for an educational landscape where the contours of one's life were not so profoundly etched by GCSE results. He said, "*It decides a lot of a person's life... if they do bad, they become quite saddened with their life.*"

4.5.2 Comparative Insights Between Year 11 and Year 12 Students

While both year groups had concerns about content and exam quantity, Year 11 students seemed particularly stressed by the immediate exam pressures. Their desires were predominantly focused on reducing content, spreading out exams, and making the importance of these exams more realistic. Year 12 students, with the benefit of hindsight, had more personal reflections. Many mentioned wishing they had worked harder or made different choices, highlighting the potential regret or realisation of the importance of the exams after the fact.

Overall, students from both years suggest that the current GCSE system might benefit from structural changes, especially regarding content volume and exam scheduling. They also emphasise the importance of mental health and well-being throughout the process.

Chapter 5 General Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 General Discussion

The current research reaffirmed the prevalence of stress in the GCSE experience and extended the findings beyond this well-trodden area. It introduced new layers to the literature by considering teacher-student interactions and their potential impacts on student anxiety and performance.

One contribution of this study is its nuanced exploration of student perceptions of GCSEs. Although stress was a recurrent theme, students concurrently highlighted the positive aspects of GCSE exam preparation. This exploration presents a refreshing perspective against the stress-dominated narrative surrounding GCSE preparations. While prior research often depicted exam preparation as a primary stressor (e.g., Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009), this study underscores its potential as an empowering avenue for some students, offering them a sense of mastery and familiarity over the examination procedure. Additionally, the study emphasised the pivotal role of substantial stakes in motivating focused exam preparation, affirming the value of GCSEs compared to low-stakes exams (e.g., in-class unit tests) that some students overlooked.

In contrast to the positive outcomes highlighted by this study, there is an ongoing debate about the relevance and value of the GCSEs, with some advocating for its abolition. For instance, several sources such as the media and research institutes have portrayed it as “pointless”, “wasteful”, and “cruel” (e.g., Coughlan, 2019; Coulter et al., 2022; Jenkins, 2022). Considering its historical role as a school-leaving certificate and the extension of compulsory schooling to age 18 in 2015 (Education and Skills Act 2008), the evolving context prompts a re-evaluation of GCSE's place in today's educational landscape.

Furthermore, the study delved into students' imaginative desires through the metaphorical "magic wand," providing unique insights into their vision for a different GCSE system. The presentation of student-driven suggestions for systemic changes, particularly in content depth and exam scheduling, enriched the findings. While previous studies have often criticised the narrowed GCSE curriculum (e.g., Perryman et al., 2011), the present study introduced a more nuanced perspective, revealing that some students found academic focus and utility in a streamlined curriculum. These insights underscore the dual conundrum faced within the GCSE framework: a curriculum that can be both narrowed in its focus and overloaded in its breadth. While each GCSE subject contains an extensive array of content to be mastered, leaving little room for exploration outside of the qualification's framework, it may also restricts learners to a narrowly defined academic path, limiting exposure to a broader spectrum of knowledge.

Upon reflecting on the study's findings, two primary observations emerged. The first observation concerns the intricate nature of test validity. GCSE is used by multiple stakeholders for multiple purposes. For example, my interview revealed that teachers, burdened by accountability pressures, might inadvertently convey these pressures to their students. There is no perfect assessment system, and even one that incorporates tests that are designed well might be used for various unintended purposes, the social consequences of which can be negative (Cizek, 2020; Newton, 2017).

Second, the significance of parental engagement in the GCSE journey came into focus. Among teachers' manifold responsibilities and the challenge of instructing numerous student classes, the role of parents in providing specialised support is pivotal, given their insights into their child's personality and challenges. However, an overreliance on parental involvement has its complexities. Parental engagement's multifaceted nature underlines its

intricacies, facing various barriers such as socioeconomic status, educational backgrounds, cultural influences, work commitments, and self-efficacy perceptions (Bevan, 2020; Hattie, 2009). Moreover, the shift from primary to secondary school and differing views on parental contributions play a part (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Nevertheless, the value of nurturing and endorsing parental engagement remained essential. Campbell (2011) outlined effective strategies to engage hard-to-reach parents, such as parenting workshops, parent-child homework sessions, and positive collaboration, emphasising the role of persistent parental engagement in enhancing student outcomes and community belonging. Harris et al. (2009) noted the persistent influence of socioeconomic factors that account for significant disparities in educational outcomes. They asserted that overcoming barriers to parental engagement is possible and crucial for meaningful progress, offering far-reaching benefits that make the investment of time and effort worthwhile.

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study contains several key limitations that merit attention. Firstly, the sample predominantly consisted of Year 12 students meeting specific GCSE standards, excluding those with lower grades or alternative education routes, thus narrowing the perspectives gathered. Secondly, my dual role as a teacher in the research setting creates the potential for bias and may influence the degree of openness from participants. Thirdly, although the five teacher interviews offered supplementary insights, their limited number restricts their comprehensiveness. Lastly, the research design is susceptible to self-selection bias, skewing the data towards participants with strong opinions or those who are more articulate or willing to express themselves.

A significant limitation lies in the risk of biased data analysis and interpretation due to my dual role as teacher and researcher. Creswell and Poth (2016) underlined ethical concerns around qualitative researchers' deep involvement in their research settings, which may lead to unintentional distortions in portraying events or people. Furthermore, the solo nature of this part-time master's project amplifies these limitations. While the subjectivity inherent in Reflexive Thematic Analysis is considered a strength (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nadar, 2014), employing additional coders or specific types of member checking, such as transcript accuracy, could improve credibility (Elliot, 2023). Unfortunately, due to time constraints, this step was optional for teacher participants in this study.

Including multiple coders could provide a richer and more nuanced analytical lens, mitigating the potential bias arising from my dual role. Collaborative coding can sharpen definitions and offer a clearer, collective understanding of the data (Miles et al., 2020). Importantly, the goal is not unanimous agreement on every code but enrichment of interpretative depth (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For future research, a more diverse sample is advised, including external researchers and a broader teacher cohort. The methodology could also make member checking a compulsory step to improve reliability. These measures would likely contribute to a richer, multi-dimensional data set, offering more profound insights into the educational context under study.

5.3 General Conclusion

This study emphasises the importance of directly gathering insights from young individuals about their examination experiences. They are articulate and offer valuable insights, and regrettably, their voices remain underrepresented in educational research and policy discussions. Conversing with students about their experiences, it becomes evident that

preparing for the GCSEs offers benefits, particularly encouraging students to learn content and skills invaluable for their further studies. While there have been debates regarding the decision to retain assessments at age 16, this research would suggest that rather than abolishing GCSEs, their design could be honed to encourage the positive effects and mitigate the impact of students' stress.

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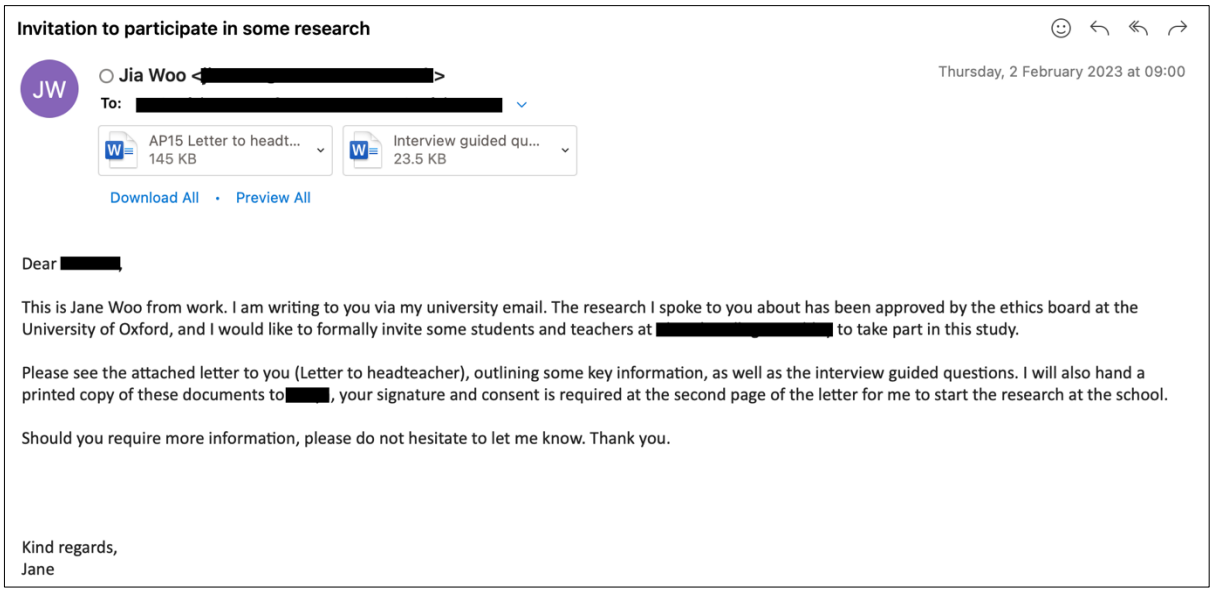
Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

A1 Sample Invitation Emails

To the Headteacher



Invitation to participate in some research

JW

Jia Woo <[redacted]>

To: [redacted]

Thursday, 2 February 2023 at 09:00

AP15 Letter to headt... 145 KB

Interview guided qu... 23.5 KB

Download All • Preview All

Dear [redacted],

This is Jane Woo from work. I am writing to you via my university email. The research I spoke to you about has been approved by the ethics board at the University of Oxford, and I would like to formally invite some students and teachers at [redacted] to take part in this study.

Please see the attached letter to you (Letter to headteacher), outlining some key information, as well as the interview guided questions. I will also hand a printed copy of these documents to [redacted], your signature and consent is required at the second page of the letter for me to start the research at the school.

Should you require more information, please do not hesitate to let me know. Thank you.

Kind regards,
Jane

To Students

Title: Invitation to take part in research with Ms Woo

Dear Year 11 students,

My name is Ms Woo, the [redacted] at [redacted] I am studying a part-time course MSc Educational Assessment at the University of Oxford, and **I would like to invite all Year 11 students to take part in my research through one-to-one interviews.**

Before you decide if you would like to join in, it is important to understand more about the study and what it would involve for you. **Please read and think about the attached information sheet carefully.** In essence, I am interested in finding out students' emotional and behavioural (e.g., study pattern) responses to GCSE. The interview will take place at school during break/lunch time. Each interview lasts around 30-40 minutes, it should feel like an informal chat with me to find out your views and experience on the research topic.

This would be a great opportunity for your voice to be heard, and your participation may help students in the future. There are only around 10 places available for your year group. If you would like to join in or have any questions, please contact me on [redacted] **by Monday 27th February 2023**. Thank you.

Kind regards,
Ms Woo

A2 Sample Information Sheet

Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE

INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENTS

Ethics Approval Reference: EDUC_C1A_2223_087

My name is Miss J Woo, and I am a student researcher at the University of Oxford in the Department of Education. I am also a teacher [redacted] at [redacted]. I am doing some research and would like you, together with some other students in the same year group, to join in this study.

Before you decide if you would like to join in, it is important to understand what the study is about, why we are doing it and what it would involve for you. Please read and think about this leaflet carefully.
I have also written to your parents/guardians to tell them about this research and think about whether you should be included. Please talk to your family, friends, or the researchers about what you would like to do and, if you are unhappy, let me know.

Why are we doing this research?
We are interested in young people's emotional and behavioural responses to GCSE, such as stress, motivation, and learning strategies. The research will help to improve understanding of students' experience of the assessments with similar group of students.

Why have I been invited to take part?
I am asking you if you would like to join in because you are in year 11 or 12, either studying GCSE or just completed GCSE last academic year.

Do I have to take part?
No - It is up to you. We will ask you to sign a form to say that you agree to take part (an assent form).
You are free to stop taking part at any time during the research without giving a reason by telling your teacher, the researcher or your parent/guardian. You do not have to say why and this will not affect your education.
If you decide to stop, no one will be upset with you.

What will happen?
You will be asked to answer one question regarding your opinion, then attend an interview with the researcher, Miss Woo. The interview will take place at school, outside the timetabled lessons and at a convenient time for you. Each interview lasts for around an hour and will be audio-recorded for research purposes only.

Are there any advantages/disadvantages in taking part?
This is a great opportunity for your voice to be heard! Your opinion is greatly valued. It will help the researchers understand more about your experience of studying and taking GCSE and it might help other students in the future.

What happens to the results of the study?
Results are kept strictly confidential, and only the people doing the research, or helping with the research, can look at the data. Only a number will be used to identify you, and all information and results are kept in a locked filing cabinet and a password-protected computer in the University. During the interview, your voice will be recorded, I will make sure that recordings are securely stored and encrypted, and only shared with the rest of the research team. I will change the names of your school, teacher, and all the students when I write about my research. No one will know that you have taken part unless you tell them yourself.

I will use the information to write up my master's degree dissertation which will be available in the University archive and openly accessible. If I want to use the information for anything else, I will ask your permission. At the end of my research, I will write to your school about what I found out in my study. You are welcome to read this if you are interested.

All research data and records will be stored for a minimum retention period of 3 years after publication or public release of the work of the research. Third parties may be given access to research data for monitoring and/or audit of the study, or for data storage purposes.

What if I don't want to take part in the research anymore?
Just tell your parents/guardians and the people carrying out the research that you don't want to take part. You don't have to give a reason and no one will be annoyed with you. It is YOUR choice.

Who is organising the research?
The research is organised by Miss Jia Woo of Oxford University, who is a master's degree student researcher.

Who has reviewed the study?
Before any research involving people can start, it has to be checked by a Research Ethics Committee to make sure that it is OK for the research to go ahead. The University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee has approved this study.

What do I do now?
Please tell your parents, guardians and/or teacher whether you are happy to take part.
I hope you will agree to take part in my study.

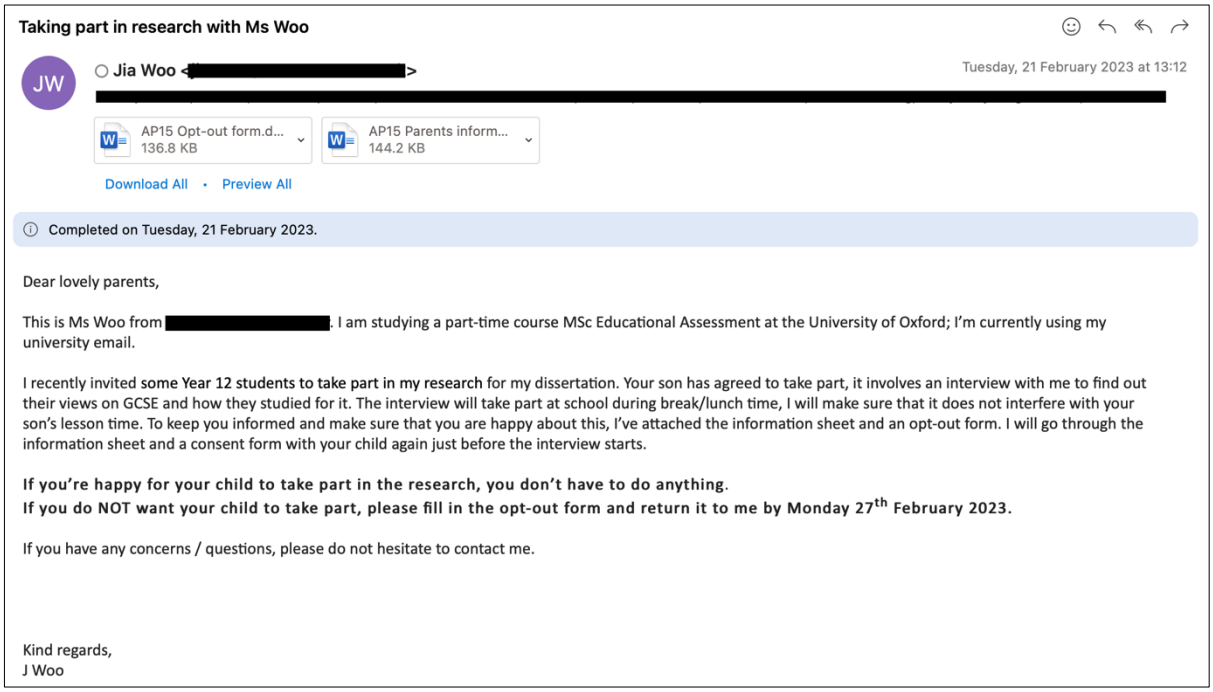
What if there is a problem or something goes wrong?
[…]

Data Protection
[…]

Contact details
[…]

Thank you for reading – please ask me any questions.

A3 Sample Email Informing Parents



Taking part in research with Ms Woo

JW

Jia Woo <[redacted]>

Tuesday, 21 February 2023 at 13:12

[redacted]

AP15 Opt-out form.d... 136.8 KB

AP15 Parents inform... 144.2 KB

Download All • Preview All

Completed on Tuesday, 21 February 2023.

Dear lovely parents,

This is Ms Woo from [redacted]. I am studying a part-time course MSc Educational Assessment at the University of Oxford; I'm currently using my university email.

I recently invited **some Year 12 students to take part in my research** for my dissertation. Your son has agreed to take part, it involves an interview with me to find out their views on GCSE and how they studied for it. The interview will take part at school during break/lunch time, I will make sure that it does not interfere with your son's lesson time. To keep you informed and make sure that you are happy about this, I've attached the information sheet and an opt-out form. I will go through the information sheet and a consent form with your child again just before the interview starts.

If you're happy for your child to take part in the research, you don't have to do anything.
If you do NOT want your child to take part, please fill in the opt-out form and return it to me by Monday 27th February 2023.

If you have any concerns / questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,
J Woo

Appendix B: Data Collection Materials

B1 Final Interview Schedules

Interview schedule – Year 11 students

Before starting the interview:

- Hi, I'm Ms Woo, you might have seen me around the school / we've known each other from school for a few years.
- Thank you for agreeing to this interview, it is a very important part of my master's dissertation. I'm studying a part-time master's degree in educational assessment at the University of Oxford. I'm interested in finding out about how students feel about GCSE and how they study for it. The interview takes around 30-40 minutes.
- There are no right or wrong answers, and you will not be judged or graded based on your responses in this interview. Do you have any questions for me about the study or the interview?
- Okay. Let's read and complete the assent form together.

Interview commences (turn on audio-recorder):
See Table 1 below for details.

Interview concludes (turn off audio-recorder):

- Thank you very much again for taking part, your participation and answers are extremely valuable.
- I will change the names of the school, teacher, and all the students when I write about my research. No one will know that you have taken part unless you tell them yourself. I will use the information to write up my master's degree dissertation which will be available in the University archive and openly accessible. You can refer to the information sheet for more details.

Table 1. ***Semi-structured interview schedules (Year 11).***

Topic	Questions	Possible follow-up questions / probes
'Warm-up' questions	When did you join the school? What GCSE subjects do you study?	
Subject choice (Year 9)	How did you choose your GCSE subjects? Do you think it was a good time to be picking your GCSE choice in Year 9?	Did anyone help you through the process?
Self-perception of success in relation to GCSE mock results (Year 10-11)	• You've just had your Year 11 mock exam in December. How did it go? • Were they a success? • Would you mind telling me what your results were? • How are you feeling about yourself as a learner now? • Did your mock results change how you studied or revised?	• What makes you say that? • Would you be happy to share your results with family or friends? • Can you give some examples of the changes?

Emotions and behaviours leading up to GCSE (Year 11)	Your GCSE exams are approaching. • How does that make you feel? • What are the key factors that make you feel that way? • Do the approaching exams change how you study or revise? • Are there any differences between subjects? If so, how? • After the exams, how much content do you remember?	 • How does this compare to how you normally feel at school? • How did your body react? • What did you do when you felt that? • Can you describe more about how you study or revise, before you prepare for GCSE and now? • Could you give some examples of what you said? • What are the key reasons for the differences?
Stakes of GCSE Plans after GCSE	• How important do you think GCSE is? • What is your plan after completing GCSE?	• What might be the consequences if you don't do well in your GCSE? • How did you come to this decision?
Reflecting	If you did not have to do GCSE, • would you have chosen your subjects differently? Why is that? • would you have studied or revised differently? If you have a magic wand now to change one thing about GCSE, what would it be? And why?	
Concluding	My final question: Tell me as many advantages and disadvantages of GCSE as you like. I have asked all my questions. Before we finish, do you have any question for me, or anything that you would like to tell me but wasn't asked in this interview?	

Interview schedule – Year 12 students

Before starting the interview:

- Hi, I'm Ms Woo, you might have seen me around the school / we've known each other from school for a few years.
- Thank you for agreeing to this interview, it is a very important part of my master's dissertation. I'm studying a part-time master's degree in educational assessment at the University of Oxford. I'm interested in finding out about how students feel about GCSE and how they study for it. The interview takes around 30-40 minutes.
- There are no right or wrong answers, and you will not be judged or graded based on your responses in this interview. Do you have any questions for me about the study or the interview?
- Okay. Let's read and complete the assent form together.

Interview commences (turn on audio-recorder):
See Table 1 and Figure 1 below for details.

Interview concludes (turn off audio-recorder):

- Thank you very much again for taking part, your participation and answers are extremely valuable.
- I will change the names of the school, teacher, and all the students when I write about my research. No one will know that you have taken part unless you tell them yourself. I will use the information to write up my master's degree dissertation which will be available in the University archive and openly accessible. You can refer to the information sheet for more details.

Table 1. ***Semi-structured interview schedules (Year 12).***

Topic	Questions	Possible follow-up questions / probes
'Warm-up' questions	When did you join the school? What GCSE subjects did you study?	
Timeline	Let's look at the timeline you've prepared. (Pointing at the timeline, use it as a prompt while asking the following questions)	• Can you tell me more about this image? • What do you mean by…? (Referring to the notes on the timeline)
Subject choice (Year 9)	How did you choose your GCSE subjects? Do you think it was a good time to be picking your GCSE choice in Year 9?	Did anyone help you through the process?
Emotions and behaviours leading up to GCSE (Year 10-11)	Leading up to the GCSE exams… • What were your feelings? • What were the key factors that make you feel that way?	• How did this compare to how you normally feel at school? • How did your body react? • What did you do when you felt that?

	• Did the approaching exams change how you study or revise? • Do you remember any strategies that you used to succeed in the exams? • Were there any differences between subjects? If so, how? • Did your Year 10 or Year 11 mock results change how you studied or revised? • After the exams, how much content do you remember?	• Can you describe more about how you study or revise, before you prepare for GCSE and now? • Could you give some examples of what you said? • What were the key reasons for the differences? • Can you give some examples of the changes?
Self-perception of success in relation to GCSE results (Year 11)	Your GCSE exams… • How did it go? • Were they a success? • Would you mind telling me what your results were? • How do you feel about yourself as a learner now?	• What makes you say that? • Were you happy to share your results with family or friends? Has it changed now? (that you're happy to share your results now) Why?
Stakes of GCSE Plans after GCSE	• How important do you think GCSE is? • Was it always your plan to study A-levels?	• What might be the consequences if you didn't do well in your GCSE? • How did you come to this decision?
Reflecting	If you did not have to do GCSE, • would you have chosen your subjects differently? Why is that? • Would you have studied or revised differently? If you have a magic wand to go back in time and change one thing about GCSE, what would it be? And why?	
Concluding	My final questions: • Tell me as many advantages and disadvantages of GCSE as you like. I have asked all my questions. Before we finish, do you have any question for me, or anything that you would like to tell me but wasn't asked in this interview?	

Interview schedule – Teachers / School Leaders

Before starting the interview:

- Hi, I'm Jane, we've known each other from school for a few years.
- Thank you for agreeing to this interview, it is a very important part of my master's dissertation. I'm studying a part-time master's degree in educational assessment at the University of Oxford. I'm interested in finding out about students' emotional and behavioural responses to GCSE. The interview takes around 30-40 minutes.
- Have you had a chance to read the information sheet and consent form? Do you have any questions for me?

Interview commences (turn on audio-recorder):
See Table 1 below for details.

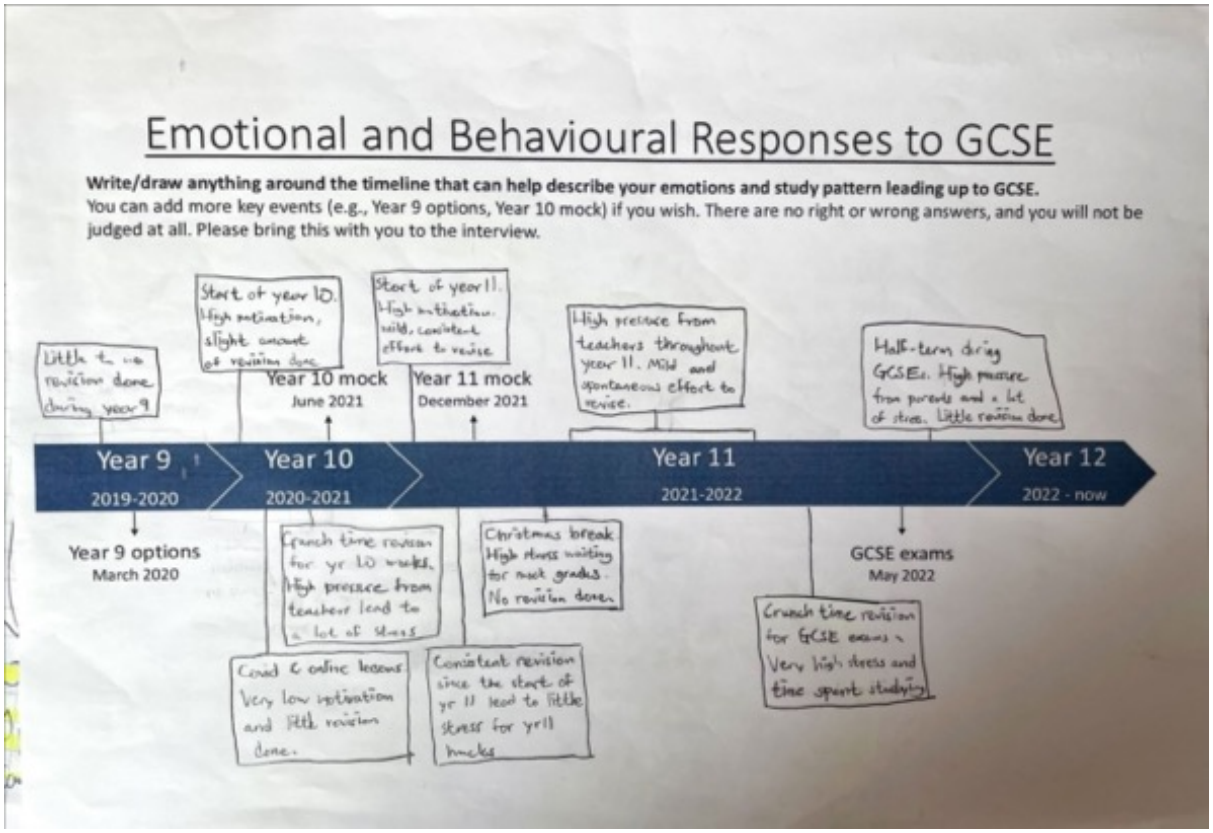
Interview concludes (turn off audio-recorder):

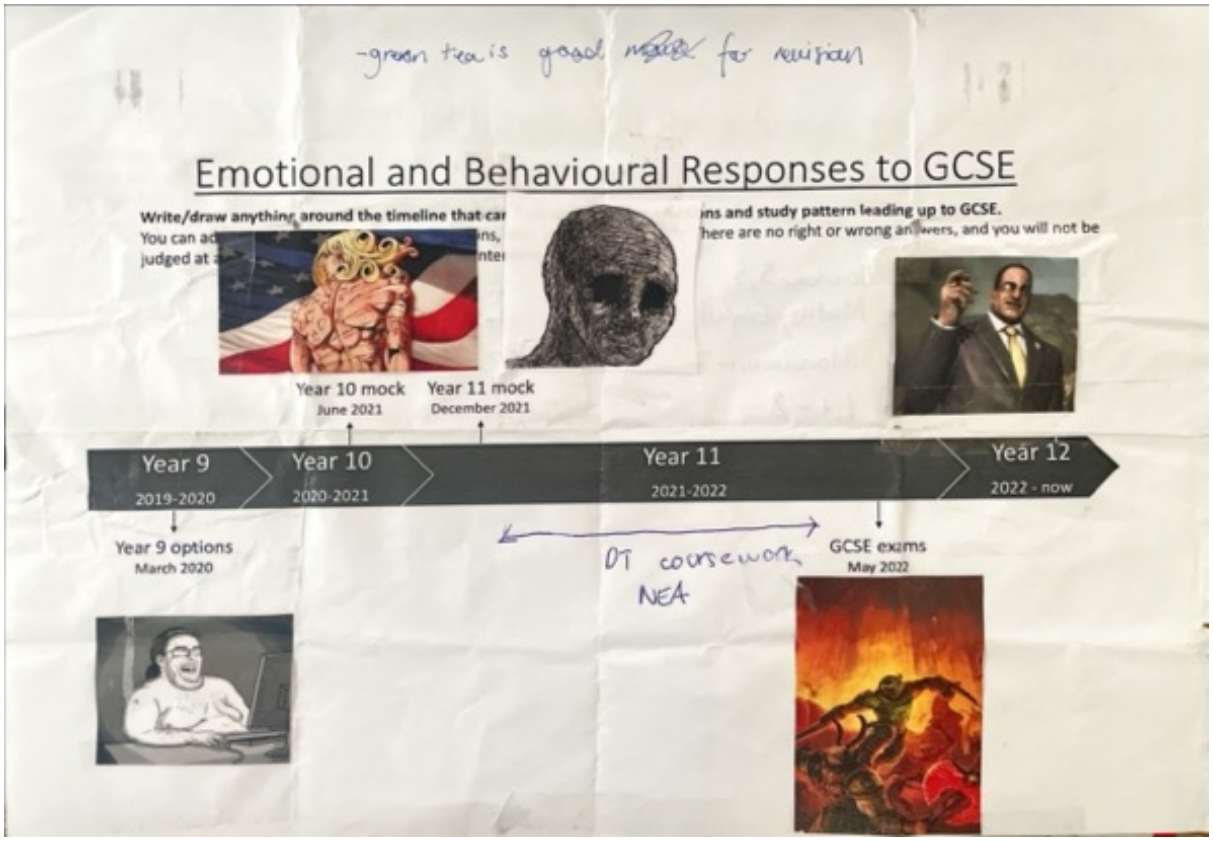
- Thank you very much again for taking part, your participation and answers are extremely valuable.
- I will change the names of the school, teacher, and all the students when I write about my research. No one will know that you have taken part unless you tell them yourself. I will use the information to write up my master's degree dissertation which will be available in the University archive and openly accessible. You can refer to the information sheet for more details.
- If you wish, you can request the audio transcription after the interview to check for errors by 31st May 2023.

Topic	Questions	Possible follow-up questions / probes
General	What is the atmosphere / learning culture you aspire to set for your students around GCSE?	Have you been able to do so?
For teachers	What are the main teaching strategies / language you use in your GCSE classes? Do the Year 10 and Year 11 mock results have any impact on your teaching strategies / classroom atmosphere? Do you notice your students getting stressed or anxious from GCSE? How do you feel about your classes' GCSE results? What makes you feel that way? How often do you run enrichment activities (e.g., using non-curricular contents in lessons, school trips, clubs) for your GCSE students?	How do you support them? What are the factors that support or hinder this? • What were the factors that hindered this? • Have you been rejected to run an enrichment activity?

For school leaders/HOD	Can you talk about the timetable allocation for the GCSE subjects, and the rationale behind the decision? Does the school/your department set aside budget for the appeal process? Do the Year 10 and Year 11 mock results have any impact on how you lead your department / the school? Do you notice your teachers / students getting stressed or anxious from GCSE? How do you feel about your department's / the school's GCSE results? What makes you feel that way? How often do teachers run non-curricular enrichment activities for GCSE students?	How do you decide which marks to appeal. How do you support them? What are the factors that support or hinder this? What do you think of this? (running enrichment activities for GCSE students)
School policy / practice around GCSE	How often do you… / what is the school's policy around… • … (run) assessments? • … teach students exam skills / through mark schemes? • … share exam paper / practice with past paper questions? • … GCSE appeals / re-mark? • … run interventions? When did you start doing this (the above)? (School leaders/HOD only) Do you think there's any difference between subjects? If so, how, and why?	How do you decide which mark to appeal? How do you decide which students should join interventions?
Concluding	I have asked all my questions. Before we finish, do you have any question for me, or anything that you would like to tell me but wasn't asked in this interview?	

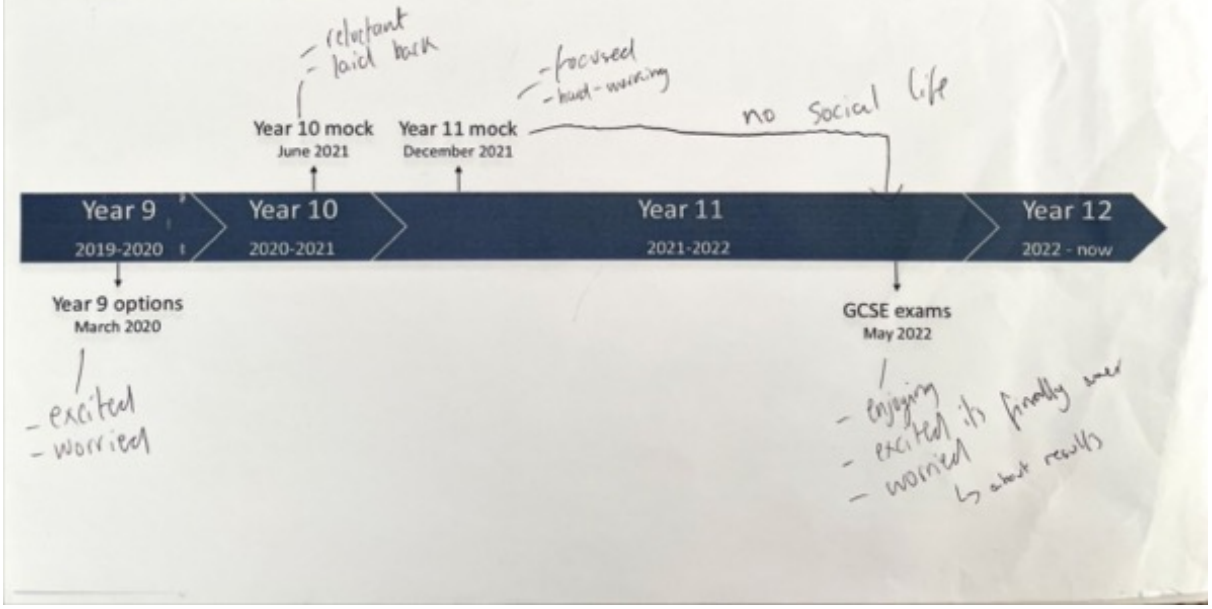
B2 Sample Completed Year 12 Timeline Memory Aids





Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE

Write/draw anything around the timeline that can help describe your emotions and study pattern leading up to GCSE.
You can add more key events (e.g., Year 9 options, Year 10 mock) if you wish. There are no right or wrong answers, and you will not be judged at all. Please bring this with you to the interview.

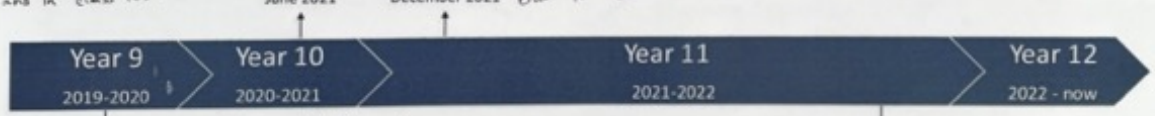


Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE

Write/draw anything around the timeline that can help describe your emotions and study pattern leading up to GCSE.
You can add more key events (e.g., Year 9 options, Year 10 mock) if you wish. There are no right or wrong answers, and you will not be judged at all. Please bring this with you to the interview.

Through Y9 I wasn't so stressed at all, wasn't thinking at about GCSEs at all. The only thing that worried me slightly was picking subjects and in class tests.

This mock effected me the most, I wasn't at the point in preperation as I should've been and failing most of my subjects was not a good look. At this time I began to do little bits of revision here and there but it was nowhere near the standard

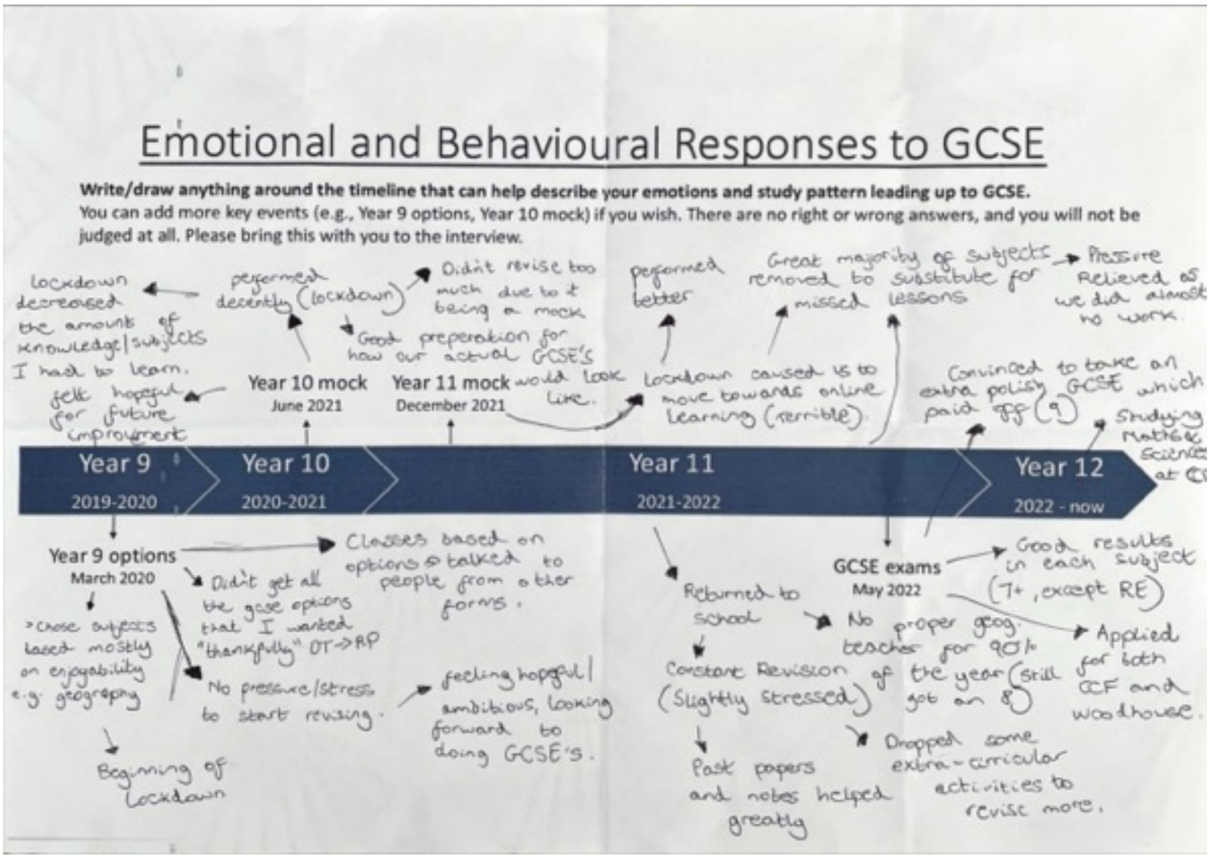


Year 9 options
March 2020

After Y10 mock I was a bit little bit shaken from results, I realised at that point I probably wasn't a top achiever but I still had high hopes and didn't do much work regretably.

GCSE exams
May 2022

Before GCSEs I don't think I was mature enough, I wasn't taking in very seriously and not much proper revision was going on, I think the stress and expectations to do well was caused by me to put of work as every time I was reminded of GCSE exam it was more of a bad thing.



Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE

Write/draw anything around the timeline that can help describe your emotions and study pattern leading up to GCSE.
You can add more key events (e.g., Year 9 options, Year 10 mock) if you wish. There are no right or wrong answers, and you will not be judged at all. Please bring this with you to the interview.

lockdown decreased the amount of knowledge/subjects I had to learn.
felt hopeful for future improvement
performed decently (lockdown)
Didn't revise too much due to it being a mock
Good preperation for how our actual GCSE's would look like.
performed better
Great majority of subjects removed to substitute for missed lessons
Pressure Relieved as we did almost no work.
Lockdown caused us to move towards online Learning (terrible)
Convinced to take an extra polish GCSE which paid off (9)
Studying Maths & Science at CI

Year 10 mock
June 2021

Year 11 mock
December 2021

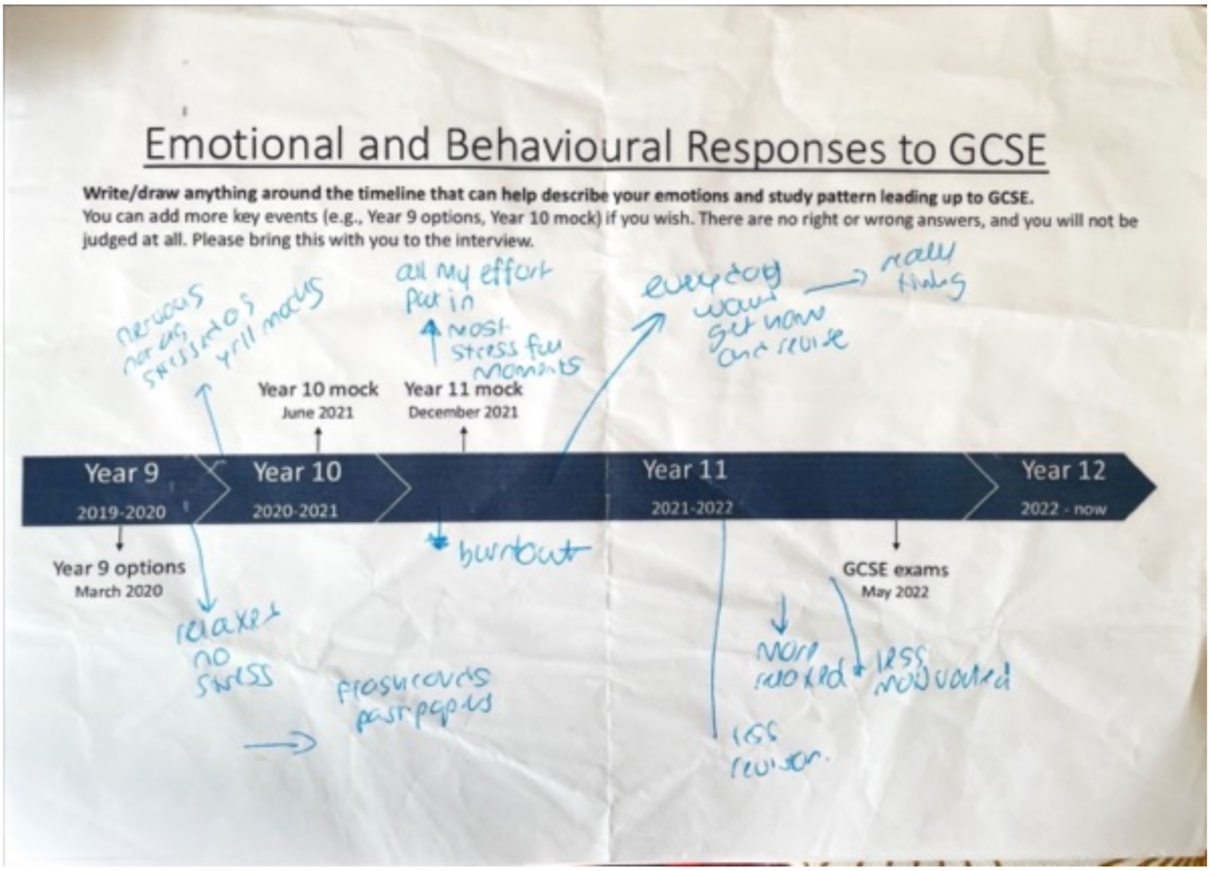
Year 9 2019-2020 | Year 10 2020-2021 | Year 11 2021-2022 | Year 12 2022 - now

Year 9 options
March 2020

Classes based on options & talked to people from other forms.
Didn't get all the gcse options that I wanted "thankfully" OT -> RP
> chose subjects based mostly on enjoyability e.g. geography
No pressure/stress to start revising.
feeling hopeful/ ambitious, looking forward to doing GCSE's.
Beginning of Lockdown
Returned to school
Constant Revision (Slightly stressed)
Past papers and notes helped greatly
No proper geog. teacher for 90% of the year (still got an 8)
Dropped some extra-curricular activities to revise more.

GCSE exams
May 2022

Good results in each subject (7+, except RE)
Applied for both CCF and Woodhouse.



Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE

Write/draw anything around the timeline that can help describe your emotions and study pattern leading up to GCSE.
You can add more key events (e.g., Year 9 options, Year 10 mock) if you wish. There are no right or wrong answers, and you will not be judged at all. Please bring this with you to the interview.

nervous nothing stressful y11 mocks
all my effort put in
most stressful moments
everyday wow get now and revise
really tiring

Year 10 mock
June 2021

Year 11 mock
December 2021

Year 9 2019-2020 | Year 10 2020-2021 | Year 11 2021-2022 | Year 12 2022 - now

burnout

Year 9 options
March 2020

relaxed no stress
flashcards pastpapers
more worked
less motivated
less revision.

GCSE exams
May 2022

B3 Sample Field Notes

Y11 S6 Memo

Y11 S6 has always been a happy-go-lucky kind of girl. She's funny, brave, strong-minded, helpful, and many more. I have been teaching her from Year 7 to 11. A lot of the time, she'd come to school early or stay late after school to have a chat with me, about anything. But not once I saw her cry about anything, apart from this time in an interview about her GCSE experience.

I was so staggered to see her cry when recounting the stress that she's getting from her parents and teachers regarding her performance for GCSE. It seems to me that she is up for challenging herself and get good results, but her definition of good results clash with parents' and teachers' expectations, that she's torn by the fact that she is not good enough for them and that her standard of good results is not accepted and understood.

It also seems to me that her voice is unheard. She puts on a mask that she's a usual happy person but in fact, her body has reacted in a bad way due to the stress of the exam, that she's never mentioned a word of this to me even though she'd share lots of personal / family things with me.

Y12 S5 Memo

Y12 S5 has always been a "messer" in my class – didn't seem to be interested in learning, would walk around the class, chat non-stop, low disruptions etc. What he portrayed himself in this interview surprised me. In particular, his wishes to do well academically and succeed in his examinations, as well as his ambition / future plan. I was also surprised by how much mum was willing to spend to get him tutors to help him succeed in GCSEs.

He seems to be really enjoying his study now. I am very happy for him.

Teacher 2 Memo

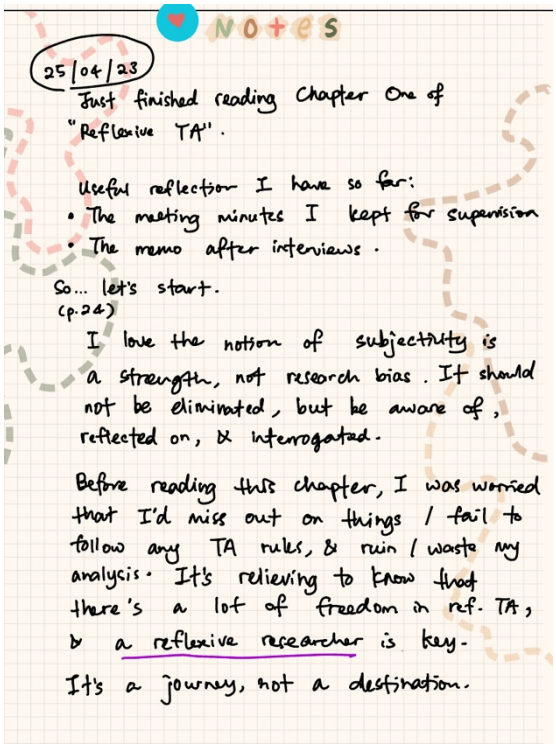
What stroke me – "because there's GCSE, so we have to be more strategic".

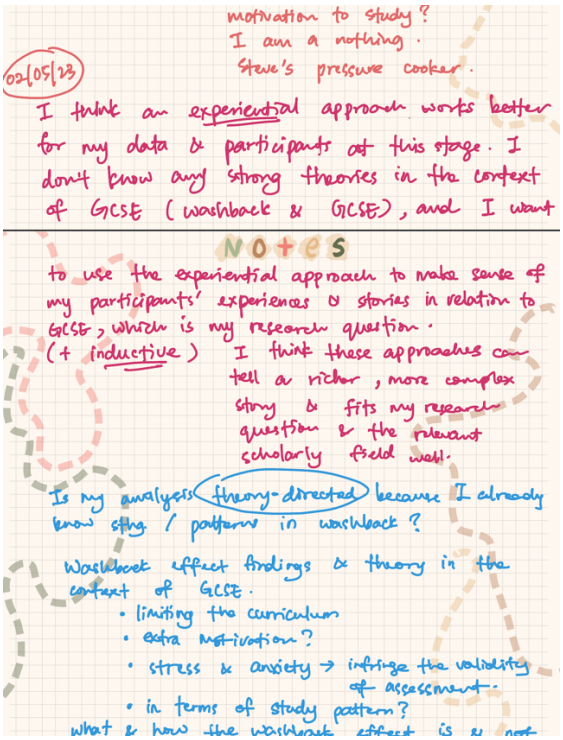
I'm touched by how the teacher tries to support students both academically and emotionally - helping them to gain the skills to succeed in GCSE and looking after their emotional well-being at the same time.

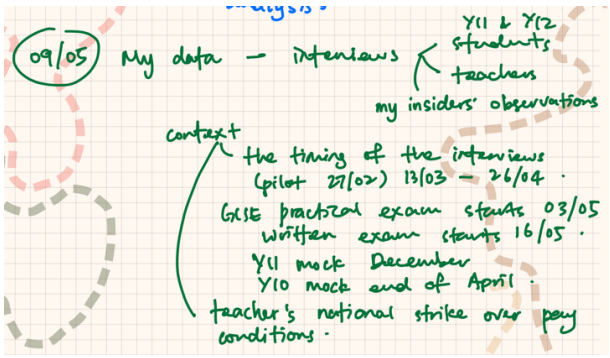
Target grade is used as a measure for whether the department has performed well.

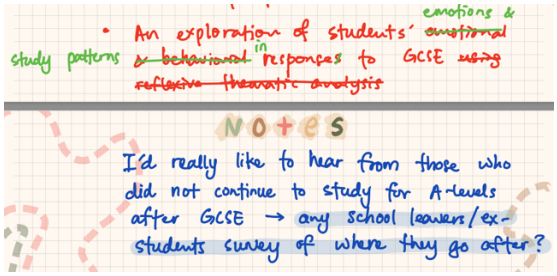
Teachers who can get students from C to A - belief was the key factor, not how things around exam eg practising past papers a lot etc. I like this, because it's sending a message to students that this is not just for your GCSE grades, but using this exam experience as a tool to believe in their own potential to achieve something.

B4 Sample Reflexive Journal and Meeting Notes (with Reflections)







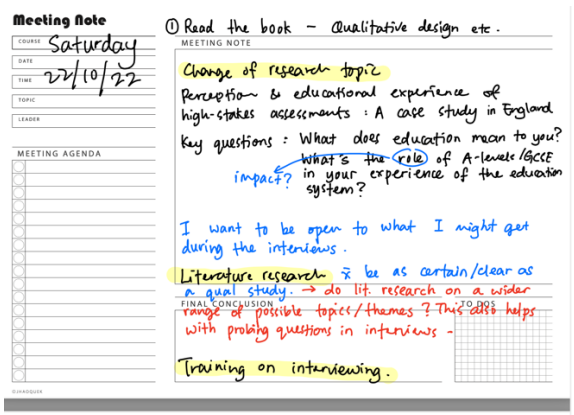


14/05/23
What is my positioning?
When I'm making familiarisation notes, I seem to be reading it from two perspectives:
- Teacher; and
- From a washback effect mentality

I don't seem to have the (broad) research question very firmly in my mind.
I need to get my theoretical positioning very clear first.
Am I seeing this from a teacher's perspective?
Am I seeing it from the washback effect perspective?

During the beginning of the familiarisation phase, I struggled to listen to the interview recording without being defensive when student participants placed the responsibility of their experience on the school or their teachers (e.g., "I couldn't be bothered to read [the GCSE options booklet], could they (the teachers) not just include that in their presentations for a start?"). This is because I am a teacher at the same school as the participants, so I recorded these conflicted emotions in my reflexive journal to remind myself to constantly challenge this notion of "fighting with my participants" when engaging with the data.

30/05/23
Am I presenting my study from the point of view of assessment, or as an educator? E.g.,
The assessment viewpoint: increasing study time leading up to an exam is a sign of washback effect, which may be a threat to the validity of assessment.
The educator viewpoint: increasing study time leading up to an exam can be a sign of students being motivated to study more, build resilience, time management, etc to work towards their goal.
Include both!


Meeting Note

COURSE
DATE Saturday 22/10/22
TIME
TOPIC
LEADER

MEETING AGENDA

① Read the book – Qualitative design etc.

MEETING NOTE

Change of research topic

Perception & educational experience of high-stakes assessments : A case study in England

Key questions : What does education mean to you?

impact? what's the role of A-levels/GCSE in your experience of the education system?

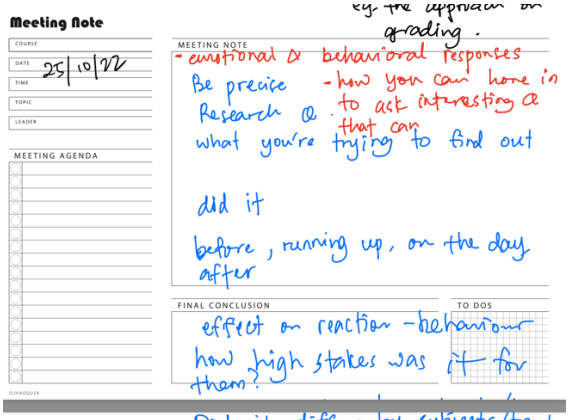
I want to be open to what I might get during the interviews.

Literature research ≠ be as certain/clear as a qual study. → do lit. research on a wider range of possible topics/themes? This also helps with probing questions in interviews.

Training on interviewing.

FINAL CONCLUSION

TO DOS


Meeting Note

COURSE
DATE 25/10/22
TIME
TOPIC
LEADER

MEETING AGENDA

eg. the approach to grading.

MEETING NOTE

- emotional & behavioral responses

Be precise - how you can hone in

Research Q. to ask interesting Q that can

what you're trying to find out

did it

before, running up, on the day after

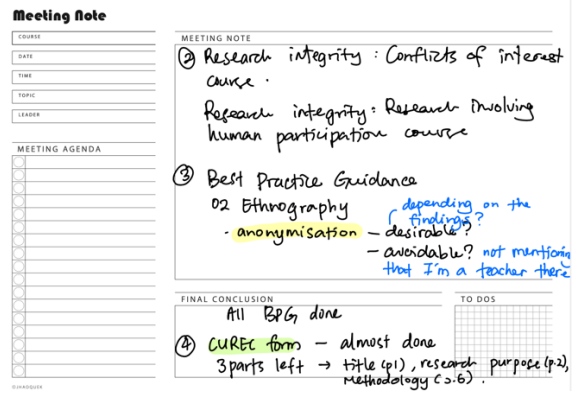
FINAL CONCLUSION

effect on reaction - behaviour

how high stakes was it for them?

TO DOS

Did it differ by subjects/teache


Meeting Note

COURSE
DATE
TIME
TOPIC
LEADER

MEETING AGENDA

MEETING NOTE

② Research integrity : Conflicts of interest course.

Research integrity : Research involving human participation course

③ Best Practice Guidance

02 Ethnography

- anonymisation – desirable? (depending on the findings?)
– avoidable? not mentioning that I'm a teacher there

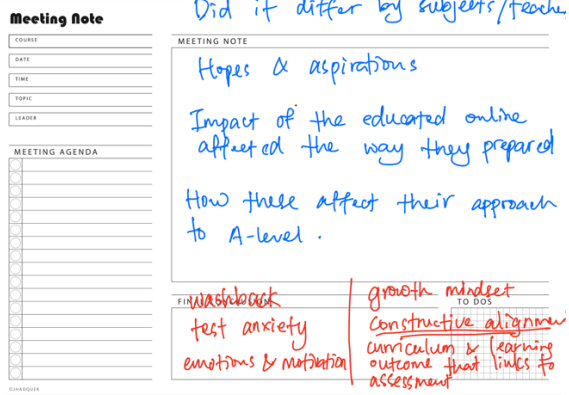
FINAL CONCLUSION

All BPG done

TO DOS

④ CUREC form – almost done

3 parts left → title (p1), research purpose (p2), Methodology (p.3-6).


Meeting Note

COURSE
DATE
TIME
TOPIC
LEADER

MEETING AGENDA

MEETING NOTE

Hopes & aspirations

Impact of the educated online affected the way they prepared

How these affect their approach to A-level.

FINAL CONCLUSION

~~washback~~

test anxiety

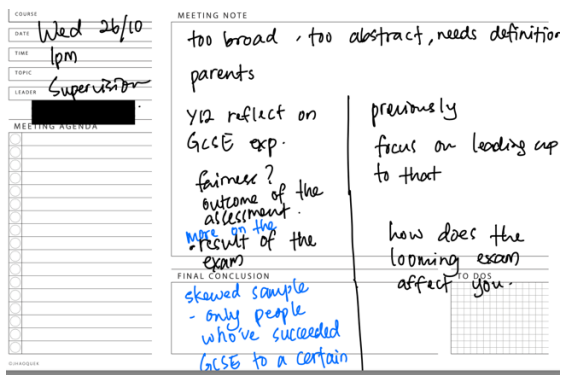
emotions & motivation

TO DOS

growth mindset

Constructive alignment

curriculum & learning outcome that links to assessment


COURSE
DATE Wed 26/10
TIME 1pm
TOPIC Supervisor
LEADER [redacted]

MEETING AGENDA

MEETING NOTE

too broad, too abstract, needs definition

parents

Y12 reflect on GCSE exp.

fairness? outcome of the assessment.

more on the result of the exam

previously focus on leading up to that

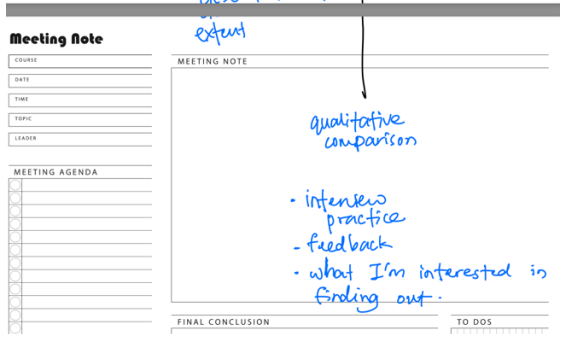
how does the looming exam affect you.

FINAL CONCLUSION

skewed sample

- only people who've succeeded GCSE to a certain extent

TO DOS


Meeting Note

COURSE
DATE
TIME
TOPIC
LEADER

MEETING AGENDA

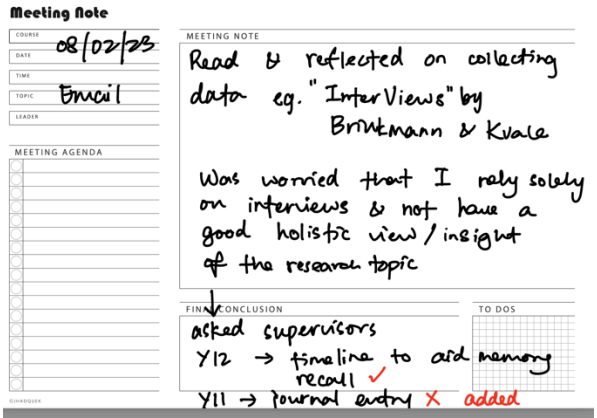
MEETING NOTE

qualitative comparison

- interview practice
- feedback
- what I'm interested in finding out.

FINAL CONCLUSION

TO DOS


Meeting Note

COURSE
DATE 08/02/23
TIME
TOPIC Email
LEADER

MEETING AGENDA

MEETING NOTE

Read & reflected on collecting data eg. "InterViews" by Brinkmann & Kvale

Was worried that I rely solely on interviews & not have a good holistic view / insight of the research topic

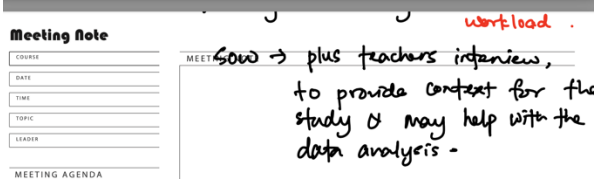
FINAL CONCLUSION

asked supervisors

Y12 → timeline to aid memory recall ✓

Y11 → journal entry ✗ added workload.

TO DOS


Meeting Note

COURSE
DATE
TIME
TOPIC
LEADER

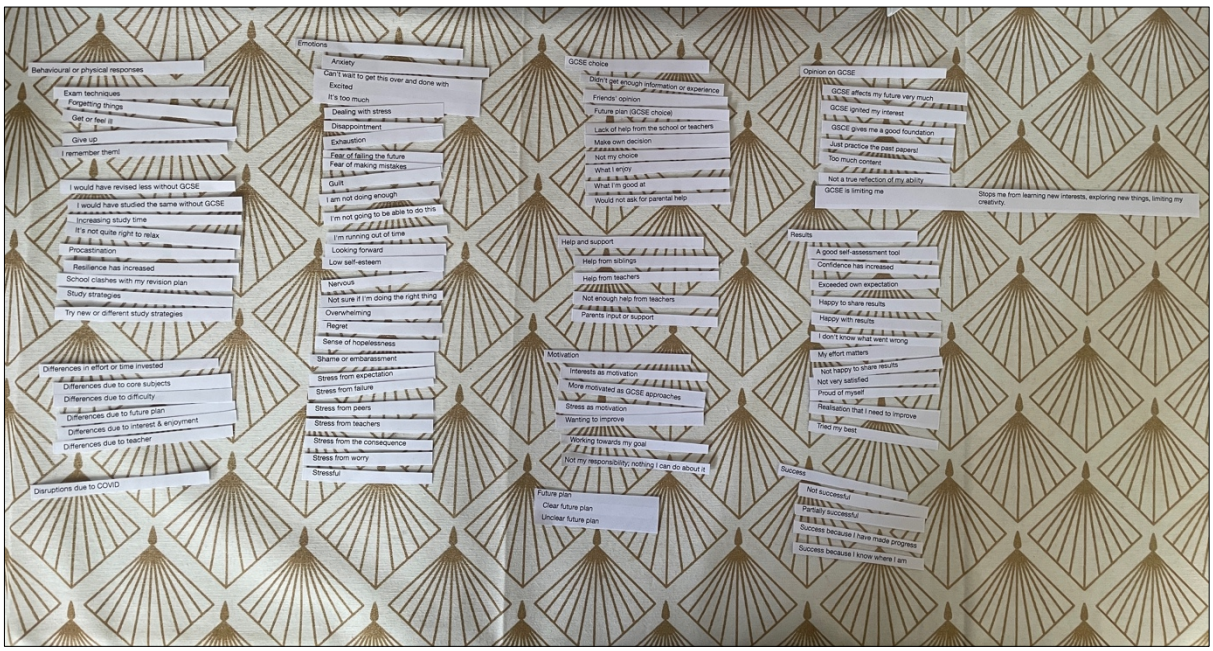
MEETING AGENDA

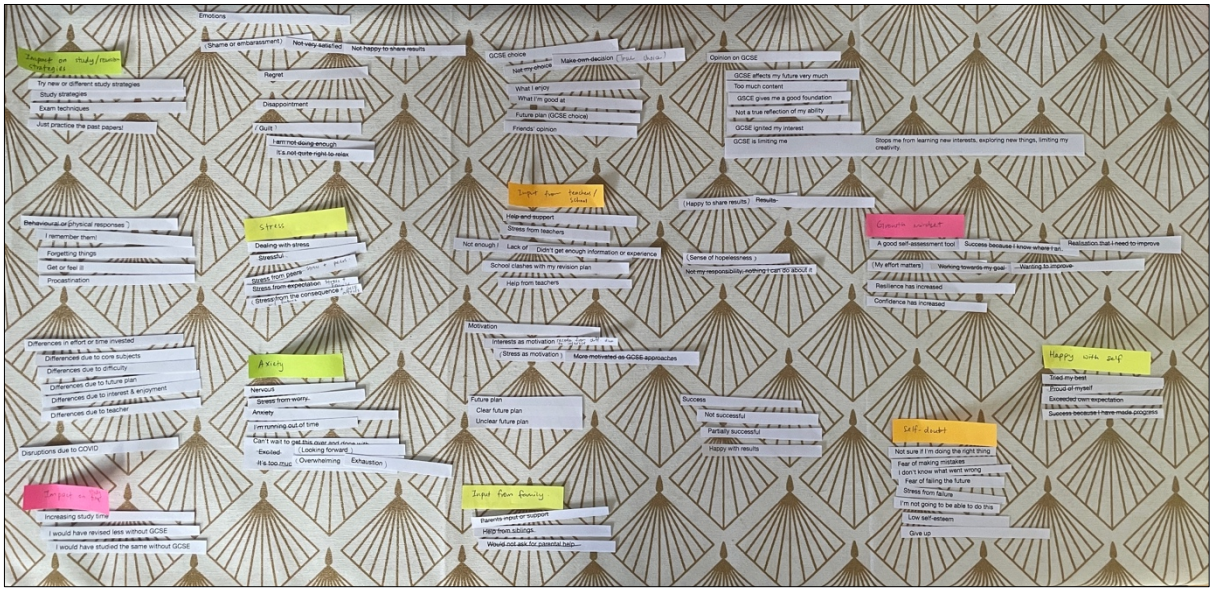
MEETING NOTE

SoW → plus teachers interviews, to provide context for the study & may help with the data analysis.

Appendix C: Data Analysis

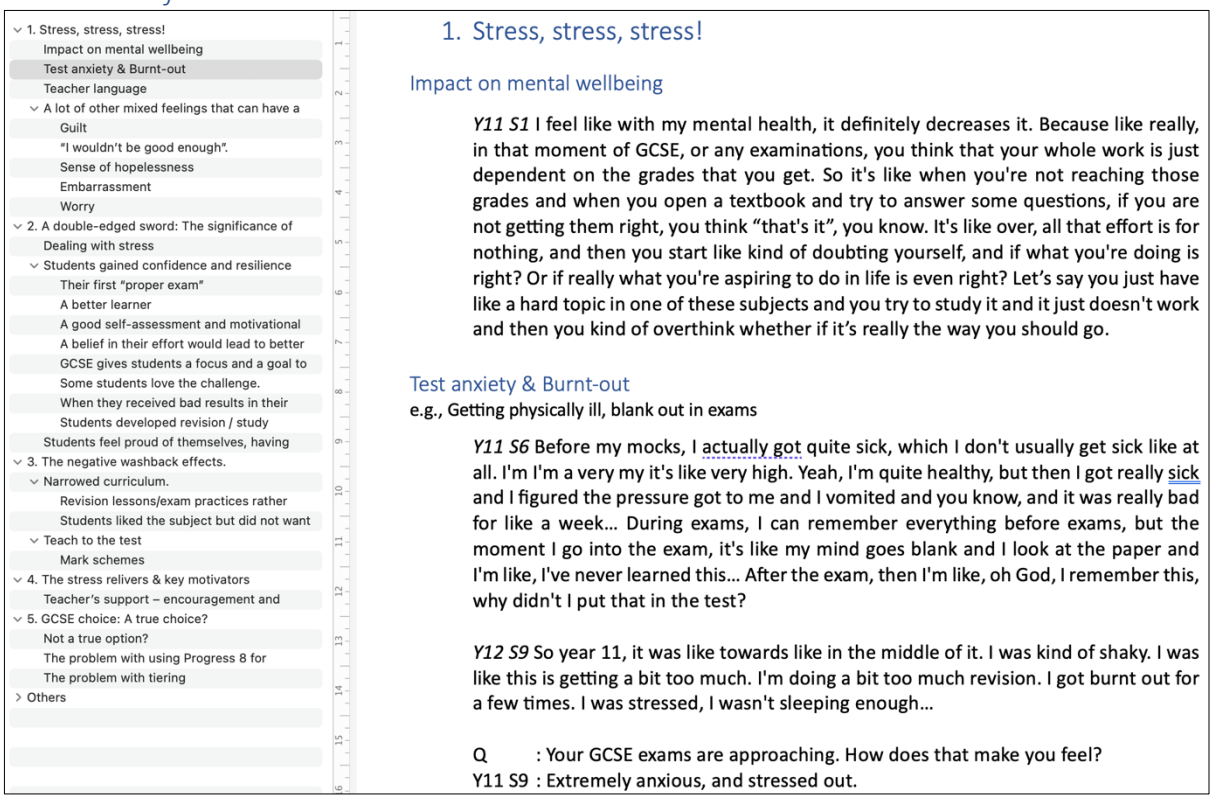
C1 Code Refining



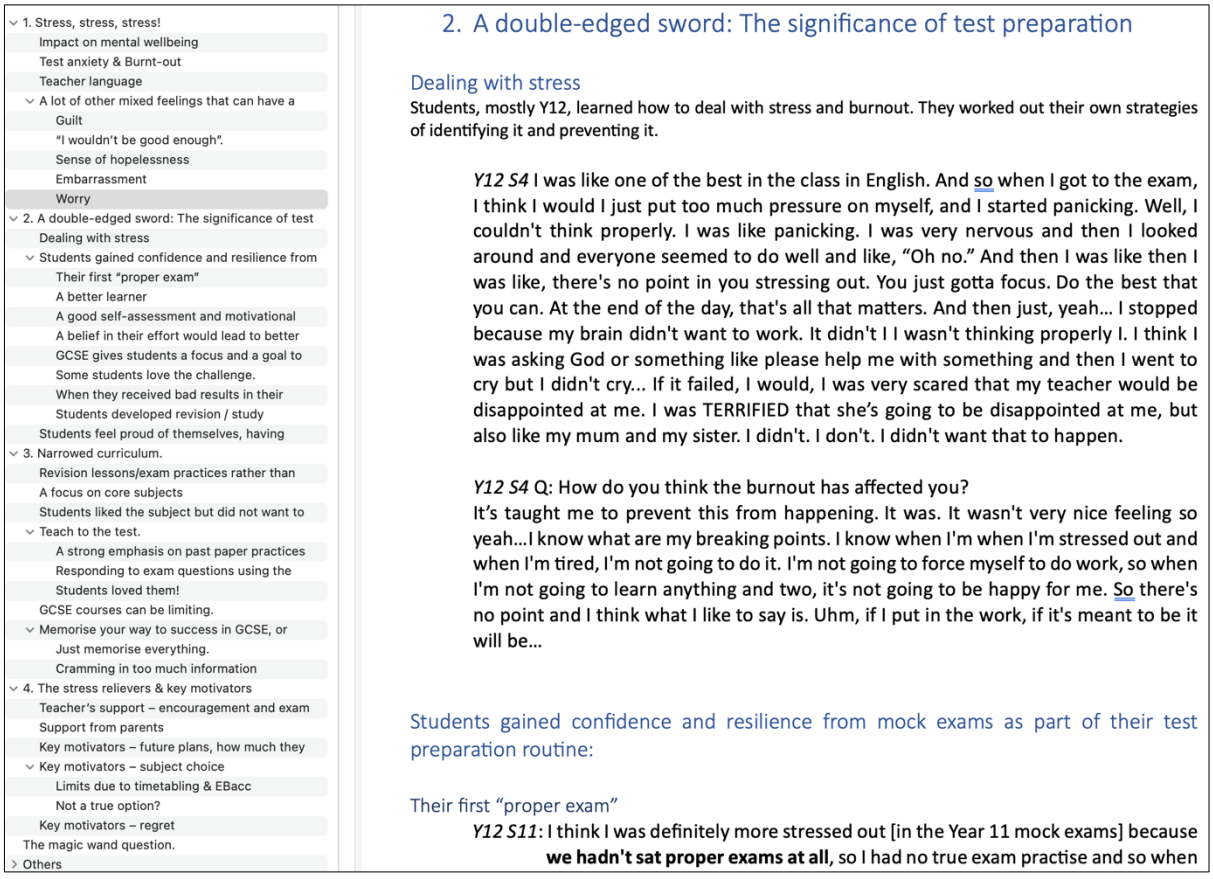


C2 Sample Themes and Quote Extracts

Five Themes from Round 1 Theme Generation



Four Themes from Round 2 Theme Generation



Appendix D: Ethics Documentation

D1 CUREC Confirmation Approval Email

Dear Jian Ean (Jane) Woo

Emotional and behavioural responses to GCSE: A case study in England
EDUC_C1A_2223_087

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, then, 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, these can be very useful in refining the writing up of ethical considerations in your research – see 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]

Chair, DREC

[redacted]

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

D2 Sample Assent Form for Students

ASSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN UNDER 16

Emotional and behavioural responses to GCSE

Student (or if unable, parent/guardian 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 quoted in the research anonymously? Yes/No

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

If you do want to take part, please write your name below.

Your name _____

Date _____

The researcher who explained this project to you needs to sign too:

Print Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

D3 Sample Opt-Out Form for Parents

Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE

OPT-OUT FORM

Ethics Approval Reference: EDUC_C1A_2223_087

If you **DO NOT** want your child to be included in the above-named research study, please fill out the form below and return it to the school **by 15th March 2023**.

If we do not receive an opt-out form from you by this date, your child may be included in this study, as described in the accompanying information sheet.

I, the undersigned, hereby DO NOT give permission for my child to be included in the study titled: "Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE".

Name of child: _____

Name of parent/guardian: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of researcher: _____

D4 Sample Consent Form for Teachers

CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHERS

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference: EDUC_C1A_2223_087

Emotional and Behavioural Responses to GCSE

		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 may be written up and published.	☐
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
9	I consent to being audio recorded	☐
10	I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.	☐
11	Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):	
	a) I give permission to be quoted directly in research outputs if I am not identifiable.	☐
	OR	
	b) I do not wish to be directly quoted	☐
14	I agree to take part in the study	☐