

**How do Students Experience Taking Key Stage 4/5
Public Examinations and What Works to Support them
and Why?**

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Abstract

This research focused on school life (assessments and transitions) as an area of change and insecurity in young people's lives, which has been shown to generate stress and induce anxiety symptoms (Seiffge-Krenke, 1993). The experiences of nine students aged 15-17 years, who were taking Key stage 4 (Secondary level) and 5 (Further Education) public examinations were explored. Two school staff in pastoral roles were interviewed to gather their perceptions of student experiences. The research took place in one secondary school in the UK where I was on placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. There are two UK based studies (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009) that have collected qualitative data on student experiences of taking exams. Whilst these studies have helped to highlight what factors might exacerbate feelings of exam stress within the school context, they do not consider the idiosyncratic nature of the exam experience and what factors help students to cope better. In choosing a case study approach with IPA as a methodology, it was possible to develop a rich picture of students' unique experiences of the exam period. Three overarching concepts were identified in the data: the stress cycle, grades, expectations and identity, and resiliency and coping. Students who were better able to regulate feelings of stress, were those who had built a range of coping skills alongside key attachment figures. It is hoped that findings from the research can be used to inform EP practice in terms of the guidance that EPs might give to schools, particularly in developing effective supportive processes and practices in school.

Declaration

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N Power', written in a cursive style.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Seiffge-Krenke (1993) identified four specific areas of change and insecurity in children and young people's (CYPs) lives which have been shown to generate stress and induce anxiety symptoms. These are: their bodies (puberty and development); relationships with peers and parents; establishing and maintaining a self-identity; and school life (assessments and transitions). This research study focuses on the last area; specifically exploring the effects of examination (exam) stress in one secondary school where I was on placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP).

The number of CYP experiencing mental health difficulties in the UK is on the rise, with more young people experiencing anxiety related symptoms (UNICEF, 2013). Anxiety disorders are defined by the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V, American Psychiatric Association, APA, 2013), as persistent and excessive suffering or worry that can manifest itself in behaviour such as crying, lack of concentration and avoiding feared situations. Anxiety disorders are one of the most common childhood disorders, with approximately 2.5% to 5% of children and adolescents being affected according to DSM-V diagnostic criteria (Rapee, Schniering & Hudson, 2009). Whilst exam stress is not a specified anxiety disorder according to the DSM-V, students have reported similar symptoms. For example, research from the mental health charity 'Mind' (2013) note that exam stress in particular can cause problems with eating, sleeping, anger and anxiety levels, where if a child is already experiencing emotional problems or mental health difficulties,

exam stress can be the last straw. There have been reports in UK newspapers that exams are the source of stress and worry for CYP. According to figures published by Mind (2013) the number of calls regarding exam stress rose from 27 per cent in 2009 to almost 40 per cent in 2011. The charity said the majority of those calls were from high-achieving teenagers in affluent families who put enormous pressure on themselves to succeed. More recently an article in 'The Independent' (May, 2016) reported that ChildLine, a UK based 24 hour counselling service for CYP, expressed concern over a rise in the number of young people seeking help for stress in the run up to exams. ChildLine reported a rise of 9% in counselling sessions (3,077 sessions) in the year 2014-15, related to exam stress.

Medical professionals have also highlighted concerns of increased levels of exam stress in young people. An article in The Telegraph newspaper (Hough, 2011), reported that more students aged 16-18 were seeking psychological help during exam periods, with doctors reporting a surge in demand for their services from students. I carried out a project (Power, 2015) to audit the mental health and well-being needs of children and young people across one London Borough. Seven school staff were interviewed who had a pastoral role within the school. School staff reported that more students felt 'stressed' because of examinations. In one school there was an increase in sixth form students making self-referrals to the Educational Psychology (EP) service for advice. School staff in all seven schools reported feeling unsure of how to support students emotionally through exams.

Despite these findings there has been a lack of research that explores how students experience taking exams and what support is helpful. There are two recent studies (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009) that have aimed to collect qualitative data on student experiences of exam stress. These have helped to highlight possible factors that exacerbate and contribute to a student experiencing exams as excessively stressful or anxiety provoking such as pressure from teachers and the anticipation of failure. However they lack richness in their methodological approaches. Denscombe's study interviewed students in pairs and focus groups which weakens the data and makes it more susceptible to social influence. These studies have also compared the experiences of students using thematic analysis and grounded theory approaches (Robson, 2002). A phenomenological approach, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA, Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) might have provided a more in depth insight into student experience, as it would allow the researcher to explore deeper underlying student beliefs. This enables interpretations to be made about how students understand their experiences of the exam process.

It is clear from these studies that factors external to the student, such as teachers within the school context, played a contributory role to heightening exam stress; yet there has been a lack of research into what students perceive to be supportive to them whilst preparing for and taking examinations (the exam period). There is limited research on the perceptions of school staff and what they understand to be supportive or non-supportive for students. The aim of this research study is to fill this gap by exploring student perceptions of exam stress

and what works to support them and why. Students who have found exams stressful, as well as students who have coped better will be interviewed. Student perceptions will be triangulated by interviewing school staff that have supported students through exams.

1.1 Examinations in secondary schools in the UK

In the UK (except Scotland) students take their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams, at age 15-16 years old, however in the last decade and specifically the last few years, more students are taking exams younger; with some taking GCSEs in core subjects as young as Year 9 (13-14 years). The role of GCSEs in contributing to what is already a growing level of stress-related psychological disorders affecting young people is well documented (Mennell et al. 1992; Alsop & McCaffrey, 1993; Smith & Rutter, 1995; Aggleton, 1996; West & Sweeting, 1996). It is suggested in the literature that this could be because GCSEs are appraised by students as “fateful moments” (Giddens, 1991 p. 75); which can be described as significant points in time that influence future life trajectory. Giddens suggests that students feel if they do not achieve good exam grades then it will have a negative impact on their future in terms of employment. With increasing competition for places at top universities, getting a grade ‘C’; what was once an acceptable pass mark, is no longer sufficient. This places additional pressures on students who are not achieving top grades (‘A*/A’ and ‘B’ grades).

There appears to be an assessment driven and exam focused culture in schools in the UK, where aside from GCSEs students are also faced with

coursework deadlines and regular assessments. Children as young as Year 6 (age 10-11 years) are assessed through Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). Recently the government has decided to introduce SATs tests for children in Year 2 (6-7 years) and this has sparked a series of protests across the UK. According to media reports, parents are taking their children out of school in order to express strong views that the testing culture has gone too far (Independent, May 2016).

Teachers are also faced with accountability for exam grades, which is now linked to performance management and pay scales. The negative effect that teacher stress has on students and their progress has been well documented. Research has shown that teachers who are stressed are less likely to interact with students in positive ways and are more likely to engage in punitive punishment of students (Bond et al., 2007; Osher et al 2007; Yoon 2002; Education, 2014). Research in this area is limited; however it begs the question of whether factors such as teacher stress have a part to play in exacerbating levels of pressure that students feel to get high grades.

1.2 Relevance to the Educational Psychology profession

Educational Psychologists (EPs) have had to respond to recent legislative changes (DfE, 2014) to the age range that they work with. Where previously EPs worked with CYP up until the age of 18 years, this has now been extended up until 25 years. This means the profession needs to develop an understanding of how students attending further education can be supported. Students from 18 years onwards will likely face important exams, in a bid to

secure increasingly competitive university places. Knowledge of what works in terms of supporting them through the exam period will become more important.

There is an increasing emphasis on EPs being involved in therapeutic work, (Mackay, 2007) and it is likely that supporting students who are experiencing exam stress will form part of such work. The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice (SEND, 2014), outlines appropriate provision to support CYP within the new category of Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. Now more than ever, EPs are likely to be working increasingly within the area of mental health and emotional well-being. Developing a stronger evidence base in the area of what works to support students taking exams would be important to support such work.

The area of exam stress has long been neglected by researchers on the education-psychology borders. Gregor (2005), a practicing EP, and researcher into the effects of using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) with students experiencing exam stress; notes that there has been very little research on exam stress in 'real life' school settings. Gregor suggests further research could look at the influence of the school environment on exam stress. EPs are well-placed to do this research given their knowledge of research methods and their experience in working with complex school systems and contexts.

In 2014 there was a move to a single assessment process in identifying CYPs needs and setting out provision in the form of an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP, SEND, 2014). At the heart of these plans, emphasis is placed on capturing the voice of CYP in terms of their future aspirations. This research aims to capture the voices of students taking exams and findings could help to inform discussions that EPs have with young people around their aspirations.

1.3 Relevance of the research to the local authority

I am on placement as a TEP in an outer London local authority (LA). Whilst it would seem that the Borough is generally an affluent area, there are some areas that are significantly deprived. Schools in the area are mixed in terms of 'good' or 'outstanding' ratings, with some school being given 'notice to improve', by the UK inspection body Ofsted. LA priorities this year include reviewing how they are supporting mental health and emotional well-being in schools. This follows two critical incidents in the space of one year, with two female sixth form students attempting to commit suicide. These students reported that they were finding the exam period difficult to cope with.

The EP team went into this school as part of their critical incident response to offer support to students and school staff. The team are currently in the process of deciding how they can provide long term support to students and staff within this school and others within the LA. My research would be beneficial to the EP service in terms of developing a knowledge base around exam stress. It would help the EP team support schools when faced with students who are

excessively worried about exams. It would also support the wider aims of the LA in relation to supporting mental health and emotional well-being.

1.4 Research aims and questions

This research study aims to explore how exam stress is experienced by students; including factors that influence and contribute to anxiety-like symptoms. What works best to support students and why, as perceived by students and school staff will also be explored.

In order to explore these aims, four research questions have been devised, which are:

- How do students experience taking Key stage 4/5 exams?
- What are students' perceptions about how they have coped during the exam period?
- What has been supportive to students whilst going through the exam period?
- What do school staff understand about how students experience the exam period and how they can be supported?

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1: Literature Search Terms

I conducted a comprehensive literature search to provide both a broad overview of the subject areas and a more specific understanding of models of stress, exam-related stress and literature on resiliency and coping. The search strategy involved electronic searches, searches of relevant journals and web sites, and consultation of reading lists. The full details of steps undertaken to conduct this search, together with search terms are given in Appendix A1.

2.2: Review of the Relevant Literature

In this chapter I will seek to understand how 'exam stress' has been conceptualised by researchers. Within the literature the terms 'test anxiety' and 'exam stress' are used interchangeably. The term 'test anxiety' is generally used to refer to measurable levels of anxiety immediately prior to and during an exam. Much of the test anxiety literature has been carried out in America and Australia. Research on test-anxiety, aims to measure how 'test anxious' a student is. The exceptions are more recent studies within the UK that explore students' perceptions through qualitative means (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009; 2014). These studies used the term 'exam stress'. This study remains consistent with the terminology used in recent research; however the term 'test-anxiety' is used when describing earlier studies.

In order to address the confusion around terminology within the literature I will begin by reviewing what is meant by the term 'stress' and will then proceed in reviewing early literature on models of test anxiety and exam stress. This study will be exploring coping ability in relation to taking exams and to do so it will be important to consider what it is about certain students that means they have coped better throughout the exam period. To do this I will explore theory on coping and resilience in relation to exam stress and will end by reviewing more recent qualitative studies that have explored perceptions of students taking exams within a UK population. What has known to work in terms of supporting students within the school system will be drawn upon, with particular reference to evidence-based interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

2.3: Part One: Understanding and Conceptualising 'Examination Stress'

2.3.1: Defining the term 'Stress'

Cox and Griffiths (1995) assert there is no consensus as to the definition of the term 'stress'. They suggest there are three conceptions of the nature of stress. The first is the 'engineering approach', whereby stress is seen as a stimulus or characteristic of the environment in the form of a demand. The second is a 'physiological approach', where stress is based upon physiological/biological changes in the person when they are in a 'stress state'. The third is a 'psychological approach', where stress is seen as a dynamic process, where individuals interact with their environment (Cox, Griffiths & Rial-Gonzales, 2000; Cox & Mackay, 1981).

Scientific models of stress such as 'life events' (stimulus based) models, define stress in objective and subjective ways. On an objective level 'stress' is considered to be any negative or positive 'major event' that leads to change. On a subjective level, 'stressors' are appraised as threatening and unpleasant to a person, making them feel out of control (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). This is in contrast to 'response based' models such as the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) model (Selye, 1936), which focuses on the bodies' response and process in fighting a threat. GAS consists of the 'alarm stage', where the body labels a stressor as threatening and where the 'fight or flight' response is triggered. The 'resistance stage' follows, where the body is still on alert, but begins to repair damage caused by the initial stressor. If the body experiences prolonged stress then it reaches the 'exhaustion stage'. By this stage the body begins to lose its ability to combat the stressor, leading to 'burn-out'.

These models of stress provide insights into the nature of stress in terms of what events could be considered as stressors and how the body responds to stress; however they are reductionist. GAS assumes that all 'stressors' are received by the body as a similar physiological response. Additionally both models do not account for perception or appraisal of an event by a person. Furthermore, they do not account for individual differences where different events are perceived as more or less stressful by people.

Factors which enable people to better cope with stress are not explored within these models. For this reason, I support a 'transactional' model of stress and coping as proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), in this study. The Transactional model appears to be a more complete model in considering a person's coping mechanisms. However I also recognise the value of considering different models of stress in providing different insights into our understanding of stress.

The 'transactional' model of stress emphasises a person's ability to appraise a situation to evaluate its potential harm, threats and challenges. This results in the process of coping with stressful events and external stressors. The level of stress is experienced in the form of feelings, emotions, thoughts and behaviours and is related to appraisals of the situation. This involves a judgment by the person about whether internal or external demands exceed resources and ability to cope. According to Lazarus and Folkman, if a person appraises an event as a threat they are likely to develop coping strategies that are either problem-focused or emotion-focused.

Emotion-focused coping attempts to change the way the stressful environment is viewed, or the personal meaning of the situation resulting in distancing from the event (Lazarus, 1993). Problem-focused coping seeks to change the relationship by acting on either the environment or the person (Lazarus, 1993) and is achieved by evaluating the stake in

the encounter and using confrontive coping strategies, self-control, accepting responsibility, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

2.3.2: Early Theoretical models of 'test-anxiety'

Models of stress have been applied to the context of research on exam stress in order to better understand what exam stress is. Early research from Zeidner (1998) refers to the term 'test anxiety' where it is suggested that test anxiety is a complex and multi-dimensional construct, embodying a range of phenomenological, physiological and behavioural responses. These responses can have a lasting impact on a students' self esteem and self concept. Zeidner outlines three components of test anxiety:

- Cognitive: negative thoughts and self-statements occurring during assessments (e.g. 'If I fail this exam my whole life is a failure') and performance-inhibiting difficulties that might arise from anxiety (e.g. recalling facts and difficulty in reading and understanding questions).
- Affective: person's appraisal of their physiological state (e.g. tension, tight muscles and trembling).
- Behavioural: poor study skills, avoidance and procrastination.

Zeidner's model provides a proposed framework for understanding the features of test anxiety. It appears to be a comprehensive model in that it considers a persons thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This also includes how a person appraises an event. Its limitations as with other models of stress and test

anxiety, is that it does not consider how a person copes in the same way that the transactional model of stress does.

Some models of test anxiety are process-oriented and have advantages over the transactional model of stress in that they emphasise the interacting variables within the environment when appraising examinations. Zeidner and Mathews' (2005) self-regulative model for short-term distress is seen as the result of negative self-beliefs which are maintained by metacognitive strategies (such as heightened attention). Long-term distress is seen as the result of maladaptive person–situation interaction (e.g. negative feedback from others). The biopsychosocial model (Lowe, Urquhart & Greenman, 2000) suggests that within person variables such as academic self-efficacy, combine with situational or interpersonal variables. This determines the degree of anxiety that is facilitating at low levels, becoming debilitating at higher levels. This is based on a curvilinear relationship between test anxiety and performance; however this relationship is not universally accepted. For example, Putwain and Deveney (2008) propose that facilitative and debilitating test anxieties are independent, so that a student may be high in one form and low in another.

Libert and Morris (1967), refer to test anxiety as being comprised of 'worry' and 'emotionality' components, where 'worry' refers to a cognitive component; such as derogatory and negative self-statements related to failure. 'Emotionality' refers to the affective physiological component of the exam situation, which is the students' perception of autonomic arousal and tension. Research suggests that 'worry' and 'emotionality' scores are highly correlated however these are

elicited and maintained by different conditions (Ware, Galassi & Dew, 1990). Eysenck (1992), proposes that 'worry' is triggered by internal and external cues that can appear threatening to a person's self esteem, whereas 'emotionality' is triggered by the external cues of the examination situation itself. Eysenck hypothesised that students high in test anxiety have more pervasive and structured 'worry clusters' in long term memory, and these include thoughts and images of prior experiences of evaluative situations involving failure. This predisposes students who are 'exam anxious' to perceive assessment situations as threatening, where worry cognitions are more easily triggered.

Transactional models of test anxiety (Spielberg & Vagg, 1995), suggest that features of the assessment context (i.e. the importance of the assessment, skill level), interact with individual differences in trait test anxiety, to determine the extent to which an assessment is appraised as threatening. This initial appraisal is followed by continuous interpretive reappraisal of threat throughout the assessment. An assessment may be appraised as less threatening if a student is able to respond to assessment demands, resulting in a reduction of emotionality and consequently worry cognitions. Eysenck and Calvo (1992) suggest that a decline in task performance could be the result of additional demands that worry cognitions place on working memory, causing processing efficiency to be reduced in tasks of high memory load, difficult questions or coordinative complexity.

2.3.3: Demographic patterns of exam stress in different populations

The difficulty with earlier research on test anxiety and the models that have been suggested to help explain it is that they have predominantly been used to develop test anxiety measures, rather than using them to qualitatively explore perceptions of students. Nevertheless there is some interesting research that has been produced on aiming to establish whether certain populations are predisposed to test anxiety.

The literature shows gender differences, with females reporting higher levels of test anxiety than males (Zeidner, 1998). Further breakdown of these reports shows that gender differences were greater for Eysenck's 'emotionality' component rather than the 'worry' component' (Zeidner, 1990; Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999); with other studies suggesting males and females differ in terms of 'emotionality' only (Zeidner and Nevo, 1992). These studies use measurements of test anxiety questionnaires to achieve a score, which gives little insight into students' experiences. Inferring that females are more test anxious is too simplistic. Other factors such as societal norms in terms of the way females and males express themselves might be at play; where in a UK society males might be socialized to perceive expressing their emotions as a sign of weakness.

Other demographic factors that have been considered in North American and European literature are ethnic background and socio-economic status. Slight differences in test anxiety scores have been reported between black-American

and white American students; and between students from Hispanic origin and white-American students (Hembree, 1988), where in both comparisons the white-American students reported higher levels of exam stress/test anxiety. These differences tended to reduce with age and were negligible by 9-12 years. A study by Hodge, McKormack and Elliot (1997) reported that for students where English was an additional language (EAL) in Australia, students reported higher levels of test anxiety. Hodge et al also found that students of lower socio-economic background reported higher levels of test anxiety. Hodge et al's study was carried out in Australia where the education system is set up similarly to the UK, with students taking summative examinations when they are 15-16 years old. Students who are learning English for the first time during these years are therefore going to feel more pressure having to sit examinations within a specific time frame and within a specific year group.

Findings have been shown to be inconsistent when replicated in the UK. Putwain (2005) used the 'Test Anxiety Inventory' (TAI) to establish a baseline measure of trait test anxiety, together with a student profile questionnaire (SPQ) to measure dichotomous categories such as gender and ethnic background. The aim of the research was to determine if demographic factors such as studies from America and Australia reflected a UK population. Putwain found higher scores of exam stress/test anxiety in female students, however little variability across ethnic background or socio-economic class. Hodge et al's study used a general measure of anxiety rather than a test anxiety measure, showing that measurement tools have the potential to produce varying findings and conclusions.

Qualitative research must be considered in order to deepen understanding of contributory factors and how they might interact in different ways for different students, rather than just producing a score that deems a student 'test anxious' and then making claims based on this. Studies to date have mainly focused on measuring 'test anxiety' with little exploration into what factors within the school environment that exacerbate feelings of stress or those that are supportive. Having a better understanding of these factors will mean that schools can introduce preventative measures.

2.3.4: Studies exploring students' subjective experiences of taking exams

There are a small number of studies that have been carried out within the UK that explore the subjective experiences of students that have taken GCSE examinations. These studies refer to 'exam stress' instead of 'test anxiety'. Denscombe's (2000) findings show that the social conditions surrounding students, particularly in a school context are possible contributory factors that exacerbate exam stress. The experiences of 15-16 year olds were analysed using a mixture of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The aim was to explore what aspects of school life students found stressful. Taking examinations was referred to as the single most stressful factor in students' lives. Themes arising from the interviews were around GCSEs being 'the first examinations that really matter'; 'the burden of coursework and pressure from teachers'; 'teachers as stress amplifiers'; 'ability and expectations'; and exams as 'being a benchmark for who I am' (pp. 364-369). These themes were

consistent across focus groups and individual interviews, suggesting that they are common viewpoints that students share.

Students in this study perceived success or failure of GCSE exams as having a major impact upon their life prospects, rather than a desire for educational success for its own sake. This was also the case for students who planned on leaving school at the age of 16, where they believed that exams were essential to getting a job upon leaving. Findings support Giddens's idea of exams being seen as 'fateful moments'. Students reported that grades had an impact on their self-worth; where GCSE's marked a significant juncture in life where their achievements were measured for the first time and made publicly available. This grade became a value that was tagged to their self-identity. In particular students in the study identified the following reasons for why GCSE examinations were stressful:

- The sudden burden of coursework and deadlines
- The uncertainty surrounding success in the GCSE examination
- The constant cajoling by teachers to produce the work and meet the deadlines
- The pressure from teachers to do well in terms of GCSE results

This study suggests that factors within the school context might be exacerbating feelings of exam stress. This also goes beyond the school context to a more

systemic level; stemming from the way the curriculum is structured with coursework and deadlines and in the summative nature of exams; with five years of secondary schooling being measured across Key stage 4. This study was carried out fifteen years ago, and given the changing nature of the education system it would be expected that these findings would change. Whilst the findings are useful, they are not necessarily generalisable to education as it is today. With the assessment driven nature in schools starting as young as Year 2, it could be expected that students now would report similar feelings about exams as in Denscombe's study but to a greater level and possibly at younger ages. The students in Denscombe's study were interviewed in groups of 5-7 or in pairs, rather than individually. Whilst peer support might encourage students to feel more comfortable to speak about their experiences, leading to obtaining more data; it is possible that social influences might have skewed the data. Furthermore, the study does not take into account individual differences and the interaction of these differences to the school context and the exam system.

Whilst Denscombe's research is useful in uncovering potential contributory factors within the school context, Putwain states that "a number of important features have yet to be specified regarding the development, antecedents and educational consequences of assessment/examination stress in Key Stage 4" (p1). Putwain (2009) interviewed 34 students in their final two years of compulsory schooling. These were across six different school contexts, including two all girls schools and two all boys schools. Eight themes were generated from the data which were centred around; 'anticipation of failure',

'valuing academic achievement', 'having particular aspirations that required specific grades', 'poor competence beliefs around memory failure in the exam', 'having competing workloads and coursework'; with teachers adding to this pressure by persistently reminding them about deadlines, 'worry about revision and preparation' and 'whether ability was viewed as fixed or incremental' (pp. 397-406). These themes were distinct but related in the following ways:

- Stress was linked to the motivation to achieve and the fear of failure through esteem judgements and conditions of acceptance from important others
- The experience of stress was linked to a wider educational context including practices and policies pursued by teachers and schools.
- A more specific state, 'examination anxiety', was associated with facilitating effects prior to examinations and debilitating effects during examinations.

Putwain's findings were gendered, with males and females talking about exams differently. Females tended to consider a grade 'C' as a failure despite it being above the official pass mark of grade 'D'. Putwain's findings might help to explain earlier findings in the literature that suggest that females experience higher incidences of test anxiety (Hodge et al., 1997). Putwain's research found that the appraisal of exams by students were more idiosyncratic than the students in Denscombe's study, however support did arise for Denscombe's position that the stress arising from GCSE's examinations might be independent of personal predisposition. For example, students referred specifically to the

pressure they felt from teachers and the constant pressure from deadlines and coursework.

Putwain interviewed students at different points across the academic year which is perhaps the reason for the idiosyncratic nature of the findings. This does make it difficult to compare students as it can be expected that different points of the year will generate different levels of pressure depending on when exams fall. However, what Putwain has achieved by choosing different time points, is an insight into the nature of the stress experienced as a result of the temporal context of exams. Most students experienced ongoing stress related to the build up to exams; reporting concerns about coursework deadlines and worries about revision. However if an exam was more imminent, stress was more intense and anxiety-like symptoms were felt. Given that exams have become increasingly more modular now, being taken throughout the GCSE course instead of at the end of two years, it can be expected that the 'examination anxiety' state that Putwain refers to might be experienced more frequently.

2.3.5: From 'test-anxiety' to a broader conceptualisation of 'exam-stress'

Putwain (2008) considers Zeidner's test-anxiety construct, concluding that it is too narrow, focusing specifically on an anxiety state that is often experienced shortly before and during an exam. This does not encapsulate other features associated with exams, such as the build up and preparation before exams when students typically do not feel this same level of anxiety, however may feel prolonged stress. One study (Putwain, 2009 (in press at the time of writing)), of

GCSE students indicated how 'stress' is often used as an umbrella term for any negative effect associated with examinations; time pressure, preparing for exams, exhaustion from sitting multiple examinations and competing coursework deadlines. Putwain acknowledges that the notion of 'examination stress' might be too broad, yet another conceptualisation is not offered.

Some studies see 'stress' as the properties of a stimulus such as an exam; and other studies to the subjective experience of a person to distress. There is a lack of precision with domains such as 'examination stress' and 'academic stress' not being clearly defined. In a study of 'examination stress', Denscombe (2000) refers to the concept of 'mental stress' in relation to students' perceptions of stressful experiences. Denscombe notes that what is experienced by one person as stressful may not be experienced as such by another. The factors involved in this might not be clear-cut or self-evident; the origins of the stress might be distant or subconscious and the pressures might not lend themselves to being measured. Denscombe's study therefore deals with stress factors that are overt and explicitly recognized by the students involved. In the same way this study focuses on the aspects of stress students are able to identify with and are able to articulate some conscious concerns about as revealed through accounts of their experiences.

Whether or not an 'examination stress' or 'test anxiety' perspective is taken, establishing what works to support students who feel excessive stress and anxiety like symptoms is of paramount importance, not least because it has

debilitating effects on mental health and emotional well-being; but also because anxiety has been shown to have an adverse impact on academic functioning (Ezpeleta, Keeler, Erkanli, Costello & Angold, 2001), with children who suffer from anxiety being less likely to fulfil their full academic potential. Children who do not suffer from anxiety tend to score higher in tests and display higher aptitude at reading and homework than their more anxious counterparts (Tomb & Hunter, 2004). Avoidance of anxiety-inducing situations commonly leads to avoidance of school resources, sports, homework and school plays, which in turn adversely affects academic achievement (Rapee, Spence, Cobham & Wignall, 2000).

2.3.6: Evidence-based interventions for 'examination stress'

The studies in the UK so far have helped to explain some of the contributory factors to students experiencing exam stress, including a specific 'examination anxiety' state prior to and during taking exams. However there is still paucity of research in the area. Research is even more limited in terms of exploring what works to support students within a school context and why. Putwain posed the question of whether interventions should be targeted at the 'anxiety' students feel or whether interventions should be more preventative, such as focusing on building resiliency and coping strategies or teaching students how to study and revise. If this is the case, then delivery of supportive interventions would rest largely with school staff, given that exams are school-based and students are given preparation time for them in lessons. Given this, it is crucial that school staff understand how students' experience examinations and understand what

works to support them and why. Knowing this would help school staff to work preventatively, targeting younger years at the first signs of exam stress.

Ergene (2003) carried out a meta-analysis of the results from 56 test anxiety studies and concluded that there was a lack of research on test anxiety reduction programmes for primary, secondary and students in further education. There has been some research to suggest that evidence based interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT, Beck, 1985), have been effective in reducing feelings of the 'examination anxiety' state that Putwain refers to, however ongoing and preventative programmes to support exam stress are lacking.

CBT is a talking therapy and first arose out of work with adults experiencing anxiety and depression (Beck, Emery, and Greenberg, 1985; Beck et al. 1979). It helps people draw attention to their thoughts, feelings and emotions and focuses on changing negative thought patterns. Research has shown that a mixed intervention programme is most beneficial. Gregor (2005) investigated interventions that helped to reduce examination anxiety. The research found that if schools used mixed intervention programmes where CBT was combined with relaxation techniques, then it helped prevent excessive anxiety and helped young people manage their feelings more effectively. The results were particularly effective for anxiety related to mathematics, suggesting intervention for anxiety related to specific subjects is essential in order to support attainment.

Gregor's decision to use relaxation methods is synonymous with more recent developments within Educational Psychology, such as the development of 'mindfulness' interventions. 'Mindfulness' can be defined as intentionally accepting thoughts, feelings and emotions experienced in the present moment, in a non-judgmental way (Weare, 2012). Inspired by Buddhist meditation practices, mindfulness programmes have a reasonably strong evidence base for reducing anxiety levels in adults (Baer, 2003) and have now been adapted for children and adolescents. The Mindfulness Attention Programme (MAP) has recently been developed at the University College London (UCL, 2013) and focuses on stress reduction through meditative techniques.

Although two recent systematic reviews of literature in the area (Burke 2009; Harnett and Dawe, 2012) look promising in terms of reducing anxiety levels, there is still only a small evidence base for its effectiveness. Mindfulness practice, whilst reducing somatic symptoms of anxiety might not be enough to challenge negative thought processes, which CBT has shown to effectively do. Gregor's research suggests that a combination of CBT and mindfulness approaches might be most beneficial.

Gregor's study is just one study that has looked at using interventions such as CBT with students experiencing exam stress. The study measured the level of anxiety felt and academic performance. There is still a gap in research that explores student perceptions of what is supportive to them during periods of exam stress within the school context.

2.4: Part Two: Coping and Resilience

In considering literature around what exam stress 'is', it is important to establish what makes a person more likely to 'cope' during the exam period. Despite there being research into coping styles and resilience; how this links to exam stress has been neglected and is an area this study aims to explore. The next sections will review research on coping, self-efficacy and resilience and attachment in order to consider how children and adolescents build effective coping skills.

2.4.1: Self-efficacy beliefs and Locus of Control

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their own capabilities to succeed in specific situations. Bandura (1977) suggests that the higher the level of academic self-efficacy a person has, the greater their achievement in learning. Consequently a student with a strong sense of academic self-efficacy is likely to be one that is motivated to study, is able to draw on effective learning strategies and has self-regulative techniques in being able to manage emotional responses during the learning experience. Bandura suggests that a mastery experience will strengthen self-efficacy and self-efficacy is a regulator of effort, where if the mastery of a task is experienced then more effort will be implemented to acquire knowledge and skill.

Emotional self-efficacy is the self-belief in being able to manage emotions effectively and this includes managing them internally by self-soothing, rather than externally by 'acting out'. According to Muris (2002), emotional self-efficacy

is a predictor of psychopathology, particularly anxiety. Maddux (2002), suggests that there are links between adaptive functioning and efficacy beliefs including mental health outcomes. Having a strong sense of emotional self-efficacy is likely to result in being able to cope better and manage feelings of anxiety. A strong sense of self-efficacy, academic and emotional, is thought by Bandura (1989) to be the result of multiple contributing factors such as vicarious modelling from teachers, peers and parents, self-confidence and the sense of agency individuals have developed and this is corroborated by other research. (Zimmerman, 2000). Bandura (1986), developed social cognitive theory where through self-reflection individuals evaluate their own experiences and thought processes in relation to their knowledge, the skills they gain and their actions in order to develop their academic and emotional self-efficacy. If a person engages with this process then they are more able to accept challenges as opportunities rather than as unobtainable barriers.

However, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy is not without criticism. Eastman and Marzillar (1984) outlined three criticisms. The first is concerned with ambiguity and a lack of definition in self-efficacy. The second is methodological, in that Bandura's methods were behavioural and tried to establish a direct cause and effect between self-efficacy beliefs and outcome. The extent to which this is possible when controlling for multiple environmental factors, is questionable. Thirdly, there are doubts that have been cast over how far Bandura measured his assertions. For example, scales that were used to 'measure' self-efficacy were not adequately evaluated. Bandura's theory also raises questions as to how self-efficacy is different from the concept 'self esteem'. Gist, Schwoerer and

Rosen (1989) suggests that “Although somewhat similar, self-efficacy is distinct from self-esteem in that self-esteem refers to a more general level of self-confidence and feelings of adequacy, whereas self-efficacy refers to a person’s belief that he or she can successfully perform a specific task (p.5).

Furthermore, Bandura does not appear to consider the effects of having an overly inflated sense of self-confidence on performance. Vancouver, Thompson, Tischner, and Putka (2002), carried out two studies to examine how high self-efficacy relates to an individual’s performance and confidence levels. They found that high self-efficacy and confidence levels did not necessarily relate to improved performance. Vancouver et al., suggested that having high self-efficacy and confidence levels could cause a complacency and lack of motivation to set high goals. However, the findings of the study should be considered carefully given the small nature of the study and the questionnaire based measures used. This study highlights methodological problems across studies that attempt to use measurements of 'personality traits' or 'skills', in that they are often self-reported measures and therefore influenced by bias. The extent to which it is possible to measure such complex concepts is also debatable. Research of a qualitative nature would help to strengthen and develop a richer picture of how people acquire self-efficacy and the interacting factors at play within their individual experiences.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to explore the role that self-efficacy beliefs play in exam stress, together with considering other environmental factors surrounding

coping and development of these beliefs. One theory that might influence a person to develop self-efficacy beliefs is the theory of locus of control. Julian Rotter (1954) developed the theory of locus of control to help explain how humans appraise what happens to them in their lives. This is inherently linked to experiences in the environment. Locus means 'place' and the locus of control is the 'place' humans credit responsibility to for the skills they gain and what happens to them.

Rotter (1954) argues that humans either have an 'internal' or 'external' locus of control. A person with an external locus of control, may give credit to fate, luck or other people in the acquisition of their knowledge or skills. Research shows that a child may attribute different amounts of power or control to external agents such as teachers, parents and peers (Crandall, Crandall., & Katkovsky, 1965). This is contrast to a person with an internal locus of control, who feels they are in control and that success or failure are consequences of their own behaviour and attributes. This supports earlier research by Bandura (1977) who suggested that people often try to preserve their self-esteem in the face of fearing failure, resorting to believing in 'luck' as a self-defence or attributing 'failure' to external sources such as the teacher not liking them.

Rotter (1966) developed the Internal-External Scale (I.E Scale) to determine how important life events affect people in different ways. Rotter argued that the autonomous individual seeks to master their environment and that people who seek achievement have a belief in their own ability to create that success, which

corresponds to theory around self-efficacy and social learning theory. Studies report a correlation between external locus of control and manifest anxiety scores (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Burhans & Dweck, 1995; Nowicki-Stricklandm, 1973), where it is suggested a person might have a psychological vulnerability to processing events as not within their control if they had experienced anxiety early in life and experienced uncontrollable events (Barlow., & Chorpita, 1998).

More recently, the relationship between locus of control and academic achievement has been documented, where it has been found that students who had a high external locus of control did not achieve as well; however having a high internal locus of control was not beneficial either (Anderson, Hattie & Hamilton, 2005). In the context of taking exams it suggests that students with a high external locus of control, who do not think they can affect a positive outcome by using their own internal resources, are more likely to show traits of anxiety and have lower levels of academic self-efficacy and potentially emotional self-efficacy.

2.4.2: Developing and building Resilient Children and Young People

More broadly, self-efficacy and coping style can be related to areas of research on resilience (Cyrułnik, 2009). Having a problem solving coping style and a strong internal locus of control for managing stressful situations, can be seen as 'protective factors' against experiencing 'stress'; leading to being more 'resilient'. In considering how to conceptualise exam stress and in examining studies that explore student perceptions of taking exam, it is also important to consider how students cope and show resilience during the exam period so that effective school practices can be set up to support students in developing life

skills that help them to become resilient. There has been research that looks at 'resilient' children in relation to learning within schools, (Lucas, Greany & Wicks, 2002; Goodbourn, Higgins, Siegle, Wall & Wright, 2006), however little research that looks at how students experience the exam process and how they have coped and shown resilience. This section reviews literature on resilience within school contexts in order to understand what resilience is and how this could be applied to students taking exams.

Broadly, Rutter (1981, 1984) and Doll and Lyon (1988), define resilience as the way a person responds to risk or negative life events (Rutter, 1987). Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) define academic resiliency as an ability for a person to succeed in school in spite of challenges and adversity. According to Cyrulnik (2009) 'resilient' children are those that 'bounce back' and overcome adversities. More recently, Newman and Dantzler (2015) state there is no single definition of resilience. This is perhaps because resilience as a concept within the literature is complex and incorporates a number of other concepts.

More specifically some research on resilience, identifies developmental personality factors that separate resilient children from those that succumb to risk factors (Benard, 1991; Benard, 2004; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1984, 1985, 1986; Werner, 1984; Werner & Smith, 1992). Benard (1996) listed personal strengths as:

- Social competence; such as being empathetic, being humorous and having good communication skills.

- Sense of autonomy/identity; such as having an internal locus of control, self-efficacy, mastery, self-awareness and detaching from negative situations.
- Sense of purpose/belief in a bright future; such as having a special interest, imagination, goals and directions, motivation, achievement, educational aspirations, optimism, sense of meaning.

Benad's suggestions seems to imply that a person is born with these traits and that they have an innate ability to communicate well, seek out opportunities and are naturally motivated. Henderson (2003, 2007, 2013) suggests that resilient individuals do not have to possess all of the traits suggested by Benad. Resilient people can often identify three or four attributes that have been significant in their transformation from at risk to resilient. Even still, both researchers appear to be placing more importance on within person qualities in how resilient a person is.

Recent researchers have placed more importance on the environment as an important function for protecting a person and helping them to develop or strengthen personal attributes such as those mentioned by Benad. The personal strengths that Benad suggested are not separate from an environmental context, and so it would seem short sighted to minimise the influence that environment has. More recent research on resilience has

recognised the importance of environmental protective factors in mitigating and sometimes even reversing the effects of risk.

Researchers have suggested these environmental factors enable children to transform adversity into resilience at school and later as successful adults (McMillan & Reed, 1994; O'Dougherty Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012; Walsh, 2012). So whilst a child might have certain within person traits/personalities that make them less vulnerable to risk factors, ultimately it is how a child interacts with their environment that creates a 'resilient child' and that this will peak and trough depending on life circumstances and the cumulative total of protective factors and support within the environment at any one time. Later research from Benad (2007) recognises environmental influences, where Benad identified three main categories of environmental protective factors as:

- Nurturing and caring relationships consisting of “compassion, understanding, respect, and interest ...grounded in listening...that establish safety and basic trust” (p. 20). These relationships might not just be parental, but can include teachers, school administrators and other adult figures who can serve as a role model or mentor.
- Adults communicating high expectations which “not only firm guidance, structure, and challenge but also, and most importantly, convey a belief in the youth’s innate resilience and look for strengths and assets as opposed to problems and deficits” (p. 20).

- Meaningful “participation and contribution...valued responsibilities...making decisions...giving voice and being heard... contributing one’s talents to the community” (p. 20).

More recently, Benad (2014) extended this to refer to resilience as the capacity of all individuals not just children, to work towards resilient outcomes. According to Benad, practice in optimism builds motivation, where positive expectations that are internalised by young people may motivate them and teach them to overcome risks. Benad posits that the developmental of resilience is the same process as healthy human development and current resiliency research should address the same developmental factors such as basic human needs for love, meaningful involvement and connectedness. Benad considers this as a dynamic process where personality and positive environmental process interact in a reciprocal transformational relationship.

There have been some studies that aim to measure how resilient a child or young person is across the age range. Following statistics from UNICEF (2007), concerning the poor outcomes for mental health and well-being of children and young people in the UK, the Institute of Education conducted a study that looked at changes in well-being of children and young people within the framework of risk and resilience (Gutman, Brown, Akerman & Obolenskaya, 2010). Secondary data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) was analysed for trajectories and drivers of change; both positive and negative and across two time periods: mid-childhood (7.5 years to

10.5 years) and early adolescence (10.5 years to 13.8 years). The analysis considered children who had a large number of risks to wellbeing in their lives, in order to identify possible protective factors.

Four dimensions of well-being were measured: emotional, behavioural and subjective social well-being. Measurements consisted of questionnaire measurements for each dimension and were considered at the different time points (7.5, 10.5 and 13.8). A series of multiple regressions looked at the correlation between well-being measures, risk and protective factors as established from the literature on resiliency and time point. Findings showed that overall a change in well-being across the different time points was significant across all the dimensions.

Children and young people with SEN were more likely than others to experience poor and declining well-being through mid-childhood and adolescence; particularly those children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The research also highlighted the importance of the positive parent-child relationship in terms of building emotional resilience. The study supports previous research on the role of important adult figures in being able to support children in developing resilience.

However there are some challenges to the study, firstly in its use of secondary data. The research report only makes reference to the primary data source

briefly, without explaining a rationale for which parts of the data to select and analyse. Secondly, the study only analyses data up to early adolescence and ignores later adolescence. It is therefore limited in what we understand about resilience and risk factors faced by adolescents who are transitioning into adulthood and facing pressures such as taking exams. Within the age range that it does consider, it does not choose time points that are commonly known to be transition points for children in terms of school life. For example, at 11.5 years children in the UK transition to Secondary school. This might have been a more relevant time to consider how risk factors such as these affect children.

Studies such as this consider measures of resilience using questionnaire based measures, yielding a score for resilience. The extent to which dimensions such as these can capture the complexity of human experience is arguable, especially when multiple protective and risk factors are interacting. These studies does not take into account qualitative experiences of children and young people and consider how they have made sense of the experiences in their lives and how this has impacted them.

2.4.3: Attachments and Adolescence

Early adolescence is a time of emotional upheaval (Steinberg & Sheffield Morris, 2001; Jackson, 2002) and the changes that puberty brings together with important life events such as taking exams, requires an adolescent to be resilient and to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy in being able to manage and cope with these changes. The school context features heavily in research on building resilience in children. Research demonstrates that teachers have

the power to change at risk behaviour into resilient behaviour in children by meeting basic needs of love, safety and belonging (Benard, 1991). Other researchers are in agreement and suggest that these 'special' teachers can provide caring relationships (Higgins, 1994), positive and high expectations (Delpit, 1996), and opportunities that reverse the effects of risk by letting students express their opinions and feelings, make choices, work with and help others and solve problems. This corroborates earlier research from Werner and Smith (1992), who noted that resilient children often have several mentors who help them to develop positively through showing understanding, compassion, interest and trust.

This focus on the adult-child relationship and the nurturing aspects of this relationship, links to research on attachment theory. Maccoby (1980), notes that an attachment can be seen as a special emotional tie to a specific other person. Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby (1969), who studied children from various backgrounds. Bowlby stated that a strong emotional and physical attachment to at least one primary caregiver is critical to personal development. Our first attachment provides us with a model or reference point for how we should approach all new relationships. Having a 'secure' attachment with a primary caregiver involves the caregiver being 'attuned' to the child, where a mutual bond is created which forms the basis for coping emotionally and interpersonally throughout life. The caregiver will be available to the child to help regulate and soothe them in times of distress. Through the process of 'containment' the child sees their primary caregiver as a 'secure base' from which they can securely explore the world.

According to Allen and Land (1999), attachments change as adolescence begins, where attachment bonds between parents and adolescents are "treated by many adolescents more like ties that restrain than like ties that anchor and secure, and a key task of adolescence is to develop autonomy so as no longer to need to rely (as much) on parents' support when making one's way through the world" (Allen & Land, 1999, p. 319). Allen and Land suggest that the parent-child relationship does not become less important during adolescence, but rather the adolescent becomes less dependent on parents and more interested in developing attachments with peers, with who they can establish a sense of autonomy. This corroborates earlier research by Weiss (1982), who suggested that adolescents who show autonomy seeking behaviour often have a positive relationship with their parents and feel comfortable using them as a secure base because they know their parents will be there for them.

Whilst there are critiques of Bowlby's work on attachment theory, in that it places all importance on the nurturing aspect of parenting rather than a child's nature (Field, 1996); research from Geddes (2005) who looks into emotional aspects of learning, suggests it is a helpful framework for thinking about how a child develops key coping strategies for managing situations, including stressful situations such as learning and assessments in school. Furthermore, Geddes (2005) suggests that the way attachments develop with a primary caregiver is predictive of how a child develops future relationships with peers and other adults such as teachers, suggesting that teachers can play a large role in acting as secondary attachment figures, helping to support the development of coping skills in children and young people. Suggestions for achieving this from Geddes

include interacting with a child in containing and nurturing ways and by keeping work task focused and success oriented in order to build self-esteem.

Research from Bomber (2007) corroborates this. Bomber explored the attachment experiences of children in foster care who experienced relational trauma in their birth homes. Bomber shows how schools can act as a secondary attachment figures by helping children regulate feelings and by developing 'safe spaces' in school for them. This work is supported by practical applications of attachment theory through initiatives such as setting up nurture groups in schools to act as safe spaces (The Nurture Group Network, 2001). Additionally Sunderland (2009) shows that through effective play, teachers can support children with developing new brain neural pathways in the neocortex, the part of the brain that helps in problem-solving and processing emotions. Sunderland suggests this can be achieved by teaching children how to regulate feelings of anxiety through play interactions in the classroom.

2.4.4: Theoretical Perspective: Systemic Theory

The present research was placed within a systemic perspective which considers how separate systems around the young person interact. It also considers the influence of context and relationship dynamics between individuals, groups and organisations. The systemic theoretical perspective used in this study drew on eco-systems theory, where I used concepts from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic model, in order to consider the systems and contexts surrounding the

student. The theory stresses the influence that these have on perceptions, behaviour and experiences. The theory suggests that an individual's experiences cannot be understood in isolation. The individual's behaviour is a function of and a product of their interactions within and between these systems.

Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic model outlines a number of systems influencing an individual. These are categorised within five levels, beginning at the microsystem and moving more systemically towards the macrosystem. Within each level there are interactions and between each level there are also interactions. Each level influences the other and interactions are bi-directional. For example, considering the school context - at the microsystem level the student is being influenced by their teacher and specific teaching practices. At the macrosystem level, the teacher is being influenced by educational ideologies and the wider education system in terms of how it impacts their practice. It is possible that teachers also influence the macrosystem in helping to inform policies that feed into the wider system. The five levels are:

- Individual: The child interactions/is present within their immediate environment.
- Microsystem: The child's immediate environment such as family, school, peer group, neighbourhood.

- Mesosystem: A system incorporating connections between immediate environments such as a child's home and school.
- Exosystem: External environmental settings which indirectly affect child development, such as parent's workplace.
- Macrosystem: The larger cultural/ideological context, which might be political and economical.

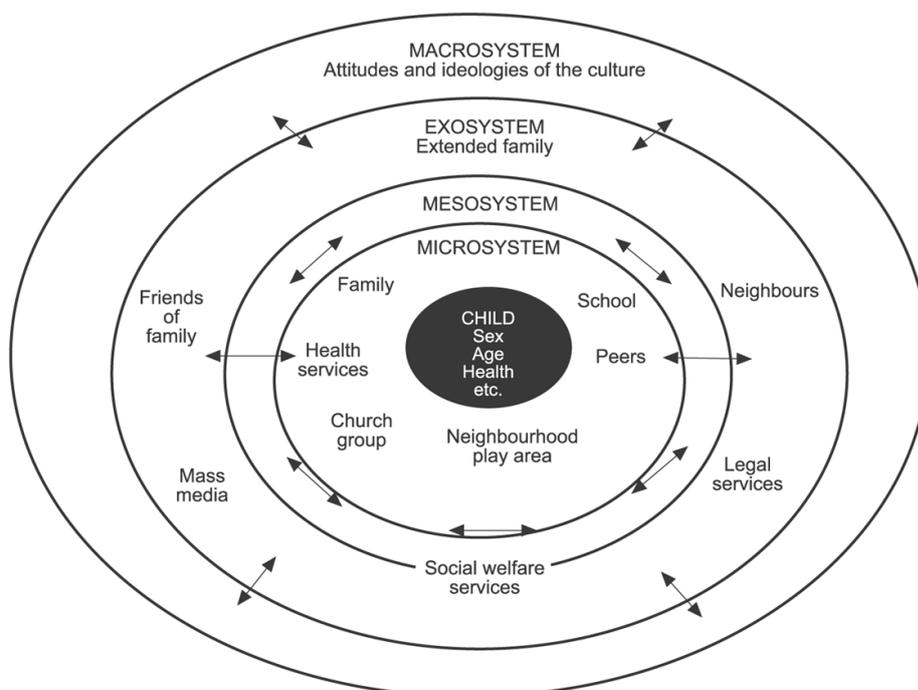


Figure 1: Visual representation of Bronfenbrenner's Eco-Systemic Model, Source: Dockrell & Messer, 1999, p.139

Concepts from Bronfenbrenner's Eco-systemic model (1979) were applied to the present study to consider how students' experiences of taking examinations were influenced by interacting systems within the school context. These included the students' peers groups, interactions with teachers and support

systems within school. The model was also used to consider school staff perceptions in terms of how they understood student experiences of taking exams and the influences of wider educational agendas and targets at the macrosystem level on staff and students.

Whilst Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic model was helpful in terms of considering a systemic perspective and considering how systems interact, I also drew on concepts from research on coping and resilience. This allowed me to encapsulate the students inner world in relation to the environment and the extent to which the environment shapes that inner world. For example, research on resilience suggests that the role of teachers is important in acting as a secondary attachment figure. Research on coping suggests that having an internal locus of control is important for managing stressful situations. These are details are not currently explicit in Bronfenbrenner's model.

2.4.5: Conclusions

This study seeks to explore how students experience taking exams in one Secondary School. Whilst the study acknowledges the influence of the home environment, it will predominantly explore student experience within the school context in order to understand the role of the school in being able to effectively support students. The framework highlights the wider ideological influences that might be at play in terms of schools being accountable to league tables and government standards and targets. It also places importance on language/discourse as a facilitator and recognises that it is through the vehicle of language that messages are communicated and potentially internalised by

the student. The framework is interactionist in that the student is shown to have within person factors such as 'coping strategies', and a 'locus of control' that are shaped by the external environment in which they interact. It suggests that how resilient a student is throughout this process will be dependent upon the systems that surround them, the types of support they receive and their individual experience of the exam process.

CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

3.1: Exploratory Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was exploratory as it aimed to “assess phenomena in a new light” and “find out what is happening, particularly in little-understood situations.” (Robson, 2002:59). The experiences of students taking key stage 4/5 public examinations were explored in order to better understand what works in terms of supporting them, specifically within the school context. This was triangulated with perceptions from school pastoral staff in order to determine how far they understand student experiences and what supportive processes are available within the school context.

3.2: Epistemological Considerations

3.2.1: Theoretical roots of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

I will be using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to inform and analyse student interviews. IPA is a qualitative framework which was developed and described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (1995, 1997, 1999, 2009). It is interested in participant’s subjective experiences of the world, rather than making claims about whether they are ‘true’ or ‘false’ (Willig, 2001). IPA recognises that a diverse range of interpretations can be applied to our understanding of the world. It is theoretically rooted in critical realism and social cognition, as described by Fade (2004). The basis in critical realism means that IPA accepts that there is a social reality which exists independently of people’s conceptions of it, but that people experience it differently. Social cognition theory argues that individuals can interpret the same experience in different

ways and assign different meaning to their experience through their varied interactions with the environment. Whilst these meanings are idiosyncratic to an extent, IPA acknowledges that they cannot be completely so, as meanings are related to an individual's social context and therefore a shared objective reality (Willig, 2001).

Smith (1996) suggests that an individual's account of phenomena can tell us something about their private thoughts and feelings. However Smith also acknowledges that we can never gain a 'pure' account of them or have direct access into their internal world, as what they say is reliant on interpretation from the researcher. In this way, IPA acknowledges that the researcher is using their own beliefs, cognitions, attitudes and experiences to interpret their data, where the research is a dynamic process with the researcher taking an active role (Willig, 2001). According to Smith (1996), interpretation of the data is affected by the researcher's pre-conceptions; however these are necessary in order to make sense of the participant's world.

By using IPA as the chosen theoretical framework it will be possible to make interpretations about how individual students make sense of their unique experiences, within a shared school context. In the literature exam stress has been described as a complex construct (Zeidner, 1998; Putwain, 2009). Each student will have a unique experience of preparing for and taking exams. I am interested in how students make sense of exam stress, what they understand about how they feel and how they have coped throughout the exam period. As a

researcher I will be able to come to an understanding of students' experiences in terms of how they experience a shared reality. From this, it will be possible to make interpretations about what aspects of their experiences are similar and different in order to illuminate processes within the school context that are supportive to them.

3.2.2: Philosophical basis of IPA

IPA has been influenced by three philosophical concepts, which will underpin my research; phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of human experience. For psychologists, the key value of this is that it provides a rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend 'lived experience' (Husserl, 1972). Idiography is concerned with the particular - the detail and depth of a person's experience. An idiographic case study approach forms the basis for using IPA and is suitable for a study with up to 10 participants. It is therefore an appropriate approach to take for the student interviews in this study. This will allow exploration of in-depth descriptions that can be written up as overarching concepts across the student group (Smith et al., 2009).

'Hermeneutics' is the theory of interpretation, where in the context of IPA the researcher is able to offer 'added value' (Smith et al., p.23) in analysing and interpreting participants' experiences beyond the 'explicit' claims of the participants. The 'double hermeneutic' (Smith et al., 2009:35), is the process by which the researcher becomes aware they are making interpretations about how the participant is making sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009:35).

An important part of ensuring that interpretations are meaningful and as co-constructed as they can be is for the researcher to remain reflexive and consider what they bring to the interpretation in terms of their values and their past experiences. A researcher's beliefs should not be seen as biases to be eliminated, but rather as being necessary for making sense of participants' experiences (Fade, 2004). Through the double hermeneutic, it will be possible for me as the researcher to reflect on the impact that participant's experiences have on me, allowing me to describe how I experienced students through the interview process. This reflexive nature of IPA will bring another lens to understanding student experiences.

3.2.3: Limitations of IPA

One limitation of IPA that has been debated is that data analysis can be too descriptive rather than interpretative (Willig, 2001), with researchers focusing on frequency of a theme and presenting too many themes with insufficient data extracts to support them. In response to this, Fade (2004) suggests that IPA can be employed in two ways. The first way is to compare themes and experiences between a small number of cases and the second way is to generate theoretical explanations when exploring patterns and relationships within larger samples. Fade argues that this theory generation becomes more synthesised resulting in a better explanatory analysis that moves beyond the descriptive.

Other criticisms of the IPA approach are that it relies heavily on language as a tool for communicating experiences, beliefs and perceptions. Willig (2001)

suggests that language skills will influence the level of meaning the researcher is able to extract from the data. The approach should therefore be used with caution with participants that have language and communication difficulties. However this does not apply to this study.

There are also some criticisms around the idiographic nature of the approach (Smith et al., 2009). As the approach aims to understand individual's perceptions it is difficult to see how these can be generalised to a larger population, especially given that IPA uses a relatively small sample size to begin with. However, Smith et al. (2009) argue that experiences of individuals can tell us something about general human experience and this would support a critical realist view of an objective reality.

3.3: Research Design

3.3.1: Rationale for qualitative design

This research uses a qualitative design, involving interviewing students and school pastoral staff. A key feature of qualitative methods is that they seek to understand experience in terms of meaning: 'qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them'. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Qualitative methods are suitable for this study and fit an IPA approach as it is the meaning that students attribute to exams

that this study seeks to explore in how students make sense of a significant point in their lives.

3.3.2: Structure: Two-phase Sequential Design

This study used a two-phase sequential design (Creswell and Clark, 2011). At phase one, perceptions of students were explored and were analysed using an IPA approach. At phase two, general ideas extracted from the IPA analysis were used to inform the interview schedule for school staff interviews (Appendix B3-B4). Using a two phase-sequential design meant that areas of importance from student interviews or misconceptions in terms of difference of experience could be explored.

3.3.3: School Selection

The school that I selected to recruit student and staff participants from was a comprehensive school and was mixed in terms of gender, socio-economic status and ethnic background. In 2014, over 40% of all pupils attained five GCSEs grade A* to C including English and mathematics. Last academic year I worked in the school as a TEP, where I observed an 'exam stress' intervention group that another EP had designed and helped to run. As the school seemed to already be taking proactive measures to respond to student concerns about exam stress I felt that this school would be suitable to carry out my research.

3.3.4: Characteristics of the 'Exam Stress' Intervention group

The school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) expressed concerns to the school EP about a group of Year 10s who were experiencing

signs of exam stress. Students reported feeling anxiety-like symptoms such as having panic attacks before an exam or in revision lessons. It was decided at an EP consultation to run an intervention group for these students and for another group of Year 11 students. Students were selected by school staff who approached students they thought might benefit from the intervention. The school EP developed a Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) inspired, exam stress intervention for groups of students. The intervention focused on building students' metacognition around how stress is manifested in their thoughts, behaviours and physiological reactions using a CBT framework. The intervention also focused on helping students to develop coping strategies such as challenging negative ways of thinking and in developing proactive studying habits such as revising in advance.

3.3.5: Participants

The sampling technique used to recruit participants for both phases of the study was purposive sampling. Purposive samples are used "to select participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question." (Creswell, 2003:185). In this case, student participants that had recently taken an exam were selected on the basis that they were still engaged with exam courses and would be able to reflect on their experiences whilst it was still 'real' for them. School staff participants working in a pastoral capacity with students were selected for this study as it was felt that they would have better insight into the supportive processes in school that are available to students given the context of their roles.

3.3.6: Phase One: Criteria for Student Selection

Homogeneity of the sample in terms of being able to share similar experiences was important in order to remain true to an IPA approach (Smith et al., 2009). Students selected for the example had recently taken exams such as GCSEs and A-Levels within the same school context. To assist me with selecting student participants I developed a clear inclusion/exclusion criteria which were applied during purposive sampling (Table 1).

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must attend the school selected for the study. • Are in Years 10/11 (15-16 years old; Key Stage 4) OR 12/13 (16-18 years old; Sixth Form). • Have taken public examinations such as GCSEs, AS/A-Levels, or other qualification such as BTec in the last year. • Are able to participate in an in-depth interview that may last up to one hour. • Are willing to attend. • Has attended an exam stress intervention group OR is known by teachers to find exams 'stressful' OR has shown good coping ability throughout taking exams. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If students are currently receiving psychiatric treatment or medications (Tier 3 Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS) intervention). • No students with limited development of language will be able to participate, as this research requires a minimum level of language and communication skills. • Students not within selected year groups.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Student Participants

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were based on my experiences of working as a TEP in schools across the Borough, including this particular school. I felt it important to select some students that had shown particularly good coping

ability whilst taking exams, in order to understand why they did not feel as stressed as others during exam time. By only focusing on experiences of students who felt excessively stressed by taking exams, I might have missed rich information in relation to what works to support students or key characteristics about those students who coped better.

3.3.7: Phase Two: Criteria for School staff Selection

Two school staff were selected for interview on the basis of their role within the school. These were the school SENCo and an Assistant Head of Year (AHY). Recruitment for school staff was straightforward in that I already knew both staff members from my work as a TEP. Both agreed to be interviewed for the study.

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to select School staff participants for the study:

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has supported students in Years 10, 11, 12 or 13 in a pastoral capacity to support emotional health and well-being; either directly through working with them OR indirectly through strategic roles within the school for more than one year. • Are able to commit to an interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School staff will not be included if they have been employed by the school for less than a school term. • Purely mainstream classroom teachers and other school staff such as administrators have been discounted from the study.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Staff Participants

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were written based on speaking with the school SENCo about the structure of the school pastoral system in working as a TEP. I decided to exclude mainstream teachers from the criteria on the basis that compared to pastoral staff they might not be able to provide information on the structure of support available to students, as well as the more direct work with students through interventions such as the 'exam stress' intervention. I chose to include roles that were more strategic as well as direct in terms of working with students, so that I could tap into more systemic aspects of the pastoral system as well as the detail in terms of relationships to students.

3.4: Sampling

3.4.1: Phase One: Sample Size

A sample size of nine student participants was selected in line with the inclusion/exclusion criteria and to meet IPA requirements with respect to homogeneity of participants. It is recommended that between four and ten interviews are appropriate when using IPA for professional doctorates (Smith et al., 2009). This is because IPA seeks to gain a rich picture of human experience. In doing so, detailed data collection techniques are employed and the researcher handles vast amounts of complex information.

3.4.2: Characteristics of the Sample

The table below (Table 2) illustrates key characteristics of the student participant sample.

Participant Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Year Group	Stream (1,2,3)	Additional Information
James	Male	11	1	High achiever; has found exams stressful; has reported panic attacks.
Sam	Male	12	2	Average achiever. High parental expectations at home, creates some pressure.
Leo	Male	12	2 & 3	Was put forward for intervention by teachers who were concerned about him being quiet and reserved about his feelings.
Annabelle	Female	13	1 & 3	According to parents finds exams very stressful. Previously not got grades she wanted in Year 12, which exacerbated stress.
Jade	Female	12	1	Significant life events outside school. Death in family two years ago. Panic attacks near exam time.
Holly	Female	12	2	Average achiever. Talented in drama. Appeared to have coped well throughout the exam process.
Ellie	Female	12	2	Presents as more 'introvert'. However, has developed confidence and can be self-assured in expressing her opinions and thoughts.
Harrison	Male	12	2	Has coped well throughout the exam process.
Mark	Male	12	2	Described as 'level-headed' by staff. Has consistently achieved good grades. Appears to have coped very well with the exam process. Has attended all revision classes.

Table 3: Student Characteristics and teacher information pre-interview

All student participants were given pseudonyms. They were selected through three streams; through the exam stress intervention group (Stream One); through an AS-Level and A-Level Psychology class (Stream 2) and through the AHY's knowledge of students she has worked with previously (Stream 3). Some students fell into two streams where they were part of the Psychology class or exam intervention and also knew the AHY well through mentoring sessions. Additional information of students in terms of why they were selected to be interviewed was given verbally to me by the AHY. This provided me with contextual information to support the interview process. Where sensitive details were provided i.e. death in the family, it enabled me to avoid speaking directly about family.

3.5: Phase Two

3.5.1: Sample Size

Two school staff participants were selected to be interviewed for this study.

3.5.2: Characteristics of the Sample

The table below illustrates key characteristics of the School staff sample, including information about their role within the school.

Staff Member	Role/responsibilities within school
Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has worked at the school for 10+ years. • Has a strategic role in terms of overseeing SEND in school; including emotional health and well-being, inclusion, developing effective programmes of support targeted for specific student needs. • Also a mainstream classroom teacher on a part time basis.
Assistant Head of Year (AHY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has worked at the school for 5+ years. • Was a Learning Mentor and Assistant Head of Year 11 in the last academic year. Working in a pastoral capacity by delivering and facilitating the setting up of small group interventions where they helped to identify students for the 'exam stress' intervention group. • When interviewed, they were training as a Psychology Teacher and was Assistant Head of Year for Year 7.

Table 4: School staff Characteristics, including job role description

School staff were selected to reflect different roles and responsibilities within the school pastoral system. For example, the SENCo had a strategic oversight of students who are in need of additional support. She was responsible for strategic development of emotional health and well-being practices within the school. The AHY had oversight of students on a year group level.

3.6: Data collection

Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews are more loosely structured, providing opportunities for the researcher to build rapport with participants by asking follow up questions. Its flexibility gives the participants opportunities to tell their experiences without using a rigid questioning style. The

order of the interview questions can be swapped around according to the way the interview unfolds (Barriball, 1994; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Further advantages of using a semi-structured interviews are that the approach takes the view that the participant is the expert on their experience, meaning the researcher is potentially led into asking questions about areas they had not considered. A criticism with this is that the researcher has less control over the content, meaning that they might not capture the most meaningful data. Interviews can also be time consuming to conduct (Smith, 1995). Despite this, a semi-structured interview was deemed the best approach for this study as I needed a method that would provide detailed accounts of participant's experiences with a flexible structure. This allowed me to ask questions around specific areas of interest in line with my research questions, yet still remain open to new content based.

Due to the idiosyncratic nature of IPA in capturing lived experiences, a semi-structured interview approach was suitable as it allowed me to be flexible in terms of questioning varying aspects of students' experiences depending on what seemed pertinent to them. Equally, School staff worked in different capacities within the school pastoral system, meaning that the nature and scope of their worked was different. Using a semi-structured interview approach allowed me to adapt my questions to focus on areas that were of more relevance to that particular staff member.

3.6.1: Developing the semi-structured interview schedule

According to Kvale and Brinkman (2009), it is essential that the design of the interview schedule enables participants to speak freely. The interview process should be reflexive, so that it enables participants to give authentic responses. Questions were designed around the research aims and questions. For each phase of the study an interview schedule was designed which included questions divided into separate sections and prompts for each question. To elicit more detailed responses in line with the questions care was taken to ensure that the prompts were not leading (Robson, 2002).

At phase one, the schedule included two sections. Section one asked students to define 'stress' and progressed to talking about their experiences of taking exams and whether they had felt 'stressed'. Section two asked Students about their coping styles and supportive mechanisms. At phase two, the school staff schedule also consisted of two sections. Section one asked school staff about their understanding of exam stress, the possible causes for it and their experiences of working with students. Section two asked them about what supportive processes and systems they felt were working or not working within the school context.

3.6.2: Piloting of the Interview Schedule

Piloting is important as it highlights problems with the designs and methods used in a study (Smith, 2005). I piloted the first draft of the interview schedule at both phases of the study (Appendix B1 and B3). This was so that I could review whether additional questions needed to be added and whether questions were

clear, transparent and not leading. It allowed me to make amendments of question phrasing and to check whether terminology I used was understood by participants. Piloting of both interview schedules was carried out in a London School where I used to work as a Secondary School Teacher in my previous role before training as an EP. At phase one the interview schedule was piloted with four Year 11 students where four students in pairs. At phase two the schedule for school staff was piloted with two teachers from the school. Both teachers worked with students In Years 10-13 helping them to prepare for taking exams. Notes were taken on the interview schedule with a small number of questions re-worded, taken out or new questions added.

Throughout piloting, participants made suggestions to amend the way that questions were phrased. This was especially the case at phase one, where some questions needed to be better differentiated across the age groups. For example, Year 13 students understood some of the terminology used better than the Year 10 students. In the case of school staff, there were suggestions for specific areas for questioning which helped to inform my development of the schedule. I discussed my schedule in supervision, where further amendments were made to the phrasing of my questions. This resulted in producing final interview schedules (Appendix B2 and B4).

3.6.3: Procedures followed in Data Collection

I began my recruitment for phase one at the end of the academic year of 2014-2015. I did this having obtained consent from the Head Teacher. On a visit to the school I asked the AHY if they would help me with student recruitment. The

AHY had been involved in recruiting students for the original 'exam stress' intervention group the previous year, so I felt they were well placed to advise on which students would be suitable for selection.

3.6.4: Phase One

The AHY approached students and handed out parental and student consent forms to them. She spoke to students from the Sixth Form who had accessed the exam stress intervention group, students from her own AS-Level and A-Level Psychology class and she also spoke to teachers about other students who might be suitable and then approached them. Three students from stream one (those who had accessed the exam stress intervention) consented to take part in the study; a further three students from stream two (Psychology class) and two students from Stream three (the wider population of exam students).

I contacted participants through the AHY to arrange interview times. I block booked a quiet room in the Sixth Form centre where I was able to carry out interviews back to back. Prior to the interview the AHY spoke to students about confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study. I also reiterated this at the start of each interview where I talked through the information sheet and consent sheet (Appendix C1). I also checked that they were happy to be audio recorded and explained that this would be destroyed following completion of the research. After each interview participants were asked if they would like to add anything and I sought permission from them to be able to contact them if the transcription was unclear. I also told the AHY that I could feedback preliminary results to students on a group level should they wish (Wengraf, 2001).

Time was taken to make brief notes after each interview. These notes centred on my own perceptions about how well the student had coped whilst preparing for and taking exams and how stressed they appeared to be. My approach during the interviews was to jointly construct an understanding of participant's experiences. Therefore, care was taken throughout each interview to check my hypotheses around their coping ability and stress levels. I did this by repeating back information to students that they had shared in order to clarify I had understood them correctly and whether they had anything else to add.

3.6.5: Phase Two

I began the School staff recruitment phase following student recruitment in October 2015. As the focus of the study was on student perceptions the staff sample size was kept to a minimum so as to still represent the school staff voice, without detracting from the main purpose of the study. I selected staff that reflected different parts of the school pastoral system in order to get a rich picture of perceptions throughout the system.

Whilst in my last stages of student recruitment I asked the AHY and the SENCo if they would be happy to be interviewed as part of this phase, to which they accepted. I explained the aims of my study and handed out information sheets and consent forms (Appendix C2). I explained that I would be focusing on their perceptions of student experiences of taking exams. The same procedures were followed as in phase one in terms of talking through ethical considerations. Of particular importance at phase two was for me to reinforce that participants answers would be kept confidential and sensitively reported. I gave school staff

reassurance that if what they said might be conceived to reflect badly on the school there would be no negative consequences for them and that I would protect their identities.

3.7: Data analysis

All interviews from both phases were audio-recorded. I chose to fully transcribe five of the student interviews as I felt this would enable me to develop a rich picture of student experience. I partly transcribed the remaining four student interviews and staff interviews. Student interviews were analysed using IPA to “capture the quality and texture of participants’ experiences” (Willig, 2001:74) of taking exams. The fully transcribed interviews were analysed first to generate overarching concepts and superordinate themes (this is explained further below). This analysis was used to inform the analysis of the remaining student data. Staff interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis based approach (Bazeley, 2009). The procedures used for data analysis for both phases are further elaborated on below.

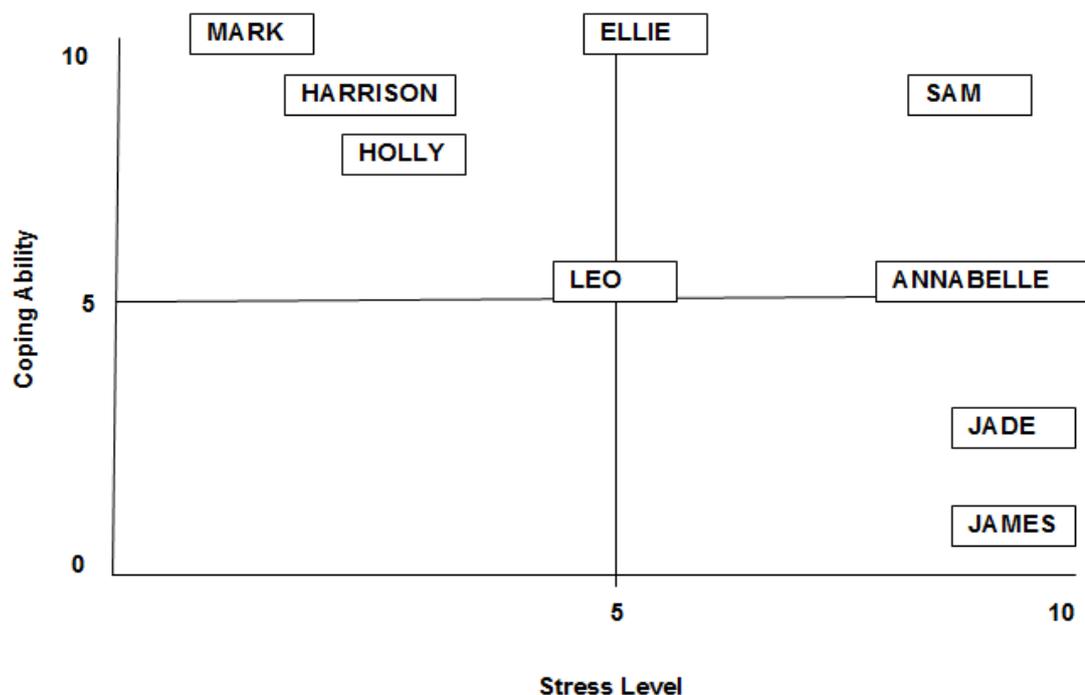
3.7.1: Phase One: Selecting student interviews

In looking at my notes from the interviews and in listening to the audio-recordings, it was apparent that some interviews stood out more than others in terms of the richness and detail they provided in relation to coping ability and stress levels. It was also evident that some students fell on more extreme ends of coping ability and stress level and other students fell somewhere in the middle range of what might be expected from a typical population of students

taking exams. I decided to focus my initial analysis on five students in order to develop a detailed picture of student experience that reflected different levels of stress and coping ability before continuing to analyse the remaining data.

In order to select the five students, a matrix (Graph 1) was developed based on my initial notes and interpretation of students' coping ability and stress levels after interview.

Graph 1: A matrix to show my perceptions of student coping ability and stress levels



I gave each participant a category based on their coping ability and stress levels (low, medium, and high) as they had described to me at interview. I also took into account information the AHY had provided to me before the interview,

however I made my decision ultimately on student perceptions. For both coping ability and stress level a score of 0 = Low, 5 = Medium and 10 = High was assigned. I decided to select students that fell on the peripheral edges of the matrix for my IPA analysis as I felt this would provide me with information on a range of different combinations of stress levels and coping abilities. I selected five students using this method. Students selected were: James, Annabelle, Ellie, Mark and Sam.

3.7.2: The Process of Analysing the Data

IPA is not prescriptive in that it provides a set of guidelines which researchers can adapt. I made use of Smith et al's., method (2009) to analyse my data (Figure 2). This was done slightly differently within the student sample and consisted of two stages.

Stage One

At stage one I applied the method below to the fully transcribed five student interviews in order to generate overarching concepts and superordinate themes. I adhered to guidelines as set out in Smith, Larkin and Flowers (2009).

Transcript is read and re-read
Initial notings are made on the transcript
Emergent themes are created from initial notings
Emergent themes are clustered into subordinate themes
The same process is repeated for all individual transcripts
Subordinate themes for all individual transcripts are clustered into superordinate themes
Super-ordinate themes are clustered into overarching concepts for the sample

Table 5: Steps for IPA analysis as set out by Smith et al., 2009

The steps that were followed in analysing transcripts are referred to below using 'James' as an example. The full IPA process showing the process of moving from emergent themes to overarching concepts and superordinate themes is evidenced in Appendices D1-D6.

Step 1: Reading and re-reading

- The audio recording of the interview was transcribed and checked for accuracy.
- Transcriptions were structured within a table with line numbers on the left hand side and margins (columns) to the right and left. Page numbers were inserted.

- Transcriptions were read and re-read whilst listening to the audio transcription.

Step 2: Initial noting

- Following third and fourth readings of the transcript, initial notings in the form of exploratory comments were made in the right hand margin as shown in Figure 2 below. Exploratory comments were made on a number of levels. Descriptive comments (black) were focused on the content of what the participant said and were taken at face value. Linguistic comments (purple) were focused on exploring the language that participants used and frequently made reference to repetitive patterns of language use. Conceptual comments (green) were interpretive and abstract where questions were posed in relation to participant's experiences. Conceptual comments were open comments that focused on "opening up a range of provisional meanings." (p.89).

Step 3: Developing emergent themes

- Emergent themes were recorded in the left hand margin. These were concise statements that highlighted the essence of the initial notings. The process reduced the volume of detail whilst maintaining the complexity of the data. According to Smith et al, more of the

researcher is included at this stage as they are closely involved with the lived experiences of the participant.

Emergent themes	Transcript (James)	Exploratory coding
Intrusive negative thoughts	What does stress mean to you? <i>It's basically making you feel uncomfortable. It's things which you should be comfortable it, like learning for example; and stress is when it becomes uncomfortable. Like you don't feel like you can achieve your potential because something's getting in the way.</i>	Stress is 'uncomfortable'. Uses words/phrases 'should be' and 'achieve potential' Could these be factors causing stress?
Physiological stress response – The Stress Cycle	How would you know you were stressed? <i>Well personally, either I don't want to do it or I feel sick. I have been sick in the past when I have...when I...yeah. When I don't...because I don't like new things, or... So whenever I don't want to do something I've been sick before, so...</i>	Words 'feel' and 'sick', in relation to the body. Repetition of sick creates sense of vulgarity. To get rid of exams. They seem afraid of being sick. Appears to be avoiding work. Could this be a 'flight' response/avoidant pattern of thinking?
Pressure on self. Grades are linked to your identity and sense of worth.	So you feel it in your body... <i>Yeah. It's physical, yeah.</i> Do you have any particular thoughts...? <i>Well mainly just the fact that...is it going to be too hard? Will I fail? What if I don't achieve the grades I need, or I want or what I'm predicted or...? Will I let anybody down including myself?</i> So it's about expectations... <i>Yeah. Well I'm predicted. As in all subjects at least, so for me there's a lot of pressure on myself. But also to achieve the high grades.</i> You've just finished taking your exams and you said they were OK. Tell me about your experiences... <i>Yeah. Well the up to the exams was actually all right because we did a lot of revision and...when I finished my exams in certain subjects it was just dedicated to other subjects. So I felt more comfortable with the exams towards the end because I had a lot more time to revise. But towards the beginning it was like revision for all subjects so it was a bit hard to narrow it down to the subject at the beginning.</i> (Inaudible).	Repetitive questioning of self. Repetition of pronouns, such as 'I'. Appears to be showing self doubt here. Is this related to expectations from self/others? There is a sense of uncertainty/it is impossible to answer these future-oriented questions. Predicted grades mentioned. Repetition of word 'achieve'. Bring in phrase 'pressure on me'. These are used as benchmarks/ways to define identity. Do they add to uncertainty? Has school causes this pressure by applying these notional standards?
The Stress Cycle – after the exams there is a sense of relief? This cycle makes him feel out of control?	<i>Yeah, exactly. But other than that they've been all right to be honest.</i> How did you feel the night before...? <i>September you're not really worried because you're still learning stuff and it's distant. So you're not really worried. But when you get towards, like especially the night before, thoughts are running in your mind, like what is it going to be, have I revised what I should have been revising and stuff like that. So...</i> Did you feel worried about coursework and assessments...? <i>No, coursework I was all right actually because you can control it. You know what your...you know what the question is, you've got a length of time to</i>	Coping strategies such as creating revision timelines. This makes him feel more 'comfortable'. Feeling prepared creates more certainty. More control. This comment of exams as being 'alright' does not appear to be congruent with feelings of being 'sick' earlier. This is now after his exams and perhaps he has gained more perspective and has had time to reflect and appraise them different? Repetition of word control. Being in control appears to be important for him.

Figure 2: Example of analysed transcript for student participant (James)

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes

- The next step involved getting a better sense of the structure of the data by listing the emergent themes in chronological order as they appeared in the data. As this was a study that was designed to reflect individual experience of students I decided that the frequency of each emergent

theme was not a reflection of its importance, however at times it did give a theme more weight. Although I did not count the frequency of each theme it was clear that students had more to say about themes that were profound or meaningful to them. This is reflected in larger extracts and a higher frequency of quotations for different themes depending on the student, however there was not a need to meticulously count them.

- I created a table to help with this process (Appendix D3) where each emergent theme was recorded together with evidence from the transcript. This allowed me to chart/map how each theme fitted together. It also allowed me to check for internal consistency of the theme, by presenting each theme with sufficient/meaningful extracts/quotations from the transcript. The meaning of each quote was checked for consistency by going back to the transcript and initial notings. Changes were made to the allocation of emergent themes where necessary.
- Emergent themes were clustered into subordinate themes. I did this by printing and cutting out the list of emergent themes and its associated extracts/quotations, and arranging them into clusters of related themes.
- I used a number of processes to support the development of subordinate themes. These included abstraction; which is a form of identifying patterns between emergent themes and developing a sense of a superordinate theme which was more conceptual, and subsumption, which is an analytic process whereby a subordinate theme acquires a superordinate status as it brings themes together. Throughout this

process a small number of emergent themes that were incoherent with the emerging subordinate themes were discarded (Smith et al., 2009).

- A master table of subordinate themes and their corresponding emergent themes was created (Appendix D4).

Step 5: Moving to the next participant

- The above process was completed on the transcripts for the remaining four selected student participants. Care was taken to ensure that as far as possible each transcript was analysed as an individual account. This was necessary to support the idiographic nature of IPA, so that new themes could be identified.

Step 6: Looking for patterns across participants

- In order to examine and to look for patterns across the data, the master tables were laid out for each participant. In order to compare themes I looked across the data and asked myself a series of questions suggested by Smith et al., 2010). These included: 'What connections are there across cases?'; 'Which themes are the most potent?' and 'How does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case?' (p.101). At times these questions meant that some of the themes were relabelled and reconfigured.

- This task moved to a more theoretical level as I began to realise that some subordinate themes that were particular to an individual could also be applied to other participants and these could represent higher superordinate themes (Appendix D5).
- Following this process I had identified overarching concepts that linked to superordinate themes and created a master table of overarching concepts and superordinate themes for the group of participants (Appendix D6).

Stage Two

Stage two involved IPA analysis of the remaining four student audio recordings, based on using the overarching concepts and superordinate themes generated at stage one and consisted of ...steps. I followed the advice of McLellan et al. (2003), to undertake a partial transcription where this is sufficient: "Selected sentences, passages, paragraphs, or stories relevant to the research question or theory may be all that are needed." Strauss and Corbin (1990:31) indicated that text selected for transcription should take into account the analytical contribution it will provide to the overall study." (66-67). I created the data analysis table below (Appendix E1) to help me with this process:

Overarching concept	Superordinate themes	Notes/Quotes/Phrases	Exploratory comments	Compare/Contrast
The Stress Cycle	Behavioural response	You can't sleep as you are thinking about exams. You would be thinking I don't want to fail.	Alterations to daily routines. Talking about self in third person. Are they trying to distance themselves from experience? Distance/timescale.	This is similar to Mark's experience of feeling very little stress at the start of the year as the exams are far away. Sam also spoke about behavioural changes such as sleep being affected. James appeared to be able to sleep well.
	Physiological response	Feeling better the further away that exams are.		
	Catastrophic thinking	When just taking one exam in Year 10 it felt a lot less stressful as there was more time to fit it in.		
Grades, Expectations & Identity	Future Aspirations	Getting under a C is failure. As anything under that companies don't really like.	Perceptions of failure. Making external attributions/speaking about other's expectations here. Competition with peers. He seems to see this as healthy. Very clear goals for self. Does this help him cope? Grade and self. Boldly uses 'I' – proudly. Very clear identity of being separate. Teacher expectations. Combines these expectations with perceptions of failure. Very astute perception of teacher stress. Appears older than age.	This is similar to the reasons why Ellie felt so stressed. Like James he comments on rivalry. Like Annabelle he has clear goals. Is this protective? He is the most aware of teacher stress compared to other peers.
	Self-esteem & self-worth	There's always that rivalry with your friends as to how you did. In a fun/friendly way. "I want to get straight A's in my A-levels. As that's what people look at...I want to get a scholarship."		
	School driven assessment culture	"I'm separate" from the grade. "Pressure that teachers and parents put on you because they want you to do well and then you feel you have to because otherwise you'd fail them." "They've worked hard for you to get you where you are so...so there's kind of pressure on you if you fail them...as they've tried to get you where you are...so you then feel pressure because of that." "...yeah they do [get stressed] a lot of them do...they just seem different they're not themselves...they're not as fun as they used to be...tense...because they no they need to do well...because they can be under scrutiny...if you are expected to do well then they want you to do well otherwise it looks bad on them."		

Figure 3: Example of analysed extracts from partially transcribed student data (Harrison)

The table included the overarching concepts and superordinate themes in the two left hand columns, followed by space for extracts/quotations from the audio recordings and then a third column for exploratory coding.

Step one: Extracting evidence from the audio recordings

- The audio recordings were played several times in order to extract relevant extracts/quotations in line with the overarching concepts and superordinate themes.

Step two: Exploratory commenting

- As can be seen in figure 3 exploratory commenting took the same form as the first IPA analysis in that descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments were made as the data was analysed.
- In order to stay true to the idiographic nature of IPA, I ensured that unique aspects of individual experiences of the students selected at stage two were captured within the data analysis table.
- I ensured that exceptions within the overarching concepts were clearly recorded and illuminated these by transcribing key extracts to reflect the unique experiences of the four stage two student participants.

Step three: Comparison across the whole group

- The final stage of the IPA analysis involved laying out the data analysis tables alongside the overarching concept and superordinate theme master tables from stage one in order to compare and contrast student experiences. I did this by re-reading the extracts and quotations selected for each student and making note of similarities in experience and unique differences for each student in the 'Comparison to stage one' box.

3.7.3: Phase Two: School staff participants

I employed a thematic analysis based approach to analysing staff data. I used an adapted version of the data analysis table from phase one shown (Figure 4, Appendix E2) to play the staff audio recordings several times and made notes

under the overarching concepts and superordinate themes in order to triangulate staff perceptions with student experiences.

Overarching concept	Superordinate theme	Notes/Quotes/Phrases	General comments	Compare/Contrast to student experiences
The Stress Cycle	Catastrophic thinking Physiological Response Behavioural Response Self-awareness	<p>"I think you see it in different forms...some get tearful...some don't understand that it is stress they're feeling...in others it's behaviour issues and other's just go very very quiet and it's really hard for them to grasp that what they are feeling is stress and for us to help them identify it a lot of the time. But you do definitely see it in a lot of different forms...as they get older I think they notice it and understand it a lot more but you do definitely see different types of stress definitely linked to school that they cannot necessarily say 'I'm stressed'...it's just something will go wrong and they may not understand why that's going wrong...we see that quite a lot."</p> <p>"...for years 10, 11...I think there's an element of disorganisation...it's almost like they say to you I just can't do it...and that's the words that come out of their mouth. It's like they have a mental block."</p> <p>"...they have rows and arguments with friends and at home and they come in with all this baggage...and they take it back [to home] and it's because they are feeling very very stressed...I don't think they've been given the cues to maybe understand that stress is quite normal and they're allowed to feel stressed and to identify it is part of how to deal with it...so everything has to be a big drama rather than I'm just feeling a bit stressed."</p> <p>"...you do see it really differently. I mean have students who just don't talk and they'll completely isolate themselves and you kinda think some things wrong here"</p> <p>"...she just hit a threshold where that stress and anxiety she couldn't contain anymore...her bodies way of saying I need help, you may not be acknowledging it but we need to do something about how you feel."</p>	<p>Different forms of stress/continuum Very assertive tone.</p> <p>Self-awareness</p> <p>Behavioural manifestations. Staff comment on what is directly observable, however they don't know for sure yet she is speaking in an assertive tone?</p> <p>Uses stress and anxiety interchangeably. What does she mean by this?</p>	<p>This appears to coincide with the stress cycle as students described. Gives the impression she has had a lot of experience with this.</p> <p>Self-awareness There were students who were not able to understand physical sensations of stress or who were not aware that they were stressed at all. Do staff have more awareness than students at times?</p> <p>This corroborates Leo's account of how his behaviour changed. He became more grumpy.</p>

Figure 4: Example of analysed extracts from partially transcribed staff data

I used guidelines from Bazeles (2009) who proposed a model of qualitative analysis termed 'Describe, Compare, Relate', which is a three step formula to qualitative data analysis. These steps were carried out in a different order suggested by Bazeles and were used in conjunction with the thematic table designed at stage one:

- *Describe and Relate:* For each of the overarching concepts identified at stage one, I made notes on how each staff member spoke about this

concept and related it back to student experiences. I focused on the conditions related to each theme such as when it occurred, what they said and why they said it. For each staff member I noted differences and similarities in their perceptions of how they understood student experience.

- *Compare*: Notes were made on the differences and meaningful associations between the two staff participants and the staff participants and the student participants. A key part of this stage was triangulating the views of staff and with that of students in order to establish what staff understood about student experiences but also what staff could offer in terms of school systems of support and wider ideological influences within school and within the education system that students might not have been aware of.

3.8: Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were followed according to the British Psychological Society Guidelines for conducting research with human participants (The British Psychological Society, 2009). Adhering to these guidelines ensured that participant's interests are protected, they give informed consent, are properly debriefed and the data protection act is enforced.

3.8.1: Informed Consent

Parents, students and school staff were briefed on the nature of the study and gave informed consent. As part of working as an EP, it is a legal requirement to ensure that parents/carers have given consent when working with CYP. I

ensured that all participants had a full understanding of what was involved in the study and the exact nature of their participation. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification. Following this, their written consent was obtained. An information sheet with a consent form (Appendix C1) was distributed by the AHY to students. I handed out these myself to school staff (Appendix C2).

3.8.2: Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity was abided by in relation to the Children's Act 1989 and all participants were informed of this at the beginning of the research. All identifying information such as family name and details were kept securely for family contact and correspondence only. All information collected was strictly confidential, and only I had access to the data. All electronic data collected was kept securely, on one laptop which was password protected. Participants were assigned a unique code, and all data and audio recorded data from interviews, was stored under this. All recordings of data were destroyed upon transcription. All names of schools and personal details of participants were anonymised. Participants are able to see any data held about them/to see the transcription of the interview and the final study write up after completion.

3.8.3: Right to Withdraw

Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research study at any time, without explanation. Audio recordings of participants from interviews, who subsequently wish to withdraw their data, will be destroyed. The information and consent forms outlined this. This also outlined situations where

withdrawing data is no longer viable (i.e. data that has been included in the final report).

3.8.4: Safeguarding and Ensuring Participants are Free from Psychological Harm or Distress

Care was taken to ensure that students were not put under excessive pressure. It was hoped that they would not experience any undue anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment as a direct result of the study, however appropriate steps were taken in the event of participants experiencing difficult emotions arising from participating. Due to my understanding, empathy and training regarding young people's mental health and emotional well-being, I arranged for a member of staff in school (a member of the pastoral staff) to be available and willing to provide support and advice to the students after the interview.

3.8.5: Follow up/Debrief

A follow up/debrief procedure was put in place, where I asked students how the interview had affected them. As I worked as a TEP within the school it was possible to signpost students needing further support to pastoral staff. Research summaries will be made available to parents, pupils and staff who took part in the study.

3.9: Reflexivity

Reflexivity ensures that the researcher constantly reviews his/her role in the research (Finlay and Gough, 2003). Part of the IPA analysis approach involved realising that I was a researcher who was trying to make sense of participants

who are making sense of their experiences and that I will be interpreting these experiences. I acknowledged some of the pre-conceptions that I brought to the interview process. For example, I had a dual role as TEP and researcher. I had to ensure that I made my role as a researcher clear before interviewing participants. My dual role meant that there could have been susceptibility to researcher bias, such as my characteristics as perceived by participants; and participant's characteristics as perceived by me. My past experience as a secondary school teacher may have had some biases in relation to my own perceptions of how students experience exam stress and the role of teachers in supporting them. I reflected on these biases throughout the interview process to ensure that I remained neutral and did not express opinions or ask leading questions (Smith, 2005).

CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS

4.1: Overview of Results

The data were analysed in order to answer the central qualitative research question: *How do students experience taking key stage 4/5 public examinations and what works to support them and why?* Three overarching concepts were identified in the data with associated superordinate themes.

This can be seen in the figure below:

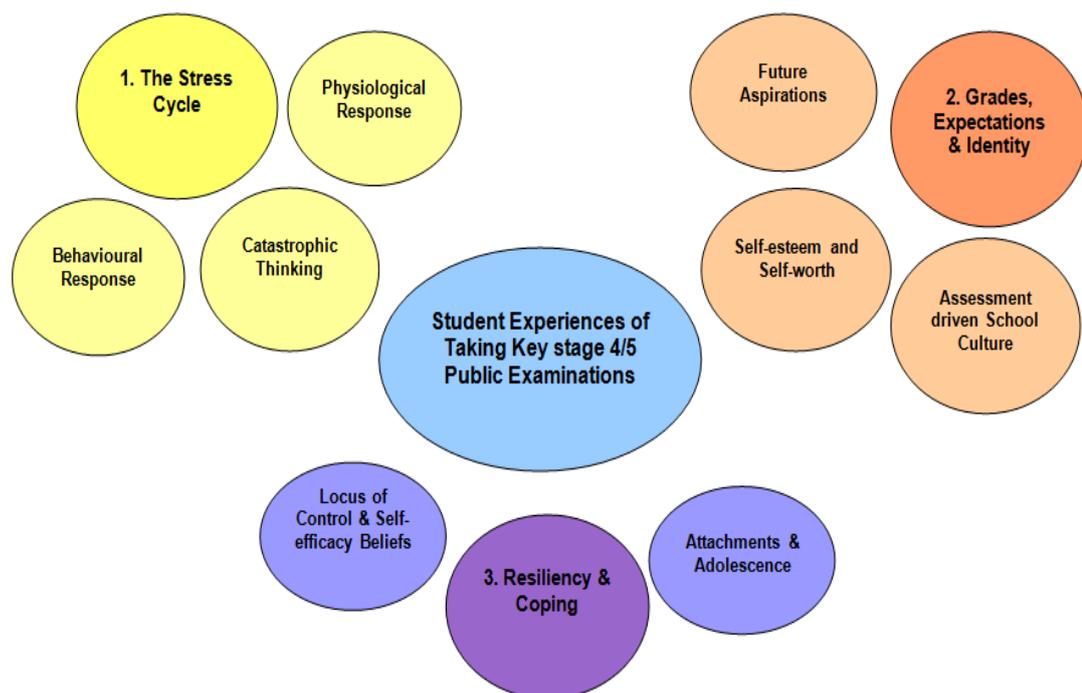


Figure 5: Map of overarching concepts and superordinate themes

The overarching concepts and superordinate themes were developed from the shared experiences of the student sample at phase one and were used to triangulate staff perceptions at phase two. Five student interviews were

transcribed. The remaining four student interviews and staff interviews were partly transcribed or notes were taken on key points.

The overarching concepts and superordinate themes are described below with supporting quotes and line numbers from the fully transcribed student data and paraphrased notes and quotes from the remaining student data and staff data. Whilst listening to audio recordings for all participants, notes were taken around tone of voice, any hesitations or pauses and my own reflections of how experiences had an impact on my practice as a TEP. These are commented on where they were significant.

4.2: Phase One: Student Interviews

4.2.1: First Overarching Concept: The Stress Cycle

The first overarching concept related to how students' responded to the pressure of preparing for and taking exams (the exam period) and the point at which this pressure was perceived to be stressful by students. This overarching concept was termed 'The Stress Cycle' as it became apparent that 'stress' was cyclical in nature with thoughts, feelings and behaviours becoming an interacting and reinforcing cycle. Stress was also cyclical in that it appeared and reduced at different time points for different students. Chronic stress within the school system was cyclical in nature with interactions across the school hierarchy between staff and students reinforcing a 'panicked' response in relation to exams.

This overarching concept consisted of the following superordinate themes:

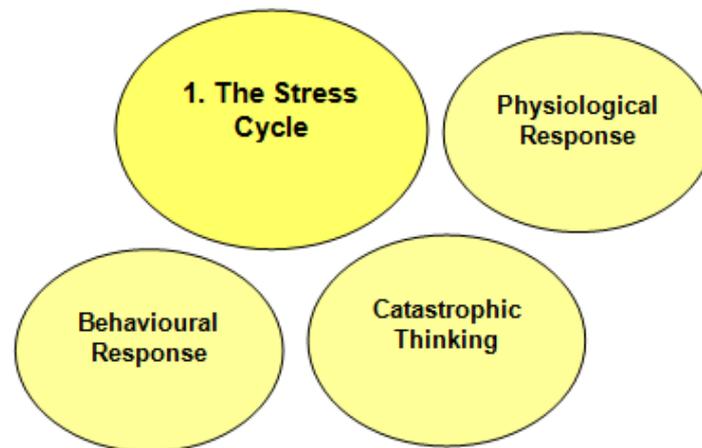


Figure 6: First overarching concept with superordinate themes

4.2.1.1: Catastrophic Thinking

Across the sample of nine students 'catastrophic thinking' referred to how students appraised their experience of taking exams, which resulted in negatively loaded self statements. These acted as an internal dialogue and were present throughout the exam period; becoming more and less intrusive at different time points for different students. Statements were overly generalised and tended to be future-oriented. All nine students experienced catastrophic thoughts when they were in the exam hall. These were in relation to imagining undesirable outcomes of the exam such as *'I'm going to fail everything'* (Ellie, 14) and in being apprehensive of what might come up in the exam such as: *'...and in my head I will probably start thinking about the different questions, which will worry me slightly. And then I'll start going over all the different things that could potentially go wrong.'* (Sam, 9-15).

All students had high expectations of themselves. These expectations manifested in their thoughts and were most commonly associated with different ambitions such as getting into Sixth Form, University, pursuing a specific career or maintaining an identity of being a high achiever. James, the highest achiever of all nine students, put pressure on himself to maintain his 'top' student status that had formed over years of successful assessment grades in school. He described a number of intrusive thoughts that made him feel physically ill and apprehensive in advance of the exams: *'...like if I'm worried about it in my head and I know it's coming up, I'll feel...not right, like maybe a month in advance.'* (163-165).

James spoke about expectations that he placed upon himself to be a 'top achiever,' and catastrophic thoughts appeared to be related to letting himself and others down: *'...is it going to be too hard? Will I fail? What if I don't achieve the grades I need, or I want or what I'm predicted? Will I let anybody down including myself?'* (14-15). James described stress as a barrier to taking exams commenting: *'Like you feel like you can't achieve your potential because something's getting in the way'* (5-6). This was most noticeable during the exam situation itself when his thoughts took a more avoidant function: *'I don't want to do it...what is the point of this, and I am going to get through it, and will my brain cope...and towards the end of the exam, is my brain just going to go?'* (288-231).

Similarly to James, Annabelle whilst not the highest achiever, placed a high amount of pressure on herself to achieve the grades she needed to get into a social work course at university. She had experienced disappointing results at GCSE and AS Level and her thinking took on a more defeated tone. Annabelle said she would think: *'It's kind of that I can't do this, I won't be able to, it's too difficult'* (p.1; 11-12) and *'...I'm never, ever be going to pass. And that was probably one of the main thoughts that I had throughout my whole GCSE year'* (p.2; 39-42).

Annabelle was two years older than James and one year older than the rest of the sample and so her responses to my questions seemed to take on a more reflective tone, perhaps because she had more time to process her experiences of taking her GCSE's. I experienced her as mature for her age and open to sharing her experiences. When I asked her about how her thinking changed over the course of her GCSE year Annabelle had the following reflection:

'...I go through a phase where I'm like...oh well, there's nothing I can do about it now...I've done the exam. But then I kind of get closer to the results and I'm thinking of the consequences...I might have to re-take the year, I won't be with my friends any more. What if I do really badly in this subject? And it kind of builds up.' (162-171).

Annabelle's comments about how her thinking changed over the year was apparent across all student experiences, suggesting that catastrophic thoughts are cyclical in nature and vary across different phases of the exam period. All students experienced some form of over thinking and over generalising on the day of the exam, even those that appeared to cope well. All students reported a sense of finality at not being able to do anything following taking the exam. Here they describe a period of time where there was temporary relief from catastrophic thinking.

Mark appraised the examination period as being a positive opportunity to challenge himself. He said that he coped well throughout; however he experienced time points where he had catastrophic thoughts. These were mainly limited to just before the exam and just before getting results. Mark said before the exam he thought: *'...have I done enough revision? Have other people done more than me? Have I done what I should have done? Have I done what I should be doing? I was starting to think, oh no; will I in ten years time be saying I wish I'd done more?'* (p.2-3, 67-71). The majority of students experienced catastrophic thoughts such as these. Students used the pronoun 'I' repetitively and imperatives such as 'should' and 'must' which created a sense of pressure.

Despite short-lived time points where Mark experienced catastrophic thoughts he had a strong sense of self in terms of being able to manage his thought process. He referred to his *'mind set'* several times and he appeared to have

adopted a problem-solving approach to reframing catastrophic thoughts in order to self-soothe. Mark said '*I just kept the same mind set and I've never really been affected by stress.*' (p.1; 34-35). Mark presented as being proud that he was 'in charge' of his mind set when he said: '*I wasn't really thinking, oh my God; I'm going to do really bad. I stayed calm and I think that helped me through it.*' (8-10), This was in contrast to the intensity of Annabelle's thoughts which '*infect[ed] everyday life*' (175).

4.2.1.2: Physiological Response

The physiological response refers to bodily sensations that students' experienced either the night before the exam or when sitting in the exam hall. Of all parts of the stress cycle (thoughts, physiological and behavioural) students reported this response the least. Whether this was because they did not experience physiological responses or whether they found them hard to identify was unclear. James, Annabelle and Sam experienced greater physiological responses throughout the examination period than others. They reported a physiological response that was related to 'feelings'. James said '*Making you feel comfortable...I feel sick...it's physical...so whenever I don't want to do something I've been sick before,*' (9-10). This is similar to responses felt by Annabelle who said '*...it's like the feeling of feeling really ill*' (12). Sam referred to a physiological feeling that he found hard to articulate it, saying '*I just don't feel quite right*'. In contrast to this, Ellie was quite clear that '*For me it's more mental than it is physical*', (11-12).

Holly told me it felt like *'loads of emotions'* and reported feeling *'pretty crap'*. Jade, a student who experienced panic attacks, reported exaggerated and more global catastrophic thoughts such as *'I'm scared'*. Jade described her experience as:

'I sat the exam in a room on my own...I had a problem with that subject for two years...just nerves...that one was always the hardest...I thought because it happens in one will it happen in others...it made me scared for all the others...they started in Year 10 I don't know why...it was in catering...I don't know why'
(Notes from partial transcription).

Jade described how she had to sit in a room away from her peers in order to sit the exam. She described not understanding why she had experienced these panic attacks and feeling frustrated and confused by them. As Jade was making sense of her experience, I felt a tension in the room, as though she was 'stuck' and not able to access her feelings. She tried on a number of occasions to minimise her experience of panic attacks, speaking in a casual tone as though they were ordinary events that just happened. I wondered whether part of the reason she had experienced panic attacks was because she was experiencing a disconnection of being able to access her feelings and appropriately express them. During the staff interviews the AHY referred to Jade. She told me she had experienced the death of a significant family member two years ago and that she had not been allowed to talk about how

she felt at home or grieve openly. This AHY hypothesised that she might have subconsciously used the exam situation as a way to transfer her feelings of grief or as a way to release some of her emotions.

Whilst speaking with the AHY she told me that James had also experienced panic attacks and that his parents had phoned the school with concerns over this. Interestingly, James had decided not to share this with me. I reflected as to why this might have been and considered the possibility that he felt ashamed. By admitting to having a 'panic attack' it was as though he had 'failed'.

4.2.1.3: Behavioural Response

The behavioural response refers to observable patterns that students and others close to them noticed and attributed to the effects of exam stress. All nine students in the sample experienced changes to behaviour that could be attributed to feeling stressed about exams. This was related to how students behaved in terms of their mood, changes to lifestyle and the way their body moved physically when experiencing stress. Sam reported noticeable bodily movements: *'I will always start doing things like nervously tapping the table, or like moving my pen around in between my fingers'* (17-18). Both James and Annabelle experienced avoidant patterns of behaviour where they felt there was no point in carrying on with the exam. For James this was linked to feelings of panic during the exam situation itself, where he reported: *'you can't achieve your potential because something's getting in the way'* (6). He considered an alternative situation where he might leave the exam. For

Annabelle, her sense of defeat at not feeling that she would pass her exams meant she tried to avoid revising. This made her feel more stressed. She noted: *'I realise that I still have to do it. I am just putting it off'*. (210). Annabelle also experienced disruptive changes to her daily routine, such as problems with sleeping.

Leo, (who attended the exam stress intervention group), referred to not being aware of the way his behaviour changed during the course of taking exams, until he had been approached by staff to ask if he wanted to attend the intervention. He said: *'I never really noticed it before...I get grumpy...I'm not a very nice person for a while...once I'm told about it I'm like...oh that makes sense'*. He also referred to the affect that stress had on his ability to revise. He said: *'If I'm stressed out then I'm distracted...and can't revise'*.

Ellie and Mark spoke about ruminating behaviour after the exam, where it was typical for peers to debrief each other about how they found the exam. Some students would speak in great detail about what they wrote for specific questions. Ellie, who tended to make external attributions, saying that her feelings of stress were caused by other people, said this made her more nervous:

“...we kind of all got together afterwards and discussed what we'd put and how we felt that it went. I felt that it had gone quite well, but I think the more that everyone talked about it and about what they'd written down, the more nervous I got that I maybe hadn't done as well as I thought I'd done while I was in there...I think that the boys were a bit less interested in...exactly what they'd written. They were kind of like, oh OK; I think I've done well on this, but maybe not so well on this. Whereas the girls that I talked to about it were more like, I wrote this, this, this and this; I think that this part was exceptionally good and this part maybe not so much, I could have done that a bit stronger. They went into more detail about how they'd done' (50-62).

I experienced Ellie as feeling angry towards other people. She spoke about her self-doubt at hearing others talking about exams. Whilst she attributed stress as being caused by others she did not consider the possibility that her thought process could be creating feelings of stress. Ellie made reference to gender differences in her perceptions about how girls and boys behave when coming out of an exam. She said that girls generally wanted to talk about it more with their boys. This coincides with Mark's experience when he said:

'I might have talked about it to my friend who I was walking home with, a couple of questions. But I thought what's the point of talking about it if I can't do

anything about it now; there was no point in thinking about what I could have done'.

Mark talked about how sharing his experience of the exam with a close friend briefly after the exam, was a positive experience and that this sharing had a specific time limit whilst on his walk home. Mark proceeded to say:

'I'm not a person to talk about my feelings and that. I don't like sharing it. So I just...whenever I came home and my parents asked, how was the exam, I'd just say, fine. Because I never like talking about these things...even if they were good, I would say the same thing' (106-107).

Marks' way of talking about exams appears to come across as managed and controlled and reflects how I experienced him throughout the interview process. He seemed to be aware of actively deciding to withhold his thoughts about how his exams went and it came across as a purposeful strategy that he employed.

4.3: Second Overarching Concept: Grades, Expectations and Identity

The second overarching theme related to students' perceptions about their future in terms of what grades they wanted to achieve and how this linked to future aspirations. All students were able to articulate the grades they desired

and how they would feel if they did not achieve these grades. There was a distinction between students who felt more stress, believing that grades defined their identity and illustrated how intelligent they were; and students who coped better and were able to see that grades were not attached to feelings of self-worth and were goals to work towards.

This overarching concept consisted of the following superordinate themes:

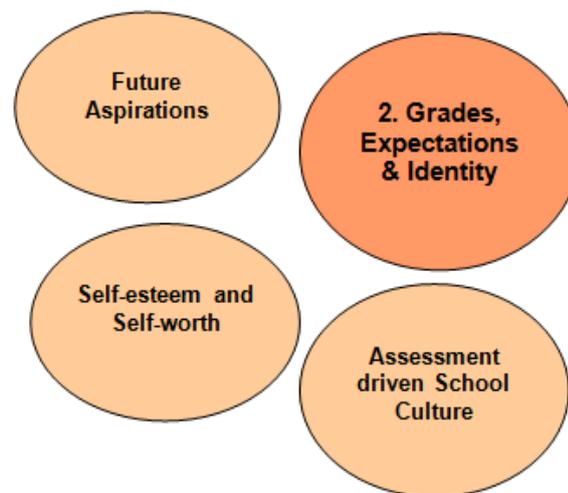


Figure 7: Second overarching concept with superordinate themes

4.3.1: Future Aspirations

All nine students felt that not getting certain grades (such as a C Grade) would affect their future aspirations; however some were more pragmatic about this than others. Jade said: '*...they were quite important as obviously I knew if I didn't get the grades then it would affect my future*'. For Ellie, being able to get into Sixth Form was contingent on getting the grades and this was a very real pressure for her. She said: '*But I felt quite nervous just because if I did not*

pass the courses that I wanted to then I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing now' (35-36). For James, success in exams meant opening doors for the future whatever route he chose to follow. He said: *'...you want to get the highest you can because then it gives you the better...opportunities in life.'* However he expressed annoyance at teachers for emphasising to students that they needed good grades to get into university, saying: *'...there's a lot of talk about how these will dictate your future and this is your future from now on. And actually it's not necessarily is it; because you can degree take or you can go down apprenticeships or whatever' (57-60).* There was a sense that he felt angry at school staff for placing this pressure on him and making him feel that university was the only choice. I felt that some of his annoyance might be related to how he was feeling about exams in general.

At the time I interviewed James he had just completed his last exam. I hypothesised that he was still feeling stressed about them yet not realising this or expressing this to me. This had an impact on me in terms of my own practice. I had noticed subtle signs of what I perceived to be stress behaviours whilst interviewing James, such as tapping his chest and coughing. I wondered had I not been a TEP and more sensitive to picking up these behaviours, whether school staff were noticing times that James needed support. His high achiever status perhaps masked stress and gave the perception of somebody who was coping.

Sam spoke about familial pressures in watching his older sister going to university and feeling that he had to have the same aspirations as her. He said:

'[my sister going to university] pressured me more than I thought it would because...usually I would just let those things go over my head; but because I know GCSE exams are really important towards getting into workplaces and university and going forward in your life, it just made me wonder whether she was right in the fact that I've got to get there...if I don't get those results, what am I going to do about it?' (84-89).

For Sam there was a sense that not achieving high grades in his GCSEs meant that he would not be able to see a happy future. This was in contrast to Annabelle who saw her strong desire to get into university to study Social Work as a motivator to do well. She said:

'I think it makes me kind of strive more to achieve. This time last year I didn't really know what I wanted to do. And I think when you're in that limbo like, well I kind of want to go to uni, but I kind of don't...having that end result, knowing where I want to go, knowing the amount of UCAS points I need, I know what I've got to get...it's more pressure but it's a good sort of pressure' (152-160).

Interestingly, Annabelle explained that she did not have this desire to pursue Social Work until AS-Level, where at GCSE she saw uncertainty around her future direction as stressful. When she had decided what her future aspirations were she was able to break down her steps to success in a way that made it feel achievable. This made her more determined. She said: '*... I wouldn't want to re-do a year, but I would do it if I had to because...my ultimate goal is to go to university to study social work*' (144-150). Annabelle was able to paint a clear image of her success in her mind. Whilst speaking to her this image came across as vivid and real as though she was already living it. There was a feeling of not being able to stop her, of sheer determination to get there. This had a strong impact on me in relation to my Trainee EP role in terms of capturing the voice of the child and using person centred approaches in my work to explore grades alongside aspirations.

This was in contrast to Sam who did not have a strong desire of what he wanted to achieve in terms of a career. For him, getting good grades and his future were linked, but in a way that was still very abstract to him and a pressure that was placed upon him by his parents. This was also the case for James, who had a goal to '*achieve his potential*'; something much less tangible than having a clear aim of which career route he wanted to go into. Again, this was also true of Ellie, who whilst knowing she wanted to get into Sixth Form, did not express a specific future aspiration but rather a feeling that she needed to get good grades know matter what.

4.3.2: Assessment driven School Culture

All nine students were aware of the assessment driven culture in school and that teachers were accountable for student grades. All students recognised that teachers felt stressed as a result of this and this affected the way they behaved. Harrison said: *'...yeah they do [get stressed] a lot of them do...they just seem different they're not themselves...they're not as fun as they used to be...tense...because they no they need to do well...because they can be under scrutiny...if you are expected to do well then they want you to do well otherwise it looks bad on them'*. Harrison, was able to provide me with an astute insight into stress within the school system and the grades driven culture. He was aware of the pressures teachers were under. By acknowledging that teacher stress was a reflection of the wider system rather than a result of him not trying hard enough, he was able to take a more pragmatic view and cope better with the process.

Teacher stress presented itself in changes to teacher behaviours and in the ways they interacted with students. A number of students reported teachers administering excessive mock exams in order to practice for the 'real thing'. Leo described the completion of excessive mocks commented: *'...they were none stop...I couldn't get a breather'*. James, Ellie and Annabelle talked about mock exams as being detrimental to their confidence. For James mock exams in January triggered a cycle of catastrophic thinking. He said: *'...my English was very low. It was Cs because I was like, well...what happens if that happens in the exam...I thought I was doing well and then this happened. So*

why...why is it' (106-110). James gave his performance in his mock English exam great importance and this caused him to change his opinion and feelings about his competence in the subject in general. There did not seem to be recognition that this was just one exam.

Ellie spoke about the importance mock exams were given and how she thought teachers made students feel about them. She said:

'...they made it as if it was going to be like the most important thing in your life. And it's not really. It leads you up to the next step without actually having that big of an impact after you've got there I think it did quite badly affect most people, but I would say a couple of people were kind of like, no; I know what's important. You don't really need to pressure me as much as you are. But I think for most people it was a case of, I need to do well or something really terrible is going to happen' (71-79).

Ellie describes a situation where she is speaking on behalf of the majority of students who felt that mock exams were unsupportive. She referred to some students being able to boundary this and detach from the pressures that teachers placed on them, however overall the mock exams had a '*bad effect*'. The statement '*I need to do well or something real terrible is going to happen*',

feels fearful and fatalistic. Ellie described a school culture where mocks were dreaded.

Annabelle offered a more pragmatic view of the pros and cons of mock exams saying: *'...in ways I think it's good because it helps me improve. But in other ways it can kind of knocks me down a bit as well'* (80-84). Annabelle became hyper aware of the grades that other people were getting saying that: *'I compare myself to a lot of people, although I probably shouldn't because it isn't very good for me'* (78-80). Annabelle spoke about teachers placing expectations on her and putting her on a *'pedestal'*. She said:

'...I made sure my folder was all up-to-date, I typed up all my notes, everything looked perfect. And my teacher was kind of like, Annabelle's doing so well, she's...you know, she's going to do this, she's going to do that. Look at her folder. Everyone else's folder should be like this. You're put higher, which I don't think is right. I just felt that too much pressure was put on me to keep it up.' (121-130).

Whilst Annabelle was not a high achiever, describing herself as *'average'*, she had built a reputation of being organised, submitting work on time and pleasing teachers. For her, getting mock exams back and not doing well meant losing this reputation and disappointing the class teacher. There was a sense that

she needed to *'keep it up'* and so mock exams consistently served as an assessment of whether she was doing this.

Students felt that the stress teachers experienced manifested through the language they used with students when talking about exams. For most students these messages made them feel that teachers had unreasonable expectations of them. James said that exams were spoken about *'...in assemblies, just gentle reminders like you need to start revising...And even in lessons; you need to be achieving this if you want to get...Or this is how to get good marks in your GCSEs'* (63-65). This was a consistent reminder of what he *'should'* be doing in order to do well.

Annabelle reflected on the process of how exams were not only talked about in assemblies but also school systems that served, in her opinion to alienate students such as herself. She said:

'...you have assemblies where they're like, this is the grade we got last year; we need to beat it this year and stuff like that...and when we were in Year 11 we had, one of the teachers who did the assembly had...we used to get badges depending on how well we'd done. And it used to be like student of the week and we used to have the clipboard of...I can't remember; something like the clipboard of disappointment.'

If you'd done something bad you get read out in assembly. So that was...it's...there's so many expectations and...But then you come to school and it's like, you need good grades you know, otherwise you won't get to university. You won't get to do this you know...that's just how it is' (133-140).

What is interesting in Annabelle's response is that she speaks about school staff communicating school targets in terms of where they sat overall as a cohort compared to last year's results. Students were being made to feel collectively responsible for letting the school down. The public humiliation of naming students caused great fear for Annabelle and threatened to remove her from the 'pedestal' she had been put on by teachers.

Teacher stressed appeared to affect students more than others. For Sam, pressures to do well from his parents seemed to dominate much of what he spoke about. Sam said: *'I don't find teachers that pressuring. Of course they want to see good results, especially if they put in as much work as they do to try and get you to where you are' (108-112).* He was able to consider teacher's perspectives in managing their expectations of him. This was in contrast to impact of parental expectations. He said: *'I feel more pressured by my parents just in general because I feel as if I'm not as smart for instance as my sister, because she is incredibly clever and always has been' (191-195).* It seemed that coming to school was refreshing for Sam where by contrast he found teachers more supportive than his parents.

Mark was also aware of the pressure that teachers were under and how they spoke to students about exams, however he seemed to be able to harness their expectations in a positive way even wanting to do better than they expected. He said: *'I was well aware of the pressure... teachers wanted me to do well...I always wanted to exceed their expectations'* (45-60). He had an implicit trust in his teachers and seemed to respect their authority. Their messages about needing to do well appeared to be aligned to his own belief that he needed to do well and this acted as a security and kept him grounded.

4.3.3: Self-esteem and Self-worth

This superordinate theme related to students perceptions of their grades in relation to their feelings of confidence and self-worth. Students spoke about what the term 'failure' meant to them. All nine students said that 'failure' would mean getting below a 'C' grade, with some students such as Ellie saying failure would be *'Anything below a B'* (28-29). The term 'failure' often related to letting themselves and others such as teachers and parents down and was especially the case for Sam who described how he thought his parents viewed his abilities. He said: *'My parents always seem to know that she will get through it. I seem to be the one where if they look at me they know that I'm not as developed as she is in a way. They realise that I don't have that stability'* (190-195). Whilst Sam told me this I felt sad. It seemed as though he also felt this as he put his head down and looked towards the floor.

For some students, getting good grades was linked to their self-worth and heavily attached to their identity as a label that would prove how good/capable they were as a person. James believed in himself as a *'top achiever'* and his self-esteem depending upon getting high grades. If this did not happen then it would compromise his sense of self-worth. James was particularly frustrated with the examination process and felt that it did not do his abilities justice. He said: *'...Because...you've done all the revision but actually...it...the letter on a piece of paper defines what you've done, so you want...you just want to do the best you can'* (173-174).

Similarly to James, Annabelle wanted to maintain her identity as somebody who did well. She described how her confidence was knocked following getting low grades in her mocks and in her AS-Level exams. She said:

'...like when I did my mocks I got a U in one of my sciences and that was so major... Looking back now I think that wasn't really a problem, but at that point in time it felt like that was the worst that could have happened to me. And getting something like that for your mocks just completely takes down all the confidence I had to actually do my GCSEs...and throughout the year I'd been getting all my test papers had been As and Bs, so it was quite a knock-back. And the same with geography as well, I got a D in that and I got a C in my English and I got an E

in media, which was a massive... So it was a bit of a shock' (49-52 & 99-104).

Annabelle appeared visibly emotional when she was recounting her experience of mock exams and AS-Level exams. She seemed frustrated and still in disbelief that she had performed in her opinion 'badly'. It seemed that her high coursework grades throughout her exam courses had been a source of comfort for her and provided a sense of control and this was taken away by the exams. Language such as '*knock-back*', '*a shock*', '*massive*' and '*all of a sudden*' paint a vision of it being very unexpected for her causing a sudden loss of self-esteem and self-belief. It is interesting that Annabelle was able to remain as determined to succeed as she did. Having a clear direction to go into Social Work following this 'knock-back' seemed to turn things around for her and re-inspire her.

Sam speaks about his past performances in his Year 10 exams where he said: '*And towards the end of Year 10 I started to worry a little bit because I knew that in some subjects I hadn't done as well as I could, which puts pressure on me in Year 11 to kind of catch up' (49-54).* For him going into Year 11 feeling as though he was already on the back foot and needing to catch up did not create a positive feeling. Sam talks about a 'botched' exam and the cycle of catastrophic/intrusive thinking this created in terms of self-doubt. He said '*I think I had one botched exam where I knew that I hadn't done well in it and then we went on to do other exams and I started to question myself more and*

more. So seeing those different...things pop up in the exams made me question whether...am I going to be able to do this? Is this going to come out as the best result or worst result in the end?' (49-54). Like James and Annabelle, Sam reflected on a key experience of one subject and how his performance affected him deeply in terms of his confidence and his ability to succeed. He said:

'PE I felt I was really good at and I was doing well in, but then when it came to the actual exam I didn't do well. But that was the exam that really dropped my confidence in because it was something that I thought...this is a subject which I know I will pass and I have to pass...And although I did pass in the end...by looking at it I thought to myself - because I got a D in the exam and the only thing that pulled me up was my coursework...' (125-135).

In speaking to Sam I realise that he had taken great pride in his talent for PE. Having previously demonstrated his strengths in this area it appeared that he had come to attach his self-worth to this subject. The idea that a 'D grade' was a failure came out of my conversation with him. Even though he achieved a 'C grade' overall, he was unable to accept the idea that his performance in the exam had been lower. Sam was able to articulate the effect of this grade on him as a person saying: *'I think it affects you as a person because it's...it has*

an effect on your life' (117). For him, PE was *'his life'* and it was hard for him to feel successful once he had not met his own expectations.

4.4: Third Overarching Concept: Resiliency and Coping

This overarching theme related to attachments that students had formed with school staff and with their peers. This helped them to achieve some sense of belonging in school, which served as a safe base for them in times of stress. Some students had containing relationships with parents who provided comfort and support to them. It became apparent that students were not only going through a challenging time in terms of taking exams, but were also grappling with transitions that come with adolescence in terms of social and emotional development. This was linked to identity formation and ideas of self-esteem and self-worth previously spoken about.

This over-arching theme consisted of the following superordinate themes:

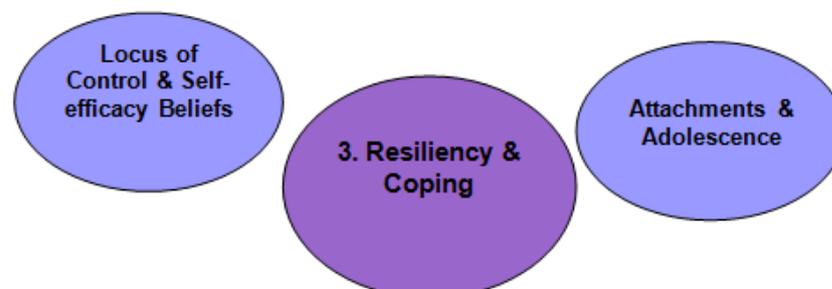


Figure 8: Third overarching concept together with superordinate themes

4.4.1: Attachments and Adolescence

All nine students desired a safe base where they felt contained and where they experienced a sense of belonging. This helped to mitigate the effects of exam stress. The close bond that students had formed with teachers and pastoral staff in school and the containment that school staff provided for students throughout the examination period was apparent for all students.

Only Mark and Annabelle spoke about having supportive role models at home. Mark presented himself as a calm and rational person who respected the views of those he believed to be helpful to him. He considered teachers and his Dad to be part of this select group. Whilst being a person who did not want to share his thoughts and engage emotionally with his parents and his teachers, his relationships with both seemed to have a positive regulatory effect for him and helped him to develop important coping strategies. When speaking about his Dad, Mark said:

'Well he's definitely some one who believes I should be working hard at school. Because...he said the thing to me, like do I want to say in ten years I wish I'd worked harder? And he was always on me to make sure I was doing my work, to make sure I'm doing my homework, to make sure I'm revising. If I wasn't then he would talk to me about it...he would use stern words. He

would make sure I know that I've got to be doing this. So I think it's definitely how he spoke to me which worked' (22-28).

Whilst Mark reflects on his Dad's tone as being stern whilst speaking to him, he believed this had a positive effect on him and motivated him to want to do well. Mark had developed his mantra about imagining success ten years into the future, based on what his Dad had said to him and it seemed to have a profound effect on him, as he repeated this mantra throughout the whole of the examination period. Mark emphasises the power of talking to trusted adults and the idea that talking allows a process to develop which '*worked*' in supporting him to feel secure. This had an impact on me in considering my own practice as a Trainee EP and in how I can work with schools and families to help them to develop supportive narratives with students around exams. Mark's experience emphasised the role of the EP in training staff on attachment theory and supporting schools to ensure that students feel contained particularly at stressful times such as taking exams.

Annabelle also described how talking to her parents helped to support her. However unlike Mark, talking allowed her to release her emotions, making room for effective problem solving. She said:

'I kind of rant about it to both my parents, my tutor, my teachers. I just kind of say how I feel, and once I've said it I kind of feel a bit better...my family is strongly for talk through your problems and it'll sort itself out kind of thing. It will help you. You know a problem shared is a problem halved. So that's how my family works. And if I'm feeling stressed about something I'll talk to my mum, I'll talk to my dad, I'll talk to my sister...or even my grandparents you know' (187-195).

What was striking about Annabelle's response was that she seemed to have built a support network for herself. Within this network she had several trusted attachment figures she could go to in order to talk through her feelings and release feelings of stress. For Annabelle this support seemed to have developed over years of being at school. She spoke about the support she received in Year 7: *'My tutor, who I had since Year 7, knows me really well and helps me a lot if I'm stressed. Even if I'm crying; he'll just sit me down and talk to me about it' (184-185).* This tutor was able to attune to Annabelle and help her to regulate her feelings. This was successful because it was a trusting relationship that had developed over time.

The need for consistency and availability from trusted teachers was reflected within the rest of the student sample. Ellie said: *'[teachers] would kind of*

always be there.' She continued by speaking about teachers going above and beyond for students saying: *'Some of the teachers that I had last year that I've got this year again, were here from seven in the morning until eight o'clock at night just talking with different students and helping them with any work they needed help with'* (112-116). This consistent availability of teachers seemed to provide containment for students such as Sam who said that teacher's availability made him feel *'calmer'* because they *'they were always there, helping, marking my different pieces of work, handing it back to me, telling me the improvements'* (169-172).

James had a different experience when it came to feeling supported in school. He spoke about his identity as a *'top achiever'* and expressed frustration that teachers seemed to focus their support on students who needed more help or who were underachieving. He said:

'I think that maybe the higher students got left behind a little bit because the students that weren't excelling, the teachers' attention was on them because they felt like they were more important because they wanted to get their grades up. But actually the higher students were then left to work independently, which some people prefer, but some students need help...But during lessons it's very much those who are struggling...especially when it was getting towards GCSEs,

those who were struggling would get more attention than those who were...not struggling' (73-77).

There was a sense through the language that James used, that he felt rejected by teachers, where they neglected to identify that he had a need for support. Language such as *'got left behind'* and *'they were more important'*, suggests that he felt overlooked because of his high achieving status. James later said that if he were to give teachers advice they should *'teach each student individually'* and provide them with *'one to one'* (210-211) to see what they were finding difficult. It was evident that James wanted time with a trusted adult, however there appeared to be some contradictions in his speech. Whilst he was making sense of his experience I got the sense that he both desired support but was also rejecting of it. I hypothesised that this might have been because he felt unworthy of support due to his *'top achiever'* status or that it made him feel like a 'failure' by accepting it.

It seemed that James experienced a sense of belonging from his peer group who were similar in terms of ability. At times this group took on a competitive nature which appeared to be actively encouraged by his teachers. James said: *'I'm just very competitive and like do the best I can...especially in Maths. There's three or four of us that are...getting A*s every past paper.'* (85-87). James seemed to find this both supportive and unsupportive; he enjoyed being part of what could be considered an 'elite' group, but at the same time did not

want to be different from his wider peer group, perhaps because of the pressure that being different created. James said:

'I always aspire to be one of the top people in the class, so...I do look at other people because it's just nice to see how other people are doing. And if you've got a bad grade and everyone else has got a good grade, why is that?...or if you've got a good grade and everyone else has got a bad grade, why have you... Why are you different to everyone else? What have you done differently to everyone else?' (95-99).

James appeared hyper vigilant to others around him in this extract. He appeared to be in a dilemma. His speech presented with a desperate tone, as though he had been grappling with questions of self-doubt around where he wanted to belong. James painted a situation whereby he wanted to fit in with others, but he also wanted to be different and this perhaps relates to his earlier comments where he needed to be noticed by teachers. At times James seemed to place himself as on an equal level with teachers when making appraisals about his peers. When speaking of students who were not as able he said: *'...because we want them to get good grades.'* He continued to explain that by teachers focusing on other students *'...it will just level itself out, because those who were top achieving will drop and then those who weren't will rise and so it just levels it out.'* (138-142). I felt that this was something that James did not want to happen. He felt that he belonged to a more elite group;

where on one hand he was being recognised for this and wanted it to continue, but on the other hand his sense of belonging here meant that his needs were going unmet.

For other students their identity was tied to a mutual hobby. Holly described how her sense of belonging came from her drama group. She describes her drama group as '*...it was like we were one big family sort of thing,*' with the staff being readily available to support them, bringing them snacks and drinks and staying behind after school. It was clear that the drama group functioned as though they were a family. Holly said: '*...we all supported each other with different things and like we had a group chat on [social media]. It was like a massive family...we would talk constantly...all day for like one year...we had our little group within the bigger group and when it came to nearer the [drama] exam I would leave my phone on constantly.*' Holly describes the intense emotional and social support that her group gave each other in the preparation and lead up to exams. Her sense of belonging to this group is perhaps most highlighted when she speaks about how difficult it was for her when her GCSE drama course ended. She said:

'...when the exam finished obviously we didn't have drama anymore and it was really sad...no one was talking at all on the group chat. Occasionally someone messaged and I'm like I miss you all...I miss the support from you all. Now in A-level drama there's nine of us...and two new girls are trying to get in

with us and I'm like no, no they're not part of the family...there's two girls that are with me that were there before and that's [great]...but it's hard because it's getting to know new people as we haven't worked with them before...it's a bit different. It's like this is our family that's your family sort of thing...being all together it's weird.' (Extract from partly transcribed student data).

The period after taking her drama exam was a difficult time for Holly. She had formed a close knit friendship group based on a shared experience. This had naturally changed and she found it difficult to cope with this transition. It seemed as though she had not experienced a feeling of closure. The exam had come and gone and I wondered at what point she was able to truly say goodbye to the group or to readjust and process her experience. This might be emphasised best in her difficulties with accepting others into the group at A-Level. There was a feeling that she now had to reattach herself and figure out where she belonged again. This made her feel out of control.

4.4.2: Locus of Control and Self-efficacy beliefs

Internal locus of control referred to students who held the belief that they were responsible and capable of success and that they were able to exercise some control over how they were affected by their environment in managing the examination period. Students who appeared to have a strong internal locus of

control also appeared to have a strong self-awareness in terms of what was supportive to them throughout the process, choosing to employ specific strategies for coping. Students who had more of an external locus of control seemed to hold a belief around the examination period being bigger than them and overwhelming. They were often highly sensitive to environmental factors in terms of how they felt about taking exams and how they felt about themselves. They often spoke specifically about feeling out of control. Locus of control appeared to relate to emotional self-efficacy in that students with higher feelings of emotional self-efficacy tended to have a higher internal locus of control. Feelings of academic self-efficacy did not seem to contribute to the level of stress students experienced within this sample; with students of varying levels of academic self-efficacy feeling more or less stressed.

All nine students showed aspects of having both an internal and external locus of control at different time points throughout the year. This was often related to how well they believed they could manage the emotional process of taking exams, including feelings of stress. As the year progressed students reported teachers seeming more 'stressed'. As this happened they tended to attribute exam stress as being caused by others, such as adults placing expectations on them and tended to feel less in control of their stress levels. Some students felt most in control of their stress levels at the beginning of the school year, when the exams were far away. However this was not the case for Sam who said he felt worse at the start of Year 11 because *'certain subjects I hadn't done as well as I should have done'* and then *'again on results day'* (36-38). This was in contrast to Ellie who said *'I wouldn't have been stressed [before*

getting results] because there wouldn't have been anything I could do about it at that point', (33-35).

Both Ellie and Mark appeared to have a strong internal locus of control, with Mark coping well until he was in the exam hall when he experienced catastrophic thoughts about the future. Ellie was able to clearly articulate how stress manifested for her and tended to make external attributions to other people causing stress, such as: *'I would say I get stressed about exams when other people stress me out about exams... if I'm by myself I don't tend to get stressed. I'll just kind of do whatever I need to do and get on with it' (5-7).* Despite these external attributions, she presented with a determination to manage this by choosing to ignore ruminating peers and expectations from teachers. She took proactive steps to protect herself and had a strong self-awareness that meant that she was not afraid to speak her mind. Whilst she was affected by her peers speaking about exams she was able to regulate her feelings about this and focus on her own thoughts. She said: *'...because everyone kept stressing me out and going, you need to do all of this work and all this work. And I'm like, no I don't need to do that; I've already done that' (14-16).*

Mark showed similar coping strategies as Ellie in that he felt he knew himself well enough to identify when and when not to engage with others in talking about exams. He had the confidence to boundary his interactions, such as choosing to debrief with one peer immediately after taking an exam and not at

all to his parents. Mark said: *'I...ignored what other people done. I thought, have I done enough for me; not have I done enough for others.'* (40-41). Mark appeared to take ownership of his feelings and made the exam process his own. He showed that he was accountable for his revision and for his successes and made use of resources that school had to offer. He said: *'I used everything that was there. I had everything I needed'* (102-104). Out of all students in the sample he appeared to be the less avoidant; meeting challenges head on and using a number of cognitive strategies to support himself through the process. He was able to better compartmentalise his thoughts when compared to others. When talking about having time away from revision he said: *'And then I just put that mind set aside for the time being. Like I don't really care about that right now. I just want to do things'* (108-109). When he did not get the grades he wanted on his mock exams, he was able to detach himself from the grade and reframe the experience, turning it into something positive. He said: *'I was disappointed, yeah, but it spurred me on. I was disappointed but it's motivated me to do more this year. To look at what I didn't do last year and do it this year'* (75-76). He had a pragmatic way of thinking and was able to rationalise disappointments in a way that other students were less able to. He said: *'I was happy with my results bar one or two; I got what I needed'* (12).

Similarly to Mark, Harrison demonstrated that he could employ a number of cognitive strategies to managing feelings of exam stress. He had a pragmatic way of viewing disappointing results saying: *'You can't just sit there and think about your results for the rest of your life can you...you've got to move forward*

to the future.' Harrison also demonstrated self-belief. He told me that a teacher had commented that he was being 'lazy', to which he said: *'...but I knew I could do it.'* Both Mark and Harrison were able to reflect on strategies and adapt them depending on how they felt. When speaking about what he would do differently at AS-Level Mark said: *'I'm going to go in thinking, what do I know, what don't I know? And then just keep the thought that I can't...if I can't do it I can't do it. There's no point in sitting there grieving that I can't do it. Just keep going on'* (97-99).

Students who tended to have a greater external locus of control felt that exams were an obstacle or barrier in some way. They showed frustration at having to take exams and felt as though their success was out of their control. Annabelle, seemed to have a greater external locus of control whilst taking her GCSEs. She said: *'But certain situations have the ability to get you so stressed even if they're absolutely tiny...whenever exams come along stress appears'* (266-67). Whilst she still experienced stress at A-Level, her newly realised ambition to become a Social Worker meant that she began to feel more in control and this motivated her to reflect on her coping strategies. From this she was able to develop better study habits. She said: *'OK. What do I need to do? I'll do my best subjects first because I'm more likely to remember it and then I do my worst subjects a bit later on'* (233-35). She developed a rational way of soothing herself that was similar to the self-talk that Mark used. This was rooted in planning out her time better and being more organised.

Sam referred to feeling that he was not in control of his life and that exams would decide and that exams were taking control of him. He appeared fatalistic in his narrative about them. He said: *'And if you can comprehend that, if you know that in the future this will affect you in some way, and if you don't exactly know how to deal with it, then it can cause you to have some possible...anxiety you don't really feel like you have control over it'* (119-121). I wondered whether the unspoken message was that he did not know how to cope with this feeling and perhaps the reason for him wanting to be interviewed by me was to gain some advice.

All nine students reported taking proactive measures to engage in more positive behaviours when feeling stressed and these related to healthy life habits such as getting good nights sleep, eating well, taking time away from studying and being physically active. Mark commented on *'being a teenager'* (120) and *'doing things you like because I can't just focus on exams all the time'* (113). Engaging in these activities appeared to break the stress cycle for most students by offering some temporary relief from feelings of stress. James noted: *'Definitely going to sleep earlier...because you feel like you...it just helps your brain and stuff like that...I do a lot of sport...you can forget about what you're doing...anything going really. Football, cricket, badminton...swimming'* (194-197).

Exercise was the single most important *'distraction'* or hobby that the majority of students reported as being helpful to them. Leo, Ellie, James and Sam all

reporting having regular commitments in competitive sports. Other activities included reading books and being part of a performing arts group. Activities such as these were community based and helped students to feel a sense of belonging. This helped to define them in an alternative way that did not involve academic grades.

4.5: Phase Two: Staff Interviews

Overall school staff perceptions of student experiences corroborated with student perceptions of their experience. Both students and school staff commented on the importance of supportive networks such as the role of primary caregivers and secondary attachment figures in school to help regulate feelings of stress. Both students and school staff commented on chronic stress within the school system as a result of the grades driven culture. Both were aware of the pressures that were placed on students to achieve. School staff offered more insights in behavioural representations of stress than students did. Both students who coped well and school staff commented on the importance of self-awareness in identifying stress in being important for employing key coping strategies such as compartmentalising and reframing catastrophic thoughts.

Below is a summary of staff perceptions in relation to the overarching concepts and superordinate themes that were extracted from the student data. Each superordinate theme has not been individually reported on, as staff did not always talk about each theme. However they have been referred to where necessary.

4.5.1: The Stress Cycle

Staff offered detailed descriptions of how they had seen exam stress manifest in students. They had a tendency to report behavioural presentations of stress, possibly because this is what was directly observable to them. I noticed the SENCo spoke more generally about a broad range of students, whereas the AHY spoke about specific students. This was perhaps because of the nature of their roles, with the SENCo working on a more systems level, compared with the AHY who worked with individual students.

Both the SENCo and the AHY said that exam stress came in different forms; however the SENCo appeared more concrete, saying that: *'I think it divides into different groups'*. Students fell into: 1). Those who had high expectations placed on them by parents/staff or themselves, 2). Those who had not worked hard enough to prepare for exams, and 3). Mainly girls and those who felt that exams are unmanageable. The SENCo felt that a number of students were uncomfortable with the examination process itself and had not accepted that taking exams is supposed to be a challenging time. She said:

'they find it very difficult to understand when we say, but actually exams aren't meant to be easy and comfortable places to be...the point is what can you do when you are put in a position of pressure'.

Students within this sample appeared to fall mainly into groups 1 or 3, with no students saying that they had not worked hard enough. Students such as Sam, James and Annabelle were very sensitive to the expectations of themselves and others and this generated high levels of pressure throughout the examination period.

The SENCo told me she thought exam stress was a continuum. She said: *'...a continuum of exam stress and it might be I've got Maths today and I really don't want to do this exam to I really can't cope with everything that's being asked of me'*. She referred to catastrophic thoughts that students had at the more extreme end of this continuum, resulting in avoidant behavioural responses such as not wanting to do the exam. This reflects James' experience where he asked himself the question of why he was taking the exam when in the exam hall.

The AHY commented on specific behavioural patterns of exam stress. She said:

'...some get tearful...some don't understand that it is stress they're feeling...in others it's behaviour issues and other's just go very quiet and it's really hard for them to grasp that what they are feeling is stress and for us to help them identify it a lot of the time...as they get older I think they notice it and understand it a lot more'.

As the AHY suggested, whilst interviewing students I felt some were not able to express the full extent of how stressed they had been. This was the case for Leo who said that his parents and teachers had pointed out that he was 'grumpy' during exam time. Jade, who experienced panic attacks did not seem to have an insight as to why they occurred when I asked her. The AHY referred to Jade whilst I interviewed her. She said: '*...she just hit a threshold where that stress and anxiety she couldn't contain anymore...her bodies way of saying I need help*'.

The AHY also suggested students notice signs of stress as they got older. This was the case for Annabelle. At the time of interviewing her she was in her final year of A-Levels and was able to reflect on the previous two years of exams. It was clear she had developed strategies as a result of being more experienced with the examination process. This further relates to the SENCo's suggestion of students not feeling familiar with the exam process.

4.5.2: Grades, Expectations and Identity

Themes coming out of the student interviews around the way that exams were spoken about, the assessment driven culture in school and teacher stress were specifically asked about whilst interviewing staff. Both staff felt pressured where they reflected on being caught up in a system where they were highly accountable for student grades and variables they could not always exert

control over. The SENCo told me she overheard a student saying the exam process was like a 'train track', one that they had to stay on and one in which staff were desperately trying to help students 'not to fall off'. It seemed that the SENCo was in agreement with this. She said:

'...I think it sort of goes right from the very top...if we don't get the results this summer what's the point of us being here...which is genuinely the line our Head teacher used two weeks ago...it filters down to SLT to the head of departments saying well the results last year were this, they've got to improve here...this is our school target. And then the heads of departments start to put the pressure on students...you know the students have on the front of their books their levels...you know your target grade is a B...if you don't pass you exams you will have to resit'.

The SENCo reflected on communication within the school system, showing how school culture is affected by language use that travels down the staff hierarchy, reaching students. This seems to corroborate with messages students reported hearing in assembly. The SENCo continued to reflect on the school system in relation to teacher targets and the levels of stress throughout the system. There was a sense of sadness in her tone of voice. She said:

'Secondary schools are becoming more stressful places for absolutely everybody because everybody has targets...from the tiniest Year 7, through to the head teacher...that actually means that it's more like a business or industry but you happen to have children involved that don't have that resilience to be able to deal with what they are being asked of them.'

Similarly, the AHY reflected on teacher stress, however this was in relation to how this affected her, rather than speaking only about stress within the school system. She spoke about line management meetings and the realisation she had a conflict of interest in terms of what she was being asked to do in 'getting' students' grades and what was in the best interests of the students. She said:

'...it's not only in this school but everywhere...all the things on the news at the moment it's kind of global. I think there's an element that we are ultimately responsible for whether they get the grades so as much as we are trying to impart wisdom on them and knowledge and help them to learn a skill set to be able to get their own grade, ultimately if they don't get the grades we don't get the grades and that is a pressure and I've found that I am very much in it for the kids...but I'm always brought back to reality when I have my line management meetings...to see how they are going...and I think hold on a

minute how can I guarantee...anything could happen...although there's a lot in your control as teachers there's a lot that's out of your control and things like how they manage exams their stress their own personalities...as much as you can give them strategies you don't know how they're going to manage.'

The AHY seems to imply here that in her line management meetings she was 'going against the grain' in terms of what she believed was right by the kids and this was creating some stress for her and making her feel out of control. The pressure she felt seemed to stem from being asked by senior leadership to do the impossible. To get students grades know matter what was happening in students' lives. She was ultimately still accountable for them. This was a view that many of the students spoke about, with some of them explicitly addressing the fact that teachers might be in trouble if they did not 'get the grades' and that it would affect their careers.

Both staff members reflected on the time constraints they had in preparing students for exams. The SENCo said that because of the business culture in schools it meant teachers were not preparing students for life. She told me that teachers work hard to make creative lessons to embed life skills, such as how to organise, budget and how to revise; however when it came down to it, there is little time to do so because of exam preparation. She said:

'I think a lot of students find there is pressure put on them because within reason schools spoon feed because they need to have the information in their books, and then some of the students are expected to process and analyse and synthesise, but we don't necessarily teach them how to do that. We definitely don't teach them how to revise.'

The SENCo implied that the current exam system does not lend itself to truly educating students. Education in her view was about the holistic child and equipping them with a range of life skills beyond examinations. She felt as though children were seen as commodities rather than supporting them to flourish.

When asked how they felt exams defined students, staff mainly spoke about friendships that students had and how this was affected by exams. The SENCo told me that students often changed their friendships depending on how they felt about their grades. She said that: *'girls shift to different friendship groups based on how they feel. So from hardworking groups to others that are concerned with drugs and alcohol'*. She proceeded to tell me that students had to be *'emotionally resilient'* in order to detach themselves from the effects of the label of the grade. Similarly, the AHY spoke about how students' target grades defined them, with parents often not understanding that achieving target grades was a developmental process, saying: *'They don't understand that it is transient and they are developing...they are*

moving towards their grades'. She said this often results in parents putting pressure on students if they have not met their target grades immediately.

In talking in more detail about pressure and expectations around grades, both staff members acknowledged that it could come from different sources. The SENCo said:

'...older siblings who've done really well... if you feel not the most able in that peer group, or if you're the most able and you feel you have a position to maintain. It can come from parents, even when parents don't mean to and I think it can be internalised as well...it's that I've got to do well because this is my future and the world tells them that all the time now. If you don't work hard you won't get a good job, if you don't work hard you won't be able to go to university. If you don't work hard you'll have to redo you previous public exams. If you don't work hard you'll end up at college and have to retake this and that...and I think when I was at school it wasn't like that.'

The SENCo appeared to have a good insight into student experience in terms of how messages from adults can be internalised, the social comparisons students make to their peer group and student

perceptions of how grades impact their future. Students had expressed the view that adults tended to overreact regarding the importance of grades. Some students reported that after taking exams they realised that grades do not mean 'everything'. The SENCo articulates student experience concisely within this paragraph, showing that she has an in depth understanding of what the majority of students felt throughout the examination period.

4.5.3: Resiliency and Coping

In speaking about how students coped throughout the exam period, both staff spoke about the support networks surrounding students and felt it was the role of adults (both parents and school staff), to support students in building effective coping skills and in becoming more resilient. The SENCo spoke about differences in students' circumstances such as their support networks, their intrinsic motivation for learning and how this related to their responses to taking exams. She said:

'I think that this sort of school will end up with a top elite and a very hard working middle and a bottom that just falls away because they haven't got parental support and they haven't potentially got the motivation or the interest in school and so they don't buy into any of those extra supports because they're

not what they want or need...and on one level they aren't stressed about exams at all and one level they are because they hate them...so they are not stressed about passing or failing, they are stressed about the fact they have got to sit the things in the first place'.

The SENCo seems to be speaking about educational aspirations in general and the embedded attitude towards learning that might come from lower parental aspirations and the influence this has on some students. She suggests that the 'bottom' layer of students have developed apathy for taking exams. It is not clear whether she thinks they do not care about taking exams or whether they do not have the sense of self-worth or belief in exerting control over their future aspirations. She seems to suggest there is an entrenched attitude from some students that getting good grades is beyond their control and so there is no point in trying.

The SENCo spoke more from a systems perspective about the interventions available to students and the process she went through in setting those up. She said:

'The last two years we have run stress management groups with a focus on exams. This year we sent out an email survey to Year 11

students. We have anonymous data and then we can start to run courses'.

The AHY placed more emphasis on relationships when speaking about coping strategies that students used. She placed onerous on staff for being the primary supporters of helping students to develop these skills. She said: *'...its finding that balance between understanding that it is stressful and yes it isn't the end of the world if you fail and there are opportunities to take it again but we don't want you to rely on the fact that if you have a bad day you have to retake'.* What she said seems to represent the conflict of interest she had earlier. She wanted to support students in helping to contain their feelings of disappointment about grades, however she had a need to ensure that they did not have to retake exams. This was reflected in the student interviews where students felt anything below a 'C' grade or a 'B' grade for one student, was a 'failure'.

The AHY felt that how students' perceptions of failure influenced how they coped throughout the examination process, with students who *'were less realistic'* experiencing a sense of *'it all crashing down'* upon them. She described how she spoke to students about failure, following disappointing grades:

'well look you got this grade here...ok you didn't get quite what you were expecting on this particular subject but you haven't failed...it's not like you've got no grades at all...failure is maybe not even trying in the first place...then you can say you've failed if you haven't even tried...if you haven't given it a go then perhaps you're setting yourself up for failure and choosing'.

The AHY describes a situation whereby she helped to reframe an experience for a student by exploring their concerns and the concept of failure itself. She spoke about students having a fixed mind set in terms of what they considered to be a 'failure'.

Similarly to the SENCo, the AHY spoke about some students having an avoidant attitude and feeling as though they had already failed before they started. She said this was usually the case for students who felt they would never meet their target grades. She described this way of thinking as: *'...a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you say you're going to fail then okay you may well do. You're choosing to have that attitude'.*

The difference between the staff roles was perhaps most reflected in the way they spoke about attachments to students with the AHY speaking mostly about her relationships with students and attuning to their needs. The SENCo spoke about adults in general in the school

environment acting as mentors and explained this could be informally as well as formal. For example, Senior Leadership provided structured mentoring for underachieving students. Informal mentoring tended to be more ad hoc and reactive, with students appearing to staff they felt comfortable with when they felt they could not cope.

The AHY provided a deeper insight into how exam stress and typical feelings in adolescence around identity and friendships seemed to interact. She said:

'I met with a student only yesterday and she burst into tears saying it always happens when I'm finding it really hard at school...she was not coping with things very well in school so it was having a knock on effect with her peer relationships...and that to me is what we see a lot in the younger years...perhaps the things they can't identify it has a knock on effect on their friendships'.

The AHY said that younger students tended not to be able to identify stress that was related to school and this manifested in the ways they behaved, which in turn affected the ways they related to their friends. From what the AHY said, it was clear that friendship difficulties were very distressing for this student and part of the attachment relationship

between the AHY and the student was about helping her to become more self-aware in identifying feelings of stress and the underlying causes. This relied on the AHY being able to identify signs that related to exam stress. The AHY continued to say:

'...they may not verbalise it but you can see it and once you open that door and you ask them then sometimes the flood gates can open...and then...this is wrong and this is wrong and I can't do this and I'm struggling with my deadline here and I feel like I'm behind and I'm not coping with this and it all comes tumbling out...and again it's them being stressed and not knowing how to manage it...I don't know whether I'm more sensitive to their needs because of the roles I have done or whether it is school wide'.

The AHY explicitly recognised that she is a staff member who is particularly sensitive to student needs because of the capacity of her role and because of her personal qualities. I experienced her as nurturing and caring. The students that I interviewed spoke about her as a source of support.

The AHY identified that *'the flood gates open'* and it seemed from what she was saying, that stress was a cumulative total of not only feeling

worried about exams, but also a build up of multiple worries with regards to adolescence and development in general. She said: *'this can be incredibly stressful especially when you think of all the other things that come with being a teenager...being a teenager girl is hard enough.'* This was an area that students commented on less. Their feelings of stress were largely attributed to what was happening in the here and now such as taking exams and they had not appeared to have made the connection to more general pressures they might be facing.

It was interesting that both the SENCo and AHY spoke mainly of girls when speaking about the pressures of adolescence. I wondered whether this was because they are female themselves or whether there was a stereotype at play here in terms of the ways that girls are perceived in relation to experiencing/showing signs of stress.

Whilst the AHY acknowledged that exams can be stressful she believed that staff can help mitigate students' feelings of stress. She also felt the school system places too much pressure on staff and that it was becoming impossible to be able to support every student in the way that she wanted to. She said:

'[When students don't get what they want] that's not only gutting for them, that's gutting for you...there is a pressure for us to ensure that they get particular grades because it's a reflection of us as a school and puts us in the league tables and where we should be nationally, but teachers don't have time with so many students. It's endless and that can be really stressful...and there's a big ask on teachers and that has a knock on effect in the classroom because you're stressed, your temper can fray...we are taught as adults to model good behaviour but we need to show kids that it's not uncommon for people to be stressed'.

The AHY seemed to be saying that they as a school need to go a step further and address stress openly, showing students that adults also experience stress and that having an open dialogue about this through secure relationships with adults, they can help students normalise feelings of stress.

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

5.1: A Commentary on Phase One and Phase Two Results in Relation to Existing Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The findings of the present study are explored in answer to the central research question: *How do students experience taking key stage 4/5 public examinations and what works to support them and why?* In order to drill down into student experiences I explored three sub questions. These were: (i) *What are the processes/factors that support students during the examination period;* (ii) *How do school staff understand the experiences of students taking key stage 4/5 public examinations;* and (iii) *How do school staff best support students during the examination period?* Three overarching concepts emerged from the data, which were: 'The Stress Cycle'; 'Grades, Expectations and Identity' and 'Resilience and Coping'.

The findings of existing research specifically on models of stress, coping and resiliency and an eco-systemic theoretical perspective was applied to make sense of students' experiences. Staff perceptions were triangulated with student data to determine their understanding of student experience. The stress cycle was inextricably linked to the overarching concepts; grades, expectations and identity and resilience and coping. Students had expectations of their grades for themselves and they had received expectations from others. How students felt

about their grades impacted how stressful they perceived exams to be. Effective coping strategies such as key attachments to adults helped to mitigate the effects of expectations from others.

Seiffge-Krenke (1993) identified four specific areas of change and insecurity in young people's lives which have been shown to generate stress and induce anxiety symptoms. These are; their bodies; relationships with peers and parents; establishing and maintaining a self-identity; and school life (assessments and transitions). According to a recent UK newspaper article (The Guardian, April 2016), the 'Child mental health crisis is worse than suspected'. Natasha Devon, former UK government mental health champion, referred specifically to an assessment driven culture in schools and the need for schools to begin focusing on helping children and young people to build inner resources for managing the pressures placed on them in schools.

Research from Denscombe (2000) and Putwain (2009) provides a deeper insight into student perceptions about taking exams. Similarities between student experiences' were found in this study that corroborates findings from their research. However, my research presents a unique contribution to the literature in helping professionals to understand the interacting factors that exacerbate feelings of exam stress as well as supportive processes within the school setting. The study also highlights characteristics of students who coped particularly

well during the exam period and suggests ways that school staff and parents/carers can help in building or strengthening coping mechanisms, something that previous research has not explored.

5.2: How do students experience taking exams?

5.2.1: The Stress Cycle

The first overarching concept was 'The Stress Cycle'. Students experienced exam stress as having a cyclical nature with thoughts, feelings and behaviours interacting and reinforcing each other. This cycle meant that all students experienced some form of stress, ranging from what could be defined as 'normal' levels of stress such as worrying, to more severe forms such as panic attacks and frequent catastrophic thoughts. Findings of the study corroborate reports from the charity 'Mind' (2013) who described a number of changes to students' sleeping and eating habits, anger and anxiety levels during the exam period. ChildLine research Students, in this study who experienced more severe exam stress, showed symptoms characteristic of those set out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V, 2013), such as lack of concentration, excessive worry and avoiding feared situations. With children and young people spending most of their week working towards assessments, it is not surprising that anxiety related disorders are on the rise (UNICEF, 2013).

School staff in this study shared the opinion that a certain amount of exam stress is 'normal' and that there was a stress continuum with students falling at different points on this in terms of the severity of their stress. McGonigal (2015) suggests that we need to practice reframing what we mean by the term 'stress' in order to use feelings of pressure to our advantage. Findings from this study corroborate this, with students who coped well, using various strategies to reframe their thinking, in order to see 'stress' as something that could bring opportunities and help them to thrive in their exams.

Subjective models of stress such as Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model (1984; 1987) are helpful for interpreting the findings of this study. They provide a framework for considering the stress response in terms of a person interacting with the environment and making appraisals based on what they perceive to be threatening. This study showed that students' perceptions of the exam situation resulted in negative physiological and behavioural responses. The transactional model of stress goes further than considering the response of a subject to a stressor, to consider ways of coping and mechanisms for coping. It is this focus on coping that makes this model more complete in terms of how it explains the stress cycle within this study. Students in this study perceived exams as threatening, with some students engaging in anticipatory forms of coping such as avoidant patterns of behaviour. This reinforced their feelings of stress within 'the stress cycle'. Students who engaged in more 'active' coping

strategies as Lazarus and Folkman suggest, were better able to self-regulate feelings of exam stress.

Whilst models of stress, such as the transactional model are helpful in providing a framework to help researchers understand the process and mechanisms of stress; they provide little insight into the specific factors that exacerbate exam stress and the factors/processes that students appraise as supportive or 'threatening' within the school context. Nor does the transactional model tell us specifically how students coped with the exam process within this specific school context. Findings from this study can best be explained by taking the transactional model of stress as a framework together with existing research on qualitative experiences of exam students, in order to better understand student experience and what is supportive to them and why.

Qualitative studies exploring students' perceptions of exam stress have revealed a number of factors that exacerbate exam stress. Putwain's (2009) study showed that exam stress can change over time and this was also the case in the present study. Denscombe's (2000) study found that girls in particular tended to ruminate about exams in negative ways prior to the exam and that this exacerbated feelings of stress. This was also found to be the case in this study, with some students actively avoiding their peers in order to reduce feelings of stress. Findings such as these show how social interactions about

exams amongst peers facilitate stress within the school context. Denscombe's and Putwain's studies are limited to student perceptions. By interviewing school staff I was able to gain insight into levels of stress within the wider school system, where it seemed that there were multiple cycles of stress across the school hierarchy. Social interactions and discourse within the wider school system between students and teachers and senior leaders and teachers, became pressurising and target driven, resulting in catastrophic thinking filtering down within the school hierarchy. It would appear from this study that an assessment driven culture is causing a chronically stressed school system.

5.2.2 Grades, Expectations and Identity

The second overarching concept which arose was 'Grades, Expectations and Identity'. Students' perceptions of what their grades meant to them and to significant attachment figures appeared to become a central part of their identity. Students who felt that either their future or their identity as an achiever was contingent on their grades, tended to experience the exam process as more stressful than those who saw grades as being separate from them. This study helped to explore some of the underlying core beliefs students held, the narratives they developed and the meanings they associated to exams in relation to their confidence and feelings of self-worth.

Denscombe (2000) and Putwain (2009) found that social conditions surrounding students were important for influencing their perceptions of the importance of exams. This was also the case in the present research. For example, the theme 'the first examinations that really matter' in Denscombe's study was also reflected in findings from this study, where the majority of students perceived their future employment opportunities as being contingent on GCSE grades. This supports Giddens (1991) assertions that GCSE results are often seen by students as "fateful moments," where students feel that exams will determine their life trajectory, creating an overwhelming need to succeed. For the majority of students in this study there was some level of preoccupation with the idea that GCSEs paved their way for the future, whether that be getting into university, Sixth Form or pursuing a chosen career path. School staff also reflected this belief in my interviews with them. On one hand they acknowledged the pressure this was placing on students and on the other hand they believed they needed to prepare them for the current educational climate. This further reflects Putwain's findings around students feeling the pressure of 'having particular aspirations that required specific grades'.

Denscombe suggested that students saw GCSE's as 'the first examinations that really matter' and this was found to be the case in the present study. The uncertainty of what grades they would achieve and whether they would be able to pursue further education, became a source of worry for students. This made them feel out of control.

Putwain suggested that the anticipation of failure was overwhelming for students. This study corroborates this finding. However this did change at different time points throughout the year, with worries about failure generally lessening after the exam and then felt again immediately before opening results. In relation to this, Giddens notes that getting a grade C, is no longer considered to be sufficient for many students. In this study all students considered getting lower than a C grade 'a failure', with higher achieving students considering lower than a B grade 'a failure'.

One theme that was extracted from Denscombe's study and that is fundamental to students' beliefs in this study, was students seeing GCSEs as a 'benchmark for who I am'. Denscombe speaks about the implications this has for feelings of self-esteem and self-worth, with students seeing grades as values by which they can judge their sense of worth. Students in this study had learned to see assessments as significant for shaping their identity and this was based on school assessments going back to when they first started secondary school as well as their performance on mock exams. Maintaining this identity was especially pressuring for high achievers, where according to some students school staff reinforced their 'top achiever' identity by 'putting them on a pedestal' and encouraging competition between students.

Denscombe's research points to concepts such as self-esteem and self-worth as being tied to students' grades, which in turn was linked to their self-identity. This study replicates those findings, however the literature on self-esteem and self-worth appears to use these concepts interchangeably. How far they differ from concepts such as self-efficacy can also be unclear. According Seligman (1996, 2002) self-esteem can be a stable and unstable trait, and it is those who's self-esteem is contingent on academic or social approval who are more likely to experience a sense of instability. Students both in Denscombe's research and in my research who attributed their feelings of self-worth as being contingent on academic success, were less able to cope with the examination process. Those who felt their self-worth rested on being a rounded person and giving equal importance to their personal life, tended to have higher feelings of self-worth that were not contingent on grades.

The concepts of self-esteem and self-worth need to be further explored in light of these findings and in relation to how school systems can create cultures that foster feelings of high self-worth. The role of GCSEs as a contributor to a growing level of stress-related psychological disorders affecting young people has been documented in the literature (Mennell et al. 1992; Alsop & McCaffrey, 1993; Smith & Rutter, 1995; Aggleton, 1996; West & Sweeting, 1996). It is concerning that students appear to be tying their sense of self-worth

disproportionally to the outcomes of exams and it would be easy to believe that this is a contributing factor to clinical levels of anxiety.

There is little research that looks at the relationship between teacher stress in relation to examinations and how this affects students. This study is unique as it triangulated the views of students with school staff, where the relationship between teacher stress and student stress was explored as part of understanding student experiences. This study showed that teacher stress filters down to students and was facilitated by the language staff used surrounding examinations and in the ways that messages were delivered to students. This manifested in teachers excessively administering mock examinations throughout the year and using pressurising language to suggest that students needed to meet specific targets.

5.3: What works to support students and why?

5.3.1: Resilience and Coping

The third overarching concept was related to how students perceived they coped throughout the examination period. Students referred to what was supportive to them and what exacerbated feelings of exam stress. It is this theme that presents a particularly unique contribution to the literature, where staff perceptions were triangulated with student experiences to determine 'what worked' in supporting students to cope better. Other qualitative studies such as those of Denscombe and Putwain do not consider the supportive processes within the school

context that can help to mitigate the risk of stress and build protective supports for students.

School staff reflected on the pastoral system and supported student perceptions that there was a range of formal and informal systems of support within the school, such as exam stress interventions and one to one sessions. The AHY seemed to understand students' needs for regular informal support, suggesting that the role staff members provides them a different lens through which they perceive what is supportive to students.

Students in this study had multiple sources of pressures in their lives and a large part of this was in relation to developing as an adolescent and having to cope with the physical and emotional changes that come with this, whilst at the same time managing feelings of exam stress. Research from Geddes (2005) and Bomber (2007) emphasised the importance of having secondary attachment figures in school in order to support students in regulating their emotions and helping them to feel secure.

Students in this study drew on a number of social supports within the school context, such as teachers and peers. Every student that was interviewed was able to name at least one teacher or learning mentor

that they considered to be a constant support to them. Availability and consistency was important for all students. Research on attachment theory, highlights the importance of caregivers being attuned to children's needs and responsive to them. In times of distress secure attachment figures act as 'containers', holding the child's concerns and helping them to self-regulate.

Some students in this study needed more support than others with helping to self-regulate. For these students the importance of a containing space, such as a room that they could find these adults in when they needed them, was crucial for helping them to manage feelings of stress. For students who were better able to self-regulate, trusting that teachers were doing their best to support them in helping them to prepare for exams was enough to create a feeling of security.

The present study showed that how successful students were at managing grade related expectations from adults, depended upon the nature of their attachments to key caregivers. Students who were able to rationalise expectations, were those who had built a range of coping skills alongside adults in their life, who encouraged them to actively build these skills. The value of using an IPA approach meant that I was able to focus on idiosyncrasies of students as well as looking for patterns across students. Mark who appeared to cope better than other students was particularly interesting to me as he demonstrated how

resilient he was in managing expectations from adults. Mark had used his Dad's mantra 'you don't want to regret anything in ten years time', to help motivate himself to achieve his goals. Whilst for some students this might appear overwhelming and pressurising, it was clear that Mark saw expectations from his Dad as supportive and encouraging. This translated into how he viewed teacher expectations, where he viewed expectations not as threatening but coming from a supportive place.

Mark's ability to feel in control of the examination process where he did not succumb to the pressures, reflects research on locus of control. According to Rutter (1984), a person with a high internal locus of control feels that success or failure is a consequence of their own behaviour and attributes. Mark appeared to have a high internal locus of control in that he believed that he could manage the exam process and thrived in the face of challenges. He revealed a number of processes of support that he drew on to help him cope such as reframing catastrophic thoughts to cope with disappointments, compartmentalising thoughts about exams to designated times, limited who he spoke to and what he spoke about.

Research from Rotter (1954) has shown that having an internal locus of control can be negative in that people place too much pressure on themselves to control a situation, placing themselves as fully

responsible. This was not the case for Mark as he was able to reframe disappointments when they occurred. James, however, also had a high internal locus of control, and placed high expectations on himself to maintain his status as a 'top achiever'. This resulted in feeling overwhelmed. The fact that Mark felt supported by teachers and James felt there was inconsistent support, suggests that secure secondary attachment figures have a role in providing containment that potentially mitigates the negative consequences of having a high internal locus of control.

Furthermore, even students who showed high stress levels, such as Annabelle were able over time to learn to be more in control. Annabelle initially felt as though the exams were overwhelming and good grades were out of reach for her. With the support of attachment figures helping her to better define her goals, she were able over time to learn how to reframe her thought processes and behaviours in order to foster more proactive coping strategies. Whilst Annabelle still experienced moments of self-doubt and catastrophic thoughts, she was able to self-regulate by drawing on supportive structures around her.

Research on academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989, Vancouver et al., 2002) suggests that students are more likely to be motivated to succeed and be less stressed if they believe they can achieve academically. This study was not consistent with these findings, as

academic self-efficacy did not seem to be enough in helping students to feel that they could cope. However I do acknowledge that this study uses a small sample of students and was not designed to specifically explore self-efficacy beliefs in depth. Students within the sample varied in terms of their academic self-efficacy beliefs with some believing that they were capable of achieving high grades and others believing they might 'fail'. Academic self-efficacy beliefs were less important and were not a good predictor of how stressed they felt. What seemed more important was students' beliefs in how effectively they could cope emotionally with the process of taking exams and this did not always directly relate to high achievement. Having high emotional self-efficacy beliefs seemed to be greater for students who had secure attachments with primary caregivers and strong secondary attachment figures in school, who they often seeking support with regulating themselves emotionally. James, who experienced panic attacks whilst taking exams had a high sense of academic self-efficacy yet felt he could not cope with the process of exams, feeling that teachers were neglecting him.

Students in this study who coped better had established multiple networks of support from adults and peers, as well as engaging in hobbies such as playing sport or reading. As a result they were able to compartmentalise their thoughts and immerse themselves in activities that were not related to exams. Taking time away from preparing for exams provided them with 'down time' away from pressurising

thoughts. This reflects research on resilience in that there is thought to be a cumulative effect, which Cyrulnik (2009) terms 'the resiliency chain', where protective factors such as engaging in meaningful participation through social activities, helps to build resiliency and mitigates risk factors that are causing feelings of stress.

CHAPTER SIX – EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1: Limitations of the Study

6.1.1: Sampling

I chose to interview students at two time points that I felt were relatively less stressful times of the academic year. Therefore I might not have captured the true extent of their exam stress. I felt that it was unethical to interview students whilst exams were imminent, as it might have exacerbated students' stress levels. By interviewing students after the exams it provided them with space to reflect on the process, arguably providing for a richer dialogue around their thoughts on what had worked to support them.

This study interviewed students who had got into Sixth Form and so had been reasonably successful at taking exams. It could be argued that students who were less successful might experience even higher levels of exam stress. Students who had not done as well in exams did not turn up to the interview and were difficult to reach. Had I interviewed them they would have been able to provide data that reflects a more representative sample of students within the school.

6.1.2: Trustworthiness and Researcher Bias

Whilst I employed means to reduce the risk of researcher bias such as using supervision time to reflect on my thoughts, making notes after each interview and seeking supervision to check reliability of overarching concepts and superordinate themes, I acknowledge that there is still possibility for some bias. Having been a teacher for a number of years prior to my role as a Trainee EP, I had worked with students who felt stressed because of exams. I also felt the pressures of preparing students for exams and the burden of this did change the way that I behaved during exam time. I had worked in a school where there was high accountability placed on teachers and this had overwhelmed me at times. I had to be careful whilst undertaking this research not to transfer feelings from my own experience onto participants. When I questioned staff about the grades culture in schools I checked that I remained neutral throughout and tried not to lead them. I noted this whilst designing my research questions and took care to position them objectively.

Prior to carrying out data collection I had conducted a comprehensive literature review in the area of exam stress, resilience and coping and this might have biased the types of questions I asked participants, the way I asked questions and how I responded to them. As Creswell (2003) notes, methods of data collection such as semi-structured interviews that rely on verbal interaction between individuals are

vulnerable to subjectivity and bias. It is also possible that participants felt they had to socially conform to what I wanted to hear or by characteristics of me as researcher.

I did feel on occasions that my role as a psychologist affected students' responses. Whilst I was clear to students that I was a researcher, some of the students had known who I was from working as a TEP within the school. Two students commented that they were not people who felt stressed and that they did not have a disorder. I tried to reassure them that this was not the aim of my research however I was conscious that they might have felt uncomfortable with my role. Being known as a Psychologist affected some students positively, with one student confiding in me after the interview had finished that he wanted to seek support for difficulties at home. I referred this to the AHY. It was clear that speaking with me was containing for him. Whilst choosing a school that I did not work in might have been a more neutral starting point, it might have presented more challenges with recruitment. I had built up relationships within this school and this was clearly a comfort for some students during the interview process.

6.1.3: Data analysis

I chose to interview nine students in this study in order to gain a broad sample of students who had varying experiences. Using an IPA approach allowed me to gain an in depth insight into student experiences. This included psychological aspects of their world, where

through the interview process I was able to interpret how they made sense of their experiences. I felt this was a powerful process and the in depth nature of IPA added richness to how I understood their students' unique experiences as well as common experiences. Reflecting on the impact each student had on me as a researcher was also meaningful and added a different dimension to my understanding of their experience. I chose to analyse my student data in stages, transcribing five of these interviews completely to generate concepts and themes and then applying this to the remaining, partly transcribed student data. I felt that in order to engage in a rich analysis, nine interviews provided too big a data set and I needed to employ a clear strategy for reducing this. I did, however feel that the concepts and themes that I have presented reflect all nine students experiences well.

6.1.4: Generalisability of findings

The small sample of students and staff limits the claims that I can make as it focuses on experiences of one school setting. Researchers such as Creswell (2003) have argued that results can be representative as if a given experience is possible then it should be subject to universalisation. Within the IPA process it was possible to look for recurrent emergent themes across the sample, and the themes that were generated did represent universal experiences of the group. School staff who had worked in other schools made comments during being interviewed about the global nature of exam stress and because of this I felt that the experiences of students within this study could

represent some common perceptions about student experiences in general.

6.2: Implications for Further Research

The present research raises additional questions regarding students' experiences of taking it exams. It also raises questions about the exam system in general, experiences of teachers and school culture. The areas that would benefit from further investigation are listed below:

- Are the three overarching concepts regarding student experiences of taking exams generalisable to students within the same school that do not apply for Sixth Form/did not achieve C grades?
- Are the three overarching concepts regarding student experiences of taking exams generalisable to students and staff across different schools?
- Are there similarities between the school staff perceptions of students' experiences and what works to support them, and perceptions of school staff with different roles within the school?
- How can teachers support students to build effective coping skills at a younger age so that taking exams becomes less stressful?
- How can parents/carers better support students throughout the exam process? What factors are supportive/unsupportive?

6.3: Dissemination Process

A summary of the completed study will be sent to the school selected for this research. This will be followed by a presentation to the school leadership team of general findings. Emphasis will be placed on how school staff can better support students to cope during exam time. The research will be presented to the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) where I completed my Trainee EP placement. It is hoped that findings will be useful to both the school and the EPS in thinking preventatively about how to support students throughout the examination process.

A general summary of the findings will also be disseminated to parents and students in the school should the senior leadership team desire this. This could be designed as a leaflet of useful advice to help support students around exam time. A more general leaflet could be created to disseminate findings to other schools in the Borough; however care would need to be taken to protect the identity of the school.

6.4: Implications for Stakeholders: Schools and the Local Authority

The research has the following implications for stakeholders:

- The importance of secondary attachment figures in schools, in helping students build effective skills in emotional-regulation, feeling safe and contained and being consistently available during times of increased stress. This finding has implications for school mentoring systems and a need to train staff in attachment theory.
- The need to train staff on research around coping and resilience and the practical implications of this for teachers in the classroom.
- The chronic stress within the school system regarding exams and the pervasive nature of this for students and staff. The effect this had on school culture in terms of the ways messages were delivered about exams and the language used, would be helpful to share with head teachers in order to raise awareness of the grades driven culture and how this plays out within the school system.
- The link between grades and identity in relation to how students appraised themselves and how this related to their feelings of self-worth. Sharing this with school staff will enable them to consider ways to make grades appear less threatening to students. Students felt that their future aspirations were contingent on getting good grades and this was a source of pressure for them. This has implications for school staff

for developing ways of helping students to reframe their thinking and in supporting them with set realistic goals.

- The coping strategies students use in order to manage the process of taking exams, such as; having supportive attachment figures, alongside a high internal locus of control and emotional self-efficacy. This information could be used to help schools and parents consider ways to help students build these skills at a younger age in order to provide students with inner resources that they can draw on in times of stress.
- The additional pressures from the home context, such as the influence of older siblings and parental expectations. The role of parents/carers in encouraging students to live a balanced life that does not only focus on academic studies.

6.5: Implications for Educational Psychologists' Practice

The findings of this research have important implications for Educational psychologists (EPs). The core functions of the EP role have been debated in the literature (Cameron, 2006; 2009). Fallons, Woods and Rooney (2010), suggested five core functions of the role which are; consultation, assessment, intervention, research and training; and this reflects the range of work EPs can offer across

different levels within the school context; such as at the individual child level, the group level and on an organisational level. Within my practice as a TEP I regularly apply Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic framework to help me consider the multiple interacting factors surrounding the child and young person. This research showed that students' experiences were influenced and shaped by interacting factors within the school environment, where students drew on support structures both formal and informal to help them cope throughout the examination period. Bronfenbrenner's framework can also be applied to consider how findings from this research has implication across different levels beginning at the individual child level and extending to the macrosystem level in thinking about implications for systemic work that EPs engage in.

EPs work at the individual level to assess the learning, social and emotional needs of children and young people (CYP). They may work with families and school staff to support their thinking in developing support plans for CYP. Following the implementation of the latest Children and Families Act (2014) and the move towards a single assessment Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) for CYP; emphasis has been placed on gaining and capturing the voice and future aspirations of the CYP as part of this process and more generally in EP work. Findings from this research showed that gaining student perspectives in relation to their experiences of taking exams is crucial in understanding how parents/carers and school staff can better

support students during the examination period. Some students in the present study had a clear vision in terms of their future aspirations and they appeared to cope better with the stress of taking exams. EPs are proficient in using a range of person-centered approaches such as Personal Construct Psychology (PCP, Kelly, 1955) where the EP works with CYP to help them better understand their thoughts, feelings and emotions. At the individual level EPs can use findings from this research in their work with students who are taking exams, in order to explore their future aspirations with them.

Within the local authority (LA) where this research took place, EPs work predominantly within a consultation based model of service delivery with schools and families. Students experiencing exam stress would be raised by the school SENCo on a consultation level. Consultation is described by Conoley and Conoley (1990) as a “problem solving relationship between professionals of differing fields” (p 84), where the purpose is to “enhance the problem solving capacity of a consultee” (p 85), by helping professionals to develop a greater sense of “self-efficacy” in coming to solutions. Within consultation EPs draw on a range of evidence based frameworks for practice (Kelly, Woolfson & Boyle, 2008). Findings of this research can help to facilitate EP work by providing a framework for understanding how students might experience exam stress and what works to support them within the school context. This knowledge can be disseminated by the EP

through consultation with school staff and parents to support thinking around strategies and interventions.

Another level that EPs can work at is the group level. Gregor (2005) showed that CBT relaxation based interventions were most effective in helping to reduce feelings of exam stress in students on a group level. Findings from this study showed that the exam stress intervention did go some way in supporting students with becoming more aware of exam stress and providing strategies to support them such as reframing thoughts and reducing physiological symptoms, however what was most effective was the group based format in allowing students to talk to each other about exam stress within a supportive structure. The intervention provided students with a containing space with an adult that they trusted to help moderate and regulate what they spoke about. This prevented unhelpful rumination about exams.

As an EP this offered me a new way to view the effects of interventions of this nature, in that positive effects might be related to supportive processes of connecting to others going through a similar experience, rather than the CBT framework itself. The EP has an important role in helping schools to set up such interventions and in facilitating the process. Having knowledge of what works will be important for informing future interventions like these.

EPs can play a valuable role at a whole school level in supporting the development of a positive school culture in relation to assessments and exams. The findings of this study could also be used by EPs to deliver training in order to upskill professionals within the school context. By building capacity within the school system, both in recognising signs of exam stress and in developing coping skills in students to support resilience, schools can begin working on a more preventative level in order to build effective coping skills in children and young people. Findings from this study showed that the ways exams were spoken about within the school context by staff and students affected students' feelings of self-worth. EPs have a role in working systemically to help schools develop positive narratives around exams. This research showed that having a high sense of emotional self-efficacy is important to support students in managing the emotional aspects of taking exams.

EPs regularly work with school staff who bring with them their own feelings of self-efficacy around managing feelings of stress related to supporting students. Obholzer and Roberts (1994) suggest that stress might also relate more generally to their role and balancing time pressures, role conflict and other organisational pressures. There are a growing number of EPs that are providing supervision to school staff and multi-professionals, where through the process of consultation EPs are able to provide a containing space for staff in order to think through a problem and helping them to regulate feelings of stress. In one LA

the process of consultation was facilitated by EPs in providing supervision to family workers and social workers through 'complex case discussions' (Feeney, 2015). Professionals commented on the therapeutic function of this process and that by engaging with the process it built capacity for them to think more psychologically, build problem solving skills and build clear solutions.

6.6: Researcher's Reflections

I found the process of undertaking this doctoral research both rewarding and challenging. The process was a learning curve both professionally and personally which I reflect on below:

6.6.1: The Education System

Listening to student accounts in relation to how pressured they felt to get grades raised questions for me in terms of the education system and my own philosophy of education. In my previous role as a teacher I had experienced students being affected by the pressure of exams and this had led me to ask wider questions about the role of exams in mental health and emotional well-being. With protests for banning SATs examinations in Primary schools in the UK taking place at the time of writing (May 2016), this research made me question the function of testing students and the implications for enjoying learning for learning's sake.

It is my personal belief that education should not only be for academic purposes but for developing rounded and resilient individuals. For me, education should draw on emotional and social aspects of learning. It should also include aspects of spirituality and moral development. The students that I interviewed had become preoccupied with getting grades, and whilst I felt that some of them had developed important coping skills throughout this process, it was clear that it was stressful for the majority of students.

6.6.2: Learning from Student Participants through the IPA process

I found the process of interviewing students an emotional journey particularly for students who had not coped as well through the process. As students spoke about how they were affected by disappointments, panic attacks and managing stress, I found myself taking on some of their feelings of stress. I also found myself celebrating in their feelings of happiness at getting the grades they wanted.

I was particularly struck by students who coped better than others, such as Mark. His ability to compartmentalize and rationalize his thoughts seemed advanced for his age. Throughout the research process I had to manage my own pressures of completing research alongside placement related work and this became stressful at times. The research encouraged me to reflect on my own coping mechanisms and to put additional supports in place.

I have found that the process of conducting this study has supported me with my own thinking in my practice as an EP. The findings of this research have offered me a new lens through which to view a problem and this has already begun to inform the questions that I ask on a consultation level with schools. For example, I worked recently with a student experiencing exam stress, where my questions centered on what support networks and key adult attachments the student had in school to draw on for support.

6.4: Conclusions

To conclude, the present study was one of the first pieces of research to qualitatively explore how students experience taking key stage 4/5 public examinations, with a focus on coping ability. I gained a rich insight into students' experiences of exam stress and how their experiences related to supportive and unsupportive processes within the school context. The research indicated that there were three common overarching concepts relating to student experiences of taking exams. These were corroborated by school staff in how they understood student experiences. School staff were able to offer additional insights into their perceptions of how stress manifested in students and the possible causes for this stress. Findings from the study highlighted the chronic stress within the school system, as perceived by students and staff. This was related to a grades driven culture and student and teacher accountability. This research study

suggests that appropriate support within the school context can mitigate pressures in relation to exams, however wider systemic changes to develop a more holistic educational approach might help to mitigate these effects further.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A1: Steps in Search of Literature

The steps undertaken to conduct this search, together with search terms are described below:

- Electronic databases such as ERIC and PSYCHINFO were searched using the general terms: 'test anxiety', 'stress', 'education', 'examinations', 'resilience', 'coping'
- Following a broad review of the literature, these databases were then searched using the following specific terms: 'transactional model of stress', 'exam stress', 'student stress', 'student experiences', 'attachment figures', 'coping strategies', 'locus of control', 'self-efficacy'.
- These search terms were combined with other search terms such as: 'student stress' AND 'locus of control'.
- As research on exam stress was limited within the UK in relation to exam-stress, I also reviewed international research from Australia and America, which were most commonly related to the term 'test-anxiety'.
- Relevant journals were searched using search terms related to exam stress. These included: Educational Psychology in Practice, Children and Schools, Journal of Educational Psychology, Test anxiety: Theory, assessment and Treatment.

- Reference lists were consulted to identify relevant articles and the latest research.
- I used internet search engines to conduct searches within UK newspapers with the term 'exam stress'.
- I consulted publications from relevant charities and organisations for mental health statistics such as: The American Psychiatric Association, Mind, ChildLine and UNICEF.

Appendix B1: Initial Student Interview Schedule

	Question	Prompt
WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF TAKING EXAMS?		
1	What does the word 'stress' mean to you?	
2	How would you know if you felt 'stressed'?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Would other people know? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Body - Thoughts - Feelings - Tell me about a time when you were 'stressed'
2	You have just finished taking your GCSE exams. Tell me about your experience of taking them. Do exams make you feel 'stressed'?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What has gone well/what has been difficult? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coursework - Exams/modular exams? - Are some exams more stressful than others?
3	Is there a difference in how you feel when preparing for exams and actually taking them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you feel the night before as opposed to preparing for them in class i.e. sometimes teachers give mock exams to help you prepare.
5	What do exams mean to you? How important do you feel exams are to your future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Fateful moments" -What does it mean to you to do well/not do well?
6	Is it important to you to do well? Why/why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pressure on self - Teacher/parental expectation - What would your peers think?
7	What would happen if you did very well in your exams?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who would notice/what would they say?
8	What would happen if you didn't do well in your exams?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who would notice/what would they say? - Perceptions of failure
9	What do you think your teacher's hopes are for your exams? Have you felt there have been any expectations from them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School: head teacher, teachers - Parents - Peers

		-Pressure -grades
10	What are you parents/carers hopes for your exams?	As above
WHAT IS HELPFUL IN SUPPORTING YOU AND WHY?		
11	Tell me about a time when you felt okay/good about an exam. What made it feel okay/good?	- Environmental factors i.e. the exam room - Subject/content - Preparation - Perception of the exam and how successful they will be.
12	Tell me about a time when you didn't feel good about an exam. What happened?	
13	How do you normally prepare for an exam? What has been helpful and why?	- Attending revision classes after school - At home – where? - With others? Study buddies/help from parents - Practice tests - Health behaviours i.e. adequate sleep
14	What has not been helpful and why?	- Teacher stress - Speaking with friends before/after an exam

Appendix B2: Final Version of Student Interview Schedule

Question	Prompt
WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF TAKING EXAMS AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN TO YOU?	
1 What does the word 'stress' mean to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How would you know if you felt 'stressed'? Would other people know? - Body - Thoughts - Feelings - Tell me about a time when you were 'stressed'
2 You have just finished taking your GCSE/AS Level exams. Tell me about your experience of taking them. Do exams make you feel 'stressed'?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What has gone well/what has been difficult? -Difference from Year 11 to Year 12, 13. - Coursework - Exams/modular exams? - Are some exams more stressful than others? - Across Year 11/at different time points, i.e. building up to exams, the night before, before results, after results. -What thoughts go through your head?
3 What do exams mean to you? For example, what were your hopes going into the exam?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How important do you feel exams are to your future? "Fateful moments" -What does it mean to you to do well/not do well? -Is it important that you do well? - Pressure on self - Teacher/parental expectation - What would your peers think? -University/aspirations
4 How do you feel that you perform in exams? Do you think this affects how stressed you might feel?	i.e. academic ability
5 What would happen if you didn't do well in your exams?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who would notice/what would they say? - Perceptions of failure – What is failure? (Grade-wise?)
6 What do you think your teacher's hopes are for your exams? Have you felt there have been any expectations from them? (How has this affected you?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do they understand how stressful they are? Teacher stress -Pressure

		-grades -School culture
7	What are you parents/carers hopes for your exams?	
8	Does how your peers/friends perform on exams have an effect on how you feel/think about them?	-Conversations -Competition -How do you feel if they are doing better? -Social media
9	Is there anything else you would like to comment on in terms of how you have felt about taking exams (this year or in your school life), in terms of how you have felt?	That might be relevant to what we are talking about/that you would like people to know about/consider?
WHAT IS HELPFUL IN SUPPORTING YOU AND WHY?		
10	Overall, how do you feel you have coped through the exams you have taken/will continue to take?	Have you learnt anything about yourself? What coping strategies do you think you have used to take stress away?
11	During times that have been difficult for you this year, is there anything that has helped you to cope better/ manage feeling less 'stressed' about exams?	-Parents -Teachers -Friends -Hobbies -Exercise -CBT intervention
12	Tell me about a time when you felt okay/good about an exam. What made it feel okay/good?	-Motivating factors -Sense of mastery/success -Practice/preparedness
13	How do you usually approach preparing for an exam? For example, some people like to prepare in advance or some people tend to leave it to closer to the time.	What are their reasons for this? Avoidant/active styles
14	Are there any adults in school that have helped to support you? If so, what did they do/say?	
15	Have you found your friends/class members a support?	Competitiveness/comparison
16	How has being within this school community supported/not supported you?	i.e. language
17	How do you feel the school community could support young people such as yourself further when they are taking exams?	
INTERVENTION		
18	I understand that you took part in an exam stress intervention. Did this help? What did	Did you apply any of these strategies?

	you learn?	
19	What was it about the intervention that was/was not successful?	What should continue/what should be changed?

Appendix B3: Initial Staff Interview Schedule

Question	Prompt
Key Question: WHAT ARE YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF HOW STUDENTS EXPERIENCE TAKING EXAMS AND WHAT STRATEGIES DO YOU THINK SUPPORT THEM?	
SECTION 1: STUDENT EXPERIENCES	
1 In your opinion what do you think 'exam stress' is?	- Physiological, cognitive, affective?
2 I would like you to think about students you have known who have experienced taking exams as stressful. How did this stress present in their behaviour/thoughts/how they felt?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does every student experience a certain level of pressure/stress? - Do all students recognise stress symptoms?
3 In your opinion, what do you think made these students feel so stressed about their exams?	- Can you give me an example of a student you have worked with who has felt particularly stressed about exams?
4 Some students who were interviewed referred to expectations they placed on themselves and from other people. They said that this put additional pressure on them. What are your thoughts about this?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents - Teachers - School culture
7 Do you think teachers are under pressure to help students get good grades? If so, where do you think this pressure comes from and how might it effect students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School leadership - Political context - Themselves - Performance management
8 Some students said that they found it difficult to be around peers during the exam period as it made them feel more stressed. What are your thoughts on this?	
9 What meaning/role do student results have for the school as a whole, class teachers and students?	- School reputation vs individual students.
SECTION 2: WHAT'S WORKED WELL TO SUPPORT STUDENTS	
10 In your opinion why is that some students seem to cope better/are more resilient than other students when taking exams?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coping styles – avoidant/proactive - Personal qualities - Revision - Ability - Gender - Home context

11	How are students who are stressed about exams identified in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Pastoral systems- Parents- Student referral
12	What is on offer for students in school to support them with taking exams?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Stress intervention- After school revision- Teacher/peer mentors?
13	For those students that find exams stressful, which strategies do you think are particularly helpful in supporting them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- One to one work- Small group work- Teaching styles

Appendix B4: Final Staff Interview Schedule

	Question	Prompt
	Key Question: WHAT ARE YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF HOW STUDENTS EXPERIENCE TAKING EXAMS AND WHAT STRATEGIES DO YOU THINK SUPPORT THEM?	
	SECTION 1: STUDENT EXPERIENCES	
1	In your opinion what do you think 'exam stress' is?	- Physiological, cognitive, affective?
2	I would like you to think about students you have known who have experienced taking exams as stressful. How did this stress present in their behaviour/thoughts/how they felt?	- Does every student experience a certain level of pressure/stress? - Do all students recognise stress symptoms?
3	In your opinion, what do you think made these students feel so stressed about their exams?	- Can you give me an example of a student you have worked with who has felt particularly stressed about exams?
4	Some students who were interviewed referred to expectations they placed on themselves and from other people. They said that this put additional pressure on them. What are your thoughts about this?	- Parents - Teachers - School culture
5	How are exams spoken about in school? What effects do you think this might have on students?	- Some students spoke about language used in assemblies as being unhelpful.
6	Some students referred to the current grades climate and the need to get top grades to compete for university places. What is your opinion on this in terms of how it might affect students?	- 'Fateful moments'
7	Do you think teachers are under pressure to help students get good grades? If so, where do you think this pressure comes from and how might it affect students?	- School leadership - Political context - Themselves - Performance management
8	Some students said that they found it difficult to be around peers during the exam period as it made them feel more stressed. What are your thoughts on this?	
9	What meaning/role do student results	- School reputation vs

	have for the school as a whole, class teachers and students?	individual students.
SECTION 2: WHAT'S WORKED WELL TO SUPPORT STUDENTS		
10	In your opinion why is that some students seem to cope better/are more resilient than other students when taking exams?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coping styles – avoidant/proactive - Personal qualities - Revision - Ability - Gender - Home context
11	How are students who are stressed about exams identified in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pastoral systems - Parents - Student referral
12	What is on offer for students in school to support them with taking exams?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stress intervention - After school revision - Teacher/peer mentors?
13	For those students that find exams stressful, which strategies do you think are particularly helpful in supporting them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One to one work - Small group work - Teaching styles
14	When interviewing students and asking them what they found helpful, some students mentioned that they had developed strong attachments to teachers who had been supportive and 'gone the extra mile'. Have you seen/experienced this?	

Appendix C1: Information Sheet and Consent Form: Student Participants

UCL logo

Hi,

I'm Natalie, and I'm training to be an Educational Psychologist, which means that I work with parents, teachers and students to support students' emotional well-being. I am very interested in how students experience taking exams and what makes them feel supported during this time. This is so that students such as you can get the support they need to do their best.

I'd really like to talk to students in Year 11/12/13 at SCHOOL NAME about their exams. As you are in one of these year groups and have just taken exams, I wondered if you wouldn't mind sharing your thoughts and feelings about the exams you have taken. If so, then we will meet once, at a time that suits you and the school.

If it's okay with you, I'll use a digital voice recorder during our meeting. This is so that I can remember what you have said without writing it all down. Everything you say to me will be private and confidential, and I will be the only person who listens to these recordings.

What will happen next?

If you're happy to chat to me then that is great. I will arrange a time for us to meet with your teachers. If during or after we have spoken you decide you do not want to continue that's also fine - you can stop at any time without saying why.

Confidentiality

Everything we talk about will be confidential, so I will not tell anyone at the school what you say to me. The only time I may have to tell someone, is if you tell me something that causes me to worry that you, or anyone else, is in danger. If this happens, I will talk to you about what information I need to pass on. When I write a summary of what you said, I will not use your name, so no one would know that this came from you.

After I finish my project, I will write a summary about it, which I will give to you. I will also provide some feedback to the school and to other trainee Psychologists.

Further information

I will be happy to answer your questions about this project at any time. You can contact me by email: **OMITTED**

Thank you for your interest in taking part in my project.

Natalie Power
Trainee Educational Psychologist

I have asked for school and parental permission for carrying out my research. I would like to ask for your permission. If you are happy to take part in my research then please fill out the section below.

I would like to take part in the project about my views of, and experiences of taking exams.

Please tick as relevant:

- I understand that my participation is voluntary.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time.
- I understand that the meetings will be voice-recorded and will be kept confidential.
- I understand that my name will not appear anywhere in the report.
- I understand that I can ask Natalie any questions I have about the research.

Signed: _____

Name: _____ School year: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C2: Information Sheet and Consent Form: Staff Participants

UCL logo

Dear Staff member,

RE: Research on how students experience exams

My name is Natalie and I am currently on the Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Programme at UCL Institute of Education. I am currently on placement at OMITTED.

As part of the doctoral programme I will be carrying out a piece of research at SCHOOL NAME over the next year that aims to capture the experiences and perceptions of students who are taking exams. This is an area that is under-researched. The research aims to promote and inform schools' understanding in how best to support students with their stress and anxiety during the exam period.

A number of Year 11, 12 and 13 students will be interviewed about their feelings and experiences of taking exams as well as school staff to gain their perceptions of working with students who have experienced taking exams. I would value the opportunity to hear your experiences of working with students given that you have worked/are working within a pastoral capacity within the school.

For placement and the doctorate programme purposes, I have been checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS, formerly the Criminal Records Bureau) and am eligible to do so.

Information about the interviews:

2. One interview will be arranged which will take up to one hour.
3. Interviews will take place at The Brakenhale School, during school hours.
4. You will be given information about the research and your consent to be involved with the research will be sought.
5. You will be asked questions about your experience of working with students who have taken/are taking exams in terms of how they have coped and what has worked well to support them.
6. A debrief with myself will be included after the interview so that you can seek any further information that they require.
7. Your interview responses will be confidential and your name will not be identified in the research. Your name will only be known to me as the researcher.
8. The interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder. This is so that I can remember what you said during the interviews. This information will be destroyed following successful completion of the doctorate programme.
9. You can withdraw from the research process at any time, and you do not have to provide a reason for this.
10. Upon my completion of the research, a summary report will be sent to the school for you to access if required.

If you are agreeable to this process, please kindly sign and return the consent form on the next page at the time of interview.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me using the details provided below.

I am very grateful for your support.

Yours Faithfully,

Natalie Power
Trainee Educational Psychologist
CONTACT DETAILS OMITTED

RE: Research on how students experience exams

I give my permission to take part in the interviews regarding their experience of taking exams.

Please tick as relevant:

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and they are able to withdraw at any stage of the research process.
- I understand that the data will be anonymised and be kept confidential so will not be identifiable to the general population.
- I understand that the interviews will be voice-recorded but the data will not use my name

Signed: _____

Name: _____ Staff member's name: _____

Date: ___/___/___

Appendix C3: Information Sheet and Consent Form for Parents

UCL logo

Dear Parent/Carer,

RE: Research on how students experience exams

My name is Natalie and I am currently on the Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Programme at UCL Institute of Education. I am currently on placement at OMITTED.

As part of the doctoral programme I will be carrying out a piece of research at SCHOOL NAME over the next year that aims to capture the experiences and perceptions of students who are taking exams. This is an area that is under-researched. The research aims to promote and inform schools' understanding in how best to support students with their stress and anxiety during the exam period.

A number of Year 11, 12 and 13 students will be interviewed about their feelings and experiences of taking exams. I would value the opportunity to hear your son/daughter's exam experiences.

For placement and the doctorate programme purposes, I have been checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS, formerly the Criminal Records Bureau) and am eligible to do so.

Information about the interviews:

2. One interview will be arranged which will take up to one hour.
3. Interviews will take place at The Brakenhale school, during school hours at a time that does not impact on their studies.
4. Your son/daughter will be given information about the research and their consent to be involved with the research will be sought.
5. They will be asked questions about their experience of taking exams.
6. A debrief with myself will be included after the interview so that they seek any further information that they require.
7. All of your son/daughter's interview responses will be confidential and the name of your son/daughter and the name of school will not be identified in the research. The name of your son/daughter will only be known to me as the researcher.
8. The interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder. This is so that I can remember what your son/daughter has said during the interviews. This information will be destroyed following successful completion of the doctorate programme.
9. You can withdraw your son/daughter from the research process at any time, and you do not have to provide a reason for this.
10. Upon my completion of the research, a summary report will be sent to the school for you and your son/daughter to access if required.

If you are agreeable to this process, please kindly sign and return the consent form on the next page in the stamped/addressed envelope/return to.../by...

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me using the details provided below.

I am very grateful for your support.

Yours Faithfully,

Natalie Power
Trainee Educational Psychologist
CONTACT DETAILS OMITTED

RE: Research on how students experience exams

I give permission for my son/daughter to take part in the interviews regarding their experience of taking exams.

Please tick as relevant:

- I understand that my son/daughter's participation is voluntary and they are able to withdraw at any stage of the research process.
- I understand that the data will be anonymised and be kept confidential so will not be identifiable to the general population.
- I understand that the interviews will be voice-recorded but the data will not use my son/daughter's name.

Signed: _____

Name: _____ Son/daughter's name: _____

Date: ___/___/___

Appendix D1: James' Complete Transcript with Initial Notings and Emergent Themes

before exams in July

Emergent themes	Transcript (James)	Exploratory coding
Intense negative thoughts	1 What does stress mean to you? 2 It's basically making you feel <u>uncomfortable</u> . It's things which you <u>should be comfortable</u> it, like learning for example; and stress is when it becomes <u>uncomfortable</u> . Like you don't feel like you can <u>achieve your potential</u> because something's getting in the way.	Stress is uncomfortable... used words/phrases 'should be comfortable', 'achieve your potential' - found these all feedback coming straight from the teacher!
Physiological stress response	3 How would you know you were stressed? 4 Well personally, either I <u>don't want to do it</u> or I <u>feel sick</u> . I have been sick in the past when I have... when I... yeah. When I don't... because I don't like new things, or... So whenever I don't want to do something I've been sick before, so...	Physiological/physical stress response - could this be a 'fight or flight' response/avoidant thought?
	5 So you feel it in your body... 6 Yeah. It's physical, yeah. 7 Do you have any particular thoughts...? 8 Well mainly just the fact that... is it going to be too <u>hard</u> ? Will I <u>fail</u> ? What if I don't <u>achieve</u> the grades I <u>need</u> , or I <u>want</u> or what I'm predicted or...? Will I let anybody <u>down</u> including myself?	Repetition of pronouns Negative thoughts/obvious comparison - repetition of 'achieve', 'pressure', 'the situation', 'down', 'fail', 'need', 'want', 'predicted or...'
	9 So it's about expectations... 10 Yeah. Well I'm <u>predicted</u> as in all subjects at least, so for me there's a lot of pressure on myself. But also to achieve the high grades. 11 You've just finished taking your exams and you said they were OK. Tell me about your experiences... 12 Yeah. Well the up to the exams was actually all right because we did a lot of <u>revision</u> and... when I finished my exams in certain subjects it was just dedicated to other subjects. So I felt <u>more comfortable</u> with the exams towards the end because I had a lot more <u>time</u> to <u>revise</u> . But towards the beginning it was like revision for all subjects so it was a bit hard to narrow it down to the subject at the beginning.	Repetition of pronouns Negative thoughts/obvious comparison - repetition of 'achieve', 'pressure', 'the situation', 'down', 'fail', 'need', 'want', 'predicted or...' Predicted grades - do they add to anxiety? Has the point-revision time grades reflected the pressure? Revision time - feeling prepared Appear to have supported coping better? 'Feel more comfortable'
	13 (Inaudible). 14 Yeah, exactly. But other than that they've been all right to be honest. 15 How did you feel the night before...? 16 September you're not really worried because you're still learning stuff and it's distant. So you're not really worried. But when you get towards, like especially the night before, <u>thoughts</u> are running in your mind, like what is it going to be, have I <u>revised</u> what I should have been revising and stuff like that. So... 17 Did you feel worried about coursework and assessments...? 18 No, coursework I was all right actually because you can <u>control</u> it. You know what you're... you know what the question is, you've got a length of time to complete it and you can ask for help and stuff like that. So coursework is	Repetition of pronouns Negative thoughts/obvious comparison - repetition of 'achieve', 'pressure', 'the situation', 'down', 'fail', 'need', 'want', 'predicted or...' More of a sense of control in Sept when 'revising' it over when there's no time to do so.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ① Coping/working as 'never pass' ② Pressure on self ③ The 'C' grade ④ University + opportunities ⑤ 'fateful moments' ⑥ Language from school staff 	<p>38 ...that never because you could control the environment that it is in.</p> <p>39 Did you find some exams more stressful than others...? 40 Yeah. Spanish was definitely more stressful because it was a whole new concept. But all the others... oh English... English... English and English literature because I don't like English, I'm <u>much more</u> maths. So English was bit stressful, and Spanish, but apart from that... 41 Do you think it's related to how you feel about the subject...? 42 Sometimes. Sometimes it's about how good you are at it, because if you are <u>excelling</u> in all the others and then there's that one subject where you're not as good, it then becomes <u>stressful</u> because you're like, well what do I focus on? 43 Do I <u>leave it and just try my best</u> and what happens <u>however</u>, or do I focus all my attention on that subject? But then will my other subjects <u>fail</u> because of it? 44 → Putting pressure on self. 45 What is failure to you...? 46 Probably getting lower than a C... to me because... for <u>university</u> and stuff like that lots of them want you to get Cs. For some people a D or an E might be not failing. But to me not getting lower than a C is... 47 So to do with <u>future aspirations</u>? 48 Yeah, sometimes it's... you want to get the highest you can because then it gives you the better <u>opportunities</u> in life. 49 Do you feel pressure around getting grades for university...? 50 Not necessarily getting grades for university but just <u>getting good grades in general</u>. Because there's a lot of talk about how these <u>will dictate your future</u> and this is your <u>future</u> from now on. And actually it's not necessarily is it, because you can degree take or you can go down apprenticeships or whatever. 51 So it's not necessarily... And there's a lot of <u>pressure</u> - well not <u>pressure</u>, but like... teachers just wanted you to <u>reach your potential</u> and get what you wanted. 52 How was the talk around it delivered...? 53 Yeah. Just like in <u>assemblies</u>, just gentle reminders like you <u>need</u> to start revising because GCSEs you're looking forward to. And even in lessons, you need to be <u>achieving</u> this if you want to get... Or this is how to get good marks in your GCSEs so... 54 Was that helpful...? 55 Some of it was because some of it was just reminding you what you needed to do. And some of it wasn't really because it was just <u>adding more pressure</u>. Like every single lesson, you need to be <u>achieving</u> this and... I want you to get an A*. When actually... an A or a B would be... 56 So they shouldn't have those high expectations...</p>	<p>not liking English, repetition of 'I'</p> <p>Appears to categorise self as a 'never person' - in same way as saying he is a 'high achiever' or an 'A/B student'</p> <p>Not being good at everything - is more a sense of hyperbole than he 'is' stressed caused by not being able to 'lose control' seem to be coping/working and this is achieving decision making</p> <p>The need to not get lower than a 'C' grade - failure + limited to university opportunities</p> <p>Grades impact future - Grades 'determine' opportunities - trying to rationalise fear?</p> <p>Repetition of 'potential' about 'opportunities', 'life', 'future', 'university'</p> <p>The way exams are spoken about in school - part of discourse of language</p> <p>Repetition of imperatives like 'need to' - as that 'gentle reminders' - or has he internalised these expectations?</p> <p>'Achieving' - some cognitive dissonance not in terms of what he perceived school was to get and what he was told to do - clear which way it is to cope with it?</p>
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27 Yeah, definitely, yeah.
 28 Do you feel teachers felt stressed...?
 29 They definitely were stressed from the students that weren't achieving. But
 30 then I think that maybe the higher students got left behind a little bit because
 31 the students that weren't excelling, the teachers' attention was on them
 32 because they felt like they were more important because they wanted to get
 33 their grades up. But actually the higher students were then left to work
 34 independently, which some people prefer, but some students need help.
 35 So more could have been done to support...
 36 The higher students, yeah.
 37 Is it important to you to do well?
 38 Yeah.
 39 Why...?
 40 I don't know. — preoccupied by other's expectations
 41 Anything other than university...?
 42 I just put a lot of pressure on myself. I don't know why. I'm just very
 43 competitive and like to do the best I can, especially when I know I can do
 44 better. And when I don't achieve it it's just frustrating...when you know you
 45 could have done better and actually...you put all the work in and you've done
 46 all you can, and then when it gets to exams...all that hard work in the last two
 47 years has just gone in an hour and a half or whatever.
 48 Did you think if you didn't do so well it wouldn't necessarily be a reflection of
 49 the effort...?
 50 Yeah. If you do two hours of work...two hours of work and you've got an A* in
 51 your coursework and then you do an exam and you get an E, it then drags
 52 everything else to a C. And then that's not a true reflection of what you've
 53 done.
 54 You mentioned being competitive...is that with your friends...?
 55 Yeah, sometimes. I always aspire to be one of the top people in the class, so...I
 56 do look at other people because it's just nice to see how other people are
 57 doing. And if you've got a bad grade and everyone else has got a good grade,
 58 why is that? Why have...or if you've got a good grade and everyone else has
 59 got a bad grade, why have you...why are you different to everyone else? What
 60 have you done differently to everyone else?
 61 Are people's grades quite public...is it encouraged...?
 62 Yeah, especially in maths. There's three or four of us that are...getting A's
 63 every past paper. So our teacher tries to like...not get us to beat each other but
 64 just kind of...push each other to achieve...like you need to get more than him
 65 or whatever. So it's trying to get them to achieve what they...
 66 Teacher stress
 67 Sense of rejection or not being helped
 68 enough. High achievers get different
 69 treatment.
 70 Importance on grades — do teachers
 71 value students' effort?
 72 Not being fair.
 73 Not aware of our needs thank!
 74 Define self as competitive is this
 75 related to social comparison?
 76 need to feel important/different!
 77 what if this was English
 78 → identity as top achiever seems
 79 important...to belong!
 80 Repetition of "achieve"

Not always good to be a top achiever
 Unsure of own desires/convicted
 Competitiveness/peers
 Competition/Social Comparison
 Identity as top achiever

116 Have you ever had a situation where you've not done as well as you've wanted
 117 to...?
 118 The mock exams in January I think it was...my English was very low. It was C
 119 and I was predicted As and A's. And...it knocked my confidence a little bit
 120 because I was like, well...what happens if that happens in the exam
 121 or...what...I've been working and I thought I was doing well and then this
 122 happened. So why...why is it and what can I do to...before the exam what can I
 123 do to try and improve my grade.
 124 It knocked your confidence.
 125 Yeah, I think when you don't do well you just kind of feel like...just down a
 126 little bit generally because you're not...kind of yourself are you; you just kind
 127 of feel...
 128 You mentioned that you'd let other people down...who would they be?
 129 Well like...well my parents. They have helped me and supported me and...not
 130 kind of let them down but just kind of...want to not disappoint them in a way.
 131 Want to achieve what they know I can achieve...
 132 What would happen if you didn't do well...?
 133 I don't know. I think probably...I'd feel quite disappointed. But that's life,
 134 you've got to get on with it and see what other options are available
 135 afterwards. Because even if you get bad grades you're not going to...not just
 136 going to stop there, so...see what happens.
 137 It sounds like grades are quite important...and that seems to be a message that
 138 maybe school gives you...
 139 Yeah, they're very much like good grades can lead to a better future and the
 140 more...not...the better grades you get the more options are available and stuff
 141 like that.
 142 How do you think people...feel about the whole idea...?
 143 For those students that don't get good grades or get like Cs all the time. I
 144 think they kind of feel not devalued, but not necessarily...included in that
 145 bracket because they feel like they're not necessarily going to get anywhere
 146 when actually they could, just on a different pathway or...what they wanted to
 147 do.
 148 So actually there are other options but maybe they're not always talked about.
 149 Actually at this stage they're just talking about the majority...the people that
 150 are getting Bs and Cs and...not necessarily the people that are getting maybe
 151 Ds or Es. It's less than important.
 152 So the top achievers get left behind...
 153 Slightly, yeah. I mean there are...
 154 (Inaudible) achievers as well...
 155 'C' is a failure!
 156 Confidence
 157 Parental expectations/owning them.
 158 Grades as a sign of value/self worth
 159 Grades = future!
 160 Grades = value?
 161 Says that Grade C would be considered a failure by him - this seems to contradict what he said earlier - Is this related to expectations?
 162 Does he mean not young because he is down or is there an underlying feeling of losing an identity as a top achiever?
 163 identity shaped by others' expectations
 164 is this a self-justifying statement?
 165 "fateful moments"
 166 his idea of failure.
 167 yet he says elsewhere that it isn't the best!

Identity as a high achiever

Getting to university.

Prolonged physical symptoms

Achievement

Yeah. Well there are...there are opportunities for top achievers like after school clubs and stuff like that. But during lessons it's very much those who are struggling...especially when it was getting towards GCSEs, those who were struggling would get more attention than those who were...not struggling, because you want them to get good GCSEs. But actually, if you focus on them, it will just level itself out, because those who were top achieving will drop and then those who weren't will rise and so it just levels it out.

What do you think the teachers' hopes are for you?
I think probably go to college or university or... Definitely go to university because...well they see me as someone who is...could get high grades and...could go far in education or become a teacher or something like that, so...

What about your parents...?
They're not fussed I don't think as long as...that I do whatever I want to do. So whatever I decide to do they'll just support me in what I do.

Is there anything you want to say...?
No, I don't think so.

You did go to an exams stress group...
Yeah.

How was that...?
It did help me a little bit, but for me it's more about how to stop, or how to get over new things or how to...actually how do I control feeling sick or how do...what do I do when it happens.

When you feel sick...?
Yeah, what do I...I don't know, what...
What else have you noticed...?
If it's...it can happen...like if I'm worried about it in my head and I know it's coming up, I'll feel...not right, like maybe a month in advance if I know it's coming up.

So quite a long time...
Yeah, if I feel worried...if I know it's coming up and I don't want to do it, or worry about it, it will then start kicking in.

You mentioned a few thoughts...
Yeah.

What other thoughts...a month prior...?
Mainly just am I going to achieve what I wanted to achieve. Because...you've done all the revision but actually...it...the letter on a piece of paper defines

Returning to idea of being recognised as a "top achiever"
Identity
Is there some moment here as though he perceives as 'less intelligent' should not be given the chance to be better than him! This might affect his identity

Looking on his response to new events/build up to events

Achievement appears to be important

5

Water/Grades awkward to say!

Identity as a high achiever.

The exam system

Intervention build metacognition awareness of stress and strategies

sleep

exercise

Proactive coping strategies

what you've done, so you want...you just want to do the best you can. And like...
Do you feel afraid of the grades almost...?
Kind of...yeah, yeah, because like...if you're predicted an A and you get a C, suddenly you feel...feel like...and somebody who was predicted an E got a C, suddenly you're on the same...the same...well not level, but on the same wavelength. And actually you know you could have done better and...you know how you could have done better but...
Is there a sense of frustration at the system and how it works...?
Yeah, almost.

It might not showcase your efforts and abilities.
Which is why BTECs are a lot...well not better...well BTECs allow you to show what you can do because it's a lot more coursework, so you can show, actually this is what I can do.

When you really...
Yeah, exactly.

So the group was OK...
Yeah, Yeah.

If you were going to say one or two things that helped you...what would you say they were?
Just being aware of what could happen if you're stressed and what...what makes you feel stressed. Or how to stop...or not...limit it, but how to decrease it further, like getting better sleep or eating. So you just feel...you feel not...well you feel better than you would have done had you not done...
Did you find yourself using any strategies...that helped...?
Definitely going to sleep earlier...getting better sleep because you feel like you...it just helps your brain and stuff like that.

Do you do any exercise...?
I do a lot of sport, yeah.

Do you find that helpful?
It does actually. It just relieves like...you can just forget about what you're doing and then...
What sport do you do?
Oh, anything going really. Football, cricket, badminton...
So you look after yourself...
Yeah, Swimming, stuff like that, so...
Is there anything that teachers could do...? Do they understand how stressed students get?
Not necessarily because the exams that they did are a lot more different to the

Identity doesn't want to lose identity.

Physical coping strategies - i.e. sleeping, exercise

6

<p>Teachers don't fully understand.</p> <p>Identity as a top achiever - is there an alternative way?!</p> <p>Teachers as secure attachment figures / teachers as protective parents / contributing resilient language.</p> <p>Importance of language: avoidant attitudes</p> <p>After exams</p> <p>writing for revision</p>	<p>exams that we do now. So I don't think they realise how tough it is and how much it's changed. I suppose everything changes... Yeah. What would you say to them...? Maybe just teach each student individually. So not classify people as people from C to B will be doing this, and people from B to... or A to A* will be doing this. Actually go, I'm going to do one-on-one with each student and find out what they're finding difficult... because each student will find something else difficult, even if they're on the same grade. If you could think of a time where someone or something... helped you feel better... My PE teacher, [redacted] he's very much... he was saying, the A's it's yours to lose and stuff like that. He said what, sorry? It's yours to lose. Basically saying... you could achieve an A* if you put the work in and stuff, but then he was like, well actually, you know you can achieve an A*, so just go in there... you know you can answer the questions and you know you can do it... just go in there and... almost have a little bit of... like... confidence that you're going to get it. Not arrogance, but just be confident that actually... you know you can do it and... So do you think that faith in you helped you? Yeah, almost... almost like... there's no pressure, just go in and... not have fun, but just go in and... whatever happens, happens. Did you... take that advice? Yeah, I just answered the questions with no pressure, just... So you were very successful... did you ever feel you wobbled...? At the start of the English exam, which was two and a quarter hours, you feel like... what is the point of this, and am I going to get through it, and will my brain cope... and towards the end of the exam, is my brain just going to go...? But... You did it. Yeah, I finished it and... How did you feel after...? Afterwards you just feel like mentally drained and... you just don't want to do anything. But then you've got to do more revision so... When are your results? 20th of August. Are you nervous...?</p>	<p>A need for a special attachment if need to be heard. Desire to not be judged by a grade!!</p> <p>Advice to teachers to differentiate / teach students one to one - is this related to feeling let down by teachers in terms of help?</p> <p>In contrast</p> <p>Positive teacher support - adopting a can-do attitude / motivational. If this teacher a mitigator - in that they feed him with the title of 'top achiever' by fostering a resilient attitude language.</p> <p>Getting on with it when the time comes</p> <p>Concerned about English exam - what is the point - avoidant coping mechanism?</p> <p>Feeling drained after exams</p>
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<p>Well... a little bit... you're always going to be a little bit nervous because you're like... I want to know what I did and how I did and just get it over and done with. But at the same time you've finished now and just enjoy... Have a break... Yeah, enjoy finishing the exams. How do you think you'll feel the day after the results...? Well I just think whatever I get I get and... Thank you...</p>	<p>- Able to rationalise / cope well after exams</p>
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Appendix D2: Part of Student Transcript (James)

Interview 1 - boy, high achiever

This is interview 1. What does stress mean to you?

It's basically making you feel uncomfortable. It's things which you should be comfortable it, like learning for example; and stress is when it becomes uncomfortable. Like you don't feel like you can achieve your potential because something's getting in the way.

How would you know you were stressed?

Well personally, either I don't want to do it or I feel sick. I have been sick in the past when I have...when I...yeah. When I don't...because I don't like new things, or... So whenever I don't want to do something I've been sick before, so...

So you feel it in your body...

Yeah. It's physical, yeah.

Do you have any particular thoughts...?

Well mainly just the fact that...is it going to be too hard? Will I fail? What if I don't achieve the grades I need, or I want or what I'm predicted or...? Will I let anybody down including myself?

So it's about expectations...

Yeah. Well I'm predicted As in all subjects at least, so for me there's a lot of pressure on myself. But also to achieve the high grades.

You've just finished taking your exams and you said they were OK. Tell me about your experiences...

Yeah. Well the up to the exams was actually all right because we did a lot of revision and...when I finished my exams in certain subjects it was just dedicated to other subjects. So I felt more comfortable with the exams towards the end because I had a lot more time to revise. But towards the beginning it was like revision for all subjects so it was a bit hard to narrow it down to the subject at the beginning.

(Inaudible).

Yeah, exactly. But other than that they've been all right to be honest.

How did you feel the night before...?

September you're not really worried because you're still learning stuff and it's distant. So you're not really worried. But when you get towards, like especially the night before, thoughts are running in your mind, like what is it going to be, have I revised what I should have been revising and stuff like that. So...

Did you feel worried about coursework and assessments...?

No, coursework I was all right actually because you can control it. You know what your...you know what the question is, you've got a length of time to complete it and you can ask for help

and stuff like that. So coursework is actually...was better because you could control the environment that it is in.

Did you find some exams more stressful than others...?

Yeah. Spanish was definitely more stressful because it was a whole new concept. But all the others...oh English...English...English and English literature because I don't like English. I'm much more maths. So English was a bit stressful, and Spanish, but apart from that...

Do you think it's related to how you feel about the subject...?

Sometimes. Sometimes it's about how good you are at it, because if you are excelling in all the others and then there's that one subject where you're not as good, it then becomes stressful because you're like, well what do I focus on? Do I leave it and just try my best and what happens happens, or do I focus all my attention on that subject? But then will my other subjects fail because of it?

What is failure to you...?

Probably getting lower than a C...to me because...for university and stuff like that lots of them want you to get Cs. For some people a D or an E might be not failing. But to me not getting lower than a C is...

So to do with future aspirations?

Yeah, sometimes it's...you want to get the highest you can because then it gives you the better...opportunities in life.

Do you feel pressure around getting grades for university...?

Not necessarily getting grades for university but just getting good grades in general. Because there's a lot of talk about how these will dictate your future and this is your future from now on. And actually it's not necessarily is it; because you can degree take or you can go down apprenticeships or whatever. So it's not necessarily... And there's a lot of pressure - well not pressure, but like...teachers just wanted you to reach your potential and get what you wanted.

How was the talk around it delivered...?

Yeah. Just like in assemblies, just gentle reminders like you need to start revising because GCSEs you're looking forward to. And even in lessons; you need to be achieving this if you want to get... Or this is how to get good marks in your GCSEs so...

Was that helpful...?

Some of it was because some of it was just reminding you what you needed to do. And some of it wasn't really because it was just adding more pressure. Like every single lesson, you need to be achieving this and...I want you to get an A. When actually...an A or a B would be...*

So they shouldn't have those high expectations...

Yeah, definitely, yeah.

Do you feel teachers felt stressed...?

They definitely were stressed from the students that weren't achieving. But then I think that maybe the higher students got left behind a little bit because the students that weren't excelling, the teachers' attention was on them because they felt like they were more important because they wanted to get their grades up. But actually the higher students were then left to work independently, which some people prefer, but some students need help.

So more could have been done to support...

The higher students, yeah.

Is it important to you to do well?

Yeah.

Why...?

I don't know.

Anything other than university...?

I just put a lot of pressure on myself. I don't know why. I'm just very competitive and like to do the best I can, especially when I know I can do better. And when I don't achieve it it's just frustrating...when you know you could have done better and actually...you put all the work in and you've done all you can, and then when it gets to exams...all that hard work in the last two years has just gone in an hour and a half or whatever.

Do you think if you didn't do so well it wouldn't necessarily be a reflection of the effort...?

Yeah. If you do two hours of work...two hours of work and you've got an A in your coursework and then you do an exam and you get an E, it then drags everything else to a C. And then that's not a true reflection of what you've done.*

You mentioned being competitive...is that with your friends...?

Yeah, sometimes. I always aspire to be one of the top people in the class, so...I do look at other people because it's just nice to see how other people are doing. And if you've got a bad grade and everyone else has got a good grade, why is that? Why have...or if you've got a good grade and everyone else has got a bad grade, why have you...why are you different to everyone else? What have you done differently to everyone else?

Are people's grades quite public...is it encouraged...?

*Yeah, especially in maths. There's three or four of us that are...getting A*s every past paper. So our teacher tries to like...not get us to beat each other but just kind of...push each other to achieve...like you need to get more than him or whatever. So it's trying to get them to achieve what they...*

Have you ever had a situation where you've not done as well as you've wanted to...?

*The mock exams in January I think it was...my English was very low. It was Cs and I was predicted As and A*s. And...it knocked my confidence a little bit because I was like, well...what happens if that happens in the exam or...what...I've been working and I thought I was doing well and then this happened. So why...why is it and what can I do to...before the exam what can I do to try and improve my grade.*

It knocked your confidence...

Yeah, I think when you don't do well you just kind of feel like...just down a little bit generally because you're not...kind of yourself, are you; you just kind of feel...

You mentioned that you'd let other people down...who would they be?

Well like...well my parents. They have helped me and supported me and...not kind of let them down but just kind of...want to not disappoint them in a way. Want to achieve what they know I can achieve.

What would happen if you didn't do well...?

I don't know. I think probably...I'd feel quite disappointed. But that's life, you've got to get on with it and see what other options are available afterwards. Because even if you get bad grades you're not going to...not just going to stop there, so...see what happens.

It sounds like grades are quite important...and that seems to be a message that maybe school gives you...

Yeah, they're very much like good grades can lead to a better future and the more...not...the better grades you get the more options are available and stuff like that.

How do you think people...feel about the whole idea...?

For those students that don't get good grades or get like Cs all the time, I think they kind of feel not devalued, but not necessarily...included in that bracket because they feel like they're not necessarily going to get anywhere when actually they could, just on a different pathway or...what they wanted to do.

So actually there are other options but maybe they're not always talked about.

Actually at this stage they're just talking about the majority...the people that are getting Bs and Cs and...not necessarily the people that are getting maybe Ds or Es. It's less than important.

So the top achievers get left behind...

Slightly, yeah. I mean there are...

(Inaudible) achievers as well...

Yeah. Well there are...there are opportunities for top achievers like after school clubs and stuff like that. But during lessons it's very much those who are struggling...especially when it was getting towards GCSEs, those who were struggling would get more attention than those who were...not struggling, because we want them to get good GCSEs. But actually, if you focus on them, it will just level itself out, because those who were top achieving will drop and then those who weren't will rise and so it just levels it out.

What do you think the teachers' hopes are for you?

I think probably go to college or university or... Definitely go to university because...well they see me as someone who is...could get high grades and...could go far in education or become a teacher or something like that, so...

What about your parents...?

They're not fussed I don't think as long as...that I do whatever I want to do. So whatever I decide to do they'll just support me in what I do.

Is there anything you want to say...?

No, I don't think so.

You did go to an exams stress group...

Appendix D3: Internal Consistency of Emergent Themes (James)

Emergent theme	Text
Bodily sensations	“Making you feel comfortable...I feel sick...it’s physical yeah...so whenever I don’t want to do something I’ve been sick before.”
Negative intrusive thoughts and over thinking Future oriented thoughts	“...is it going to be too hard? Will I fail? What if I don’t achieve the grades I need, or I want or what I’m predicted? Will I let anybody down including myself?” “...like if I’m worried about it in my head and I know it’s coming up, I’ll feel...not right, like maybe a month in advance.” “Afterwards you just feel like mentally drained and...you just don’t want to do anything.” “...you’re always going to be a little bit nervous because you’re like...I want to know what I did and how I did and just get it over and done with. But at the same time you’ve finished now and just enjoy finishing the exams.” “Well I just think whatever I get I get and...”
Stress as a barrier Avoidant ways of behaving Belief in not being able to cope	“Like you feel like you can’t achieve your potential because something’s getting in the way.” “I don’t want to do it” “At the start of the English exam...you feel like...what is the point of this, and I am going to get through it, and will my brain cope...and towards the end of the exam, is my brain just going to go?”
University & opportunities Getting the highest grades A good future is	“...you want to get the highest you can because then it gives you the better...opportunities in life.” “Not necessarily getting grades for university but just getting good grades in general. Because there’s a lot of talk about how these will dictate your future and this is your future from now on. And actually it’s not necessarily is it; because you can degree take or you

contingent on grades	can go down apprenticeships or whatever.”
Language used by school staff	“...in assemblies, just gentle reminders like you need to start revising...And even in lessons; you need to be achieving this if you want to get...Or this is how to get good marks in you're GCSEs.”
The top achiever and getting the grades	<p>“...am I going to achieve what I wanted to achieve. Because...you've done all the revision but actually its the grade that counts.”</p> <p>“...just teach each student individually. So not classify people as people from C to B will be doing this, and people from B to...or A to A* will be doing this. Actually go, I'm going to do one-to-one with each student and find out what they're finding difficult...because each student will find something else difficult, even if they're on the same grade.”</p>
Expectations of self in relation to others	<p>“I just put a lot of pressure on myself. I don't know why. I'm just very competitive and like do the best I can, especially when I know I can do better. And when I don't achieve it it's just frustrating.”</p> <p>“...especially in Maths. There's three or four of us that are...getting A*s every past paper. So our teacher tries to like...not get us to beat each other but just kind of...push each other to achieve...like you need to get more than him or whatever.”</p> <p>“I always aspire to be one of the top people in the class, so...I do look at other people because it's just nice to see how other people are doing. And if you've got a bad grade and everyone else has got a good grade, why is that?...or if you've got a good grade and everyone else has got a bad grade, why have you... Why are you different to everyone else? What have you done differently to everyone else?”</p> <p>“...because we want them to get good grades. But actually if you focus on them [less able]...it will just level itself out, because those who were top achieving will drop and then those who weren't will rise and so it just levels it out.”</p> <p>“...am I going to achieve what I wanted to achieve.”</p> <p>“Will I let anybody down including myself?”</p>
Performance and confidence	“If...you've got an A* in your coursework and then you do an exam and you get an E, it then drags everything

	<p>else to a C. And then that's not a true reflection of what you've done."</p>
Mock exams shape beliefs	<p>"The mock exams in January...my English was very low. It was Cs because I was like, well...what happens if that happens in the exam...I thought I was doing well and then this happened. So why...why is it."</p>
Taking a confidence knock	<p>"...I think when you don't do well you just kind of feel like...just down a little bit generally because you're not...kind of yourself are you; you just kind of feel..."</p> <p>"...For those students that don't get good grades or get like Cs all the time, I think they kind of feel not devalued, but not necessarily going to get anywhere when actually they could, just on a different pathway."</p>
The grade and your - self-worth/value	<p>"Sometimes it's about how good you are at it, because if you are excelling in all the others and then there's that one subject where you're not as good, it then becomes stressful because you're like, well what do I focus on?"</p>
Your relationship with a subject	<p>"Spanish was definitely more stressful because it was a whole new concept. But all the others...oh English...English...English and English literature because I don't like English. I'm much more Maths. So English was a bit stressful, and Spanish, but apart from that..."</p>
Adult expectations Not letting adults down	<p>"...well my parents. They have helped me and supported me and...not kind of let them down but just kind of... want to not disappoint them in a way. Want to achieve what they know I can achieve."</p>
Teachers expectations add pressure	<p>"...And there's a lot of pressure – well not pressure, but like...teachers just wanted you to reach your potential and get what you wanted."</p> <p>"Some of it was [helpful] because some of it was just reminding you what you needed to do. And some of it wasn't really because it was just adding more pressure. Like every single lesson, you need to be achieving this and...I want you to get an A*. When actually...an A or a B would be..."</p>

Reframing experiences to stay in control	<p>“...[if you didn’t do well]...I think probably...I’d feel quite disappointed. But that’s life, you’ve got to get on with it and see what other options are available afterwards. Because even if you get bad grades you’re not going to...not just going to stop there, so...see what happens.”</p>
There's nothing you can do about it	<p>“Well I just think whatever I get I get and...”</p>
Coursework gives you control	<p>“Coursework I was alright actually because you can control it. You know...what the question is, you’ve got a length of time to complete it and you can ask for help and stuff like that...coursework was better because you could control the environment that it is in.”</p>
The grade takes your control away by defining you	<p>“...you put all the work in and you’ve done all you can, and then when it gets to exams...all that hard work in the last two years has just gone in an hour and a half or whatever.”</p>
Preparing for the exam	<p>“...Because...you’ve done all the revision but actually...it...the letter on a piece of paper defines what you’ve done, so you want...you just want to do the best you can.”</p>
Getting adequate sleep and exercise	<p>“...what can I do...before exam what can I do to try and improve my grade.”</p> <p>“Do I leave it and just try my best and what happens happens, or do I focus all my attention on that subject? But then will my other subjects fail because of it?”</p> <p>“...like getting better sleep.”</p> <p>“Definitely going to sleep earlier...because you feel like you...it just helps your brain and stuff like that.”</p> <p>“I do a lot of sport...you can forget about what you’re doing...anything going really. Football, cricket, badminton...swimming.”</p>

Interventions to build self-awareness	“Just being aware of what could happen if you’re stressed and what...makes you feel stressed. Or how to stop...or not...limit it, but how to decrease it further...so you just feel...better than you would have done had you not done.”
Teachers as secure attachments Expectations help build resilience	<p>“My PE teacher, Mr B he’s very much...he was saying, the A*s it’s yours to lose and stuff like that”</p> <p>“...It’s yours to lose. Basically saying...you could achieve an A* if you put the work in and stuff, but then he was like, well actually...you know you can achieve and A*, so just go in there...you know you can answer the questions and you know you can do it. Just go in there and...almost have a little bit of...like...confidence that you’re going to get it. Not arrogance, but just be confident that actually...you know you can do it and...”</p> <p>“[Did you take that advice?]....Yeah, I just answered the questions with no pressure.”</p>
Being rejected by teachers Being successful means losing attachments	<p>“I think that maybe the higher students got left behind a little bit because the students that weren’t excelling, the teachers’ attention was on them because they felt like they were more important because they wanted to get their grades up. But actually the higher students were then left to work independently, which some people prefer, but some students need help.”</p> <p>“But during lessons it’s very much those who are struggling...especially when it was getting towards GCSEs, those who were struggling would get more attention than those who were...not struggling.”</p>

Appendix D4: Master Table of Subordinate Themes and Corresponding Emergent Themes (James)

Subordinate themes with corresponding emergent themes	Text
Physiological response Bodily sensations	“Making you feel comfortable...I feel sick...it’s physical yeah...so whenever I don’t want to do something I’ve been sick before.”
Catastrophic thinking Negative intrusive thoughts and over thinking Future oriented thoughts	“...is it going to be too hard? Will I fail? What if I don’t achieve the grades I need, or I want or what I’m predicted? Will I let anybody down including myself?” “...like if I’m worried about it in my head and I know it’s coming up, I’ll feel...not right, like maybe a month in advance.” “Afterwards you just feel like mentally drained and...you just don’t want to do anything.” “...you’re always going to be a little bit nervous because you’re like...I want to know what I did and how I did and just get it over and done with. But at the same time you’ve finished now and just enjoy finishing the exams.” “Well I just think whatever I get I get and...”
Behavioural response Stress as a barrier Avoidant ways of behaving Belief in not being able to cope	“Like you feel like you can’t achieve your potential because something’s getting in the way.” “I don’t want to do it” “At the start of the English exam...you feel like...what is the point of this, and I am going to get through it, and will my brain cope...and towards the end of the exam, is my brain just going to go?”
Future aspirations University and opportunities Getting the highest grades A good future is contingent on grades	“...you want to get the highest you can because then it gives you the better...opportunities in life.” “Not necessarily getting grades for university but just getting good grades in general. Because there’s a lot of talk about how these will dictate your future and this is your future from now on. And actually it’s not necessarily is it; because you can degree take or you can go down apprenticeships or whatever.”

<p>The mock exams shape beliefs</p> <p>Taking a confidence knock</p> <p>The grade and your self-worth/value</p> <p>Your relationship with a subject</p>	<p>and then this happened. So why...why is it.”</p> <p>“...I think when you don’t do well you just kind of feel like...just down a little bit generally because you’re not...kind of yourself are you; you just kind of feel...”</p> <p>“...For those students that don’t get good grades or get like Cs all the time, I think they kind of feel not devalued, but not necessarily going to get anywhere when actually they could, just on a different pathway.”</p> <p>“Sometimes it’s about how good you are at it, because if you are excelling in all the others and then there’s that one subject where you’re not as good, it then becomes stressful because you’re like, well what do I focus on?</p> <p>“Spanish was definitely more stressful because it was a whole new concept. But all the others...oh English...English...English and English literature because I don’t like English. I’m much more Maths. So English was a bit stressful, and Spanish, but apart from that...”</p>
<p>Locus of control</p> <p>Reframing experiences to stay in control</p> <p>There's nothing you can do about it</p> <p>Coursework gives you control</p>	<p>“...[if you didn’t do well]...I think probably...I’d feel quite disappointed. But that’s life, you’ve got to get on with it and see what other options are available afterwards. Because even if you get bad grades you’re not going to...not just going to stop there, so...see what happens.”</p> <p>“Well I just think whatever I get I get and...”</p> <p>“Coursework I was alright actually because you can control it. You know...what the question is, you’ve got a length of time to complete it and you can ask for help and stuff like that...coursework was better because you could control the environment that it is in.”</p> <p>“...you put all the work in and you’ve done all you can, and then when it gets to exams...all that hard work in the last two years has just gone in an hour and a half or whatever.”</p>

Expectations help build resilience	<p>“I think that maybe the higher students got left behind a little bit because the students that weren’t excelling, the teachers’ attention was on them because they felt like they were more important because they wanted to get their grades up. But actually the higher students were then left to work independently, which some people prefer, but some students need help.”</p> <p>“But during lessons it’s very much those who are struggling...especially when it was getting towards GCSEs, those who were struggling would get more attention than those who were...not struggling.”</p>
Being rejected by teachers	
Being successful means losing attachments	

Appendix D5: Development of Superordinate Themes from Subordinate and Emergent Themes

Overarching concept	Superordinate theme	Participant	Subordinate theme	Emergent theme	Example
The Stress Cycle	Catastrophic thinking	James	Thinking process	Catastrophic thoughts and over thinking Future oriented thoughts Social comparison	<i>'Is it going to be too hard? Will I fail? What if I don't achieve the grades I need, or I want or what I'm predicted? Will I let anybody down including myself?'</i>
		Annabelle	Catastrophizing	Negative statements about failure Vicious cycle Comparing self with others	<i>'It's kind of that I can't do this, I won't be able to, it's too difficult'</i>
		Mark	Having exaggerated thoughts about future	On the day of the exam	<i>'Oh my God, will I in ten years time be saying I wish I'd done more?'</i>
		Ellie	Future oriented thoughts	Exaggerated and over generalized	<i>'That I'm going to fail and everything'</i>
		Sam	Worrying/nervous thoughts	Different time points across year Negative internal dialogue Linked to nervous feeling Use of imperatives such as 'I must'	<i>'And in my head I will probably start thinking about the different questions, which will worry me slightly. And then I'll start going over all the different things that could potentially go wrong' 'It also depends on the day, like what's been going on'</i>
	Physiological response	James	Physiological response	Bodily sensations	<i>'Making you feel comfortable...I feel sick...it's physical yeah...so whenever I don't want to do something I've been sick before'</i>
		Annabelle	Physiological response	Feeling ill and tired	<i>'...and then it's like the feeling of feeling really ill. So that's how it affects me'</i>
		Mark	Feeling pressure	Pressure in your body	<i>'something that you feel when there's pressure on you'</i>
		Ellie	Mental not physical	Not recognising bodily sensations as stress	<i>'It could be both. For me it's more mental than it is physical'</i>
		Sam	Nervous feeling in body	Feeling not right	<i>'So if...if...I go into a hall and I know I'm doing something that I just don't feel quite right about, it will have an effect on how I feel in the future about doing that which also...which will probably cause me stress'</i>
	Behavioural response	James	Behavioural	Stress as a barrier Avoidant ways of behaving	<i>'Like you feel like you can't achieve your potential because something's getting in the'</i>

			response	Belief in not being able to cope	way 'I don't want to do it' 'At the start of the English exam...you feel like...what is the point of this, and I am going to get through it, and will my brain cope...and towards the end of the exam, is my brain just going to go?'
		Annabelle	Unhelpful behaviours	Putting off revision Letting work build up	'So I realise that I still have to do it. I am just putting it off'
		Mark	Choosing helpful behaviours	Avoiding peers and parents	'Whenever I came home and my parents asked, how was the exam, I'd just say, fine. Because I never like talking about these things' 'I might have talked about it to my friend who I was walking home with, a couple of questions'
		Ellie	Altering your behaviour	Staying away from peers Rumination with peers	'Well we kind of all got together afterwards and kind of discussed what we'd put and how we felt that it went' 'the more that everyone talked about it and about what they'd written down, the more nervous I got that I maybe hadn't done as well as I thought I'd done while I was in there'
		Sam	Altered behaviour following thoughts	Repetitive behaviours Fidgeting/energised	'Like I will always start doing things like nervously tapping the table, or like moving my pen around in between my fingers'
Grades, Expectations & Identity	Future Aspirations	James	Future Opportunities	University and opportunities Getting the highest grades A good future is contingent on grades	'you want to get the highest you can because then it gives you the better...opportunities in life' 'Not necessarily getting grades for university but just getting good grades in general. Because there's a lot of talk about how these will dictate your future and this is your future from now on. And actually it's not necessarily is it; because you can degree take or you can go down apprenticeships or whatever'
		Annabelle	Pursuing a specific career	Setting high expectations Determination to achieve Goal setting	'I've disappointed myself.' 'Because I know I could do better, but I don't know what I haven't done, do you know what I mean, do make me be better.' 'my ultimate goal is to go to university and get

					a degree.'
		Mark	Being motivated to achieve	Getting positive outcomes for yourself	'I thought...in ten years' time do I want to say to myself, why did I let stress affect me and affect how I performed? And that's what motivated me'
		Ellie	Further education	Needing certain grades for Sixth Form	'But I felt quite nervous just because if I did not pass the courses that I wanted to then I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing now'
		Sam	Uncertain about future aspirations	Experiences of sister	'My sister is four years older than me and she did really well in her GCSEs but not so well in her A-levels. So she had decided that she wanted to go to Southampton University and she didn't get in. Instead she ended up going to Hertfordshire for a course that she didn't want to do. And that was all because she didn't get the grades that she needed to get and that she wanted to get in A-level. So there was an additional pressure of I know she did well in her GCSEs; maybe not so well in her A-levels, but I know that she got those really good results and then yet later in life she's still having difficulty because of the next stage. So I've got to do well here and then go on and make sure I continue with how well I've done'
	Self-esteem & Self-worth	James	Identifying self with grade	Being a top high achiever Expectations of self in relation to others Past performance and confidence The mock exams shape beliefs Taking a confidence knock The grade and your self worth/value Your relationship with a subject	'am I going to achieve what I wanted to achieve. Because...you've done all the revision but actually it's the grade that counts.' 'I just put a lot of pressure on myself. I don't know why. I'm just very competitive and like do the best I can, especially when I know I can do better. And when I don't achieve it it's just frustrating' '...especially in Maths. There's three or four of us that are...getting A's every past paper. So our teacher tries to like...not get us to beat each other but just kind of...push each other to achieve...like you need to get more than him or whatever' 'I always aspire to be one of the top people in the class, so...I do look at other people because it's just nice to see how other people

					<p>are doing' <i>The mock exams in January...my English was very low. It was Cs because I was like, well...what happens if that happens in the exam...I thought I was doing well and then this happened. So why...why is it'</i></p>
		Annabelle	Having your confidence knocked	Letting yourself down Letting teachers down	<i>'If I get a good grade I'm happy. If I get a bad grade I'm really unhappy and I cry and I'm so upset with it'</i>
		Mark	Being pragmatic about your grades	Being competitive with yourself Learning from past performances	<i>'I just...ignored what other people done. I thought, have I done enough for me; not have I done enough for others' <i>'Well I'm going to do the same thing I done but I'm go in with a different mind set'</i></i>
		Ellie	Your future is contingent on your grade	Teachers reinforce messages Perceptions of failure	<i>'Yeah, you felt like you need to pass and you need to do this exactly...this all has to happen. I think especially with the amount of mocks that we had as well, they made it as if it was going to be like the most important thing in your life. And it's not really. It leads you up to the next step without actually having that big of an impact after you've got there'</i>
		Sam	Not feeling good enough	Past experience of mock exams Overwhelmed with coursework Managing feelings of failure	<i>'Through Year 11 I'd say probably the very start of the year because certain subjects I hadn't done as well as I should have done' <i>'And towards the end of Year 10 I started to worry a little bit because I knew that in some subjects I hadn't done as well as I could, which puts pressure on me in Year 11 to kind of catch up' <i>'I think I had one botched exam where I knew that I hadn't done well in it and then we went on to do other exams and I started to question myself more and more. So seeing those different...things pop up in the exams made me question whether...am I going to be able to do this? Is this going to come out as the best result or worst result in the end?'</i></i></i>
	School	James	Language	Language used by school staff	<i>'And there's a lot of pressure – well not</i>

	assessment driven culture		in school		<p>pressure, but like...teachers just wanted you to reach your potential and get what you wanted' <i>'Some of it was [helpful] because some of it was just reminding you what you needed to do. And some of it wasn't really because it was just adding more pressure. Like every single lesson, you need to be achieving this and...I want you to get an A*. When actually...an A or a B would be...'</i></p>
		Annabelle	Teacher expectations/stress	Teachers put you on a pedestal Excessive mock exams	<i>'The expectation is your work's always up-to-date, your work's always at a higher grade. It's...that's...you know, expectations...' <i>'[mocks]...as revise stuffs as well as do homework as well as do all the extra curricula stuff I do. How am I going to cope with this?'</i></i>
		Mark	Pressure on teachers	Accountability for grades	<i>'Well I was well aware of the pressure. And I know that...you know, teachers wanted me to do well'</i>
		Ellie	Teacher stress	Teachers speaking about exams constantly	<i>'Well I mean I can understand why they put the pressure on us to do well because it is their career that they...they want us to do well. But I think that they made it a bigger deal than it actually was. So I mean it got to results day and basically I'd manage to pass everything, got at least a C in everything...and I was like, OK, I've done really well; I can do what I want. But had I maybe not passed some of the subjects it wouldn't have been as much of a catastrophe as they would said that it would be' <i>'It was like, a couple of months before the exams started, especially when teachers started saying, we haven't covered this, we haven't covered this; we need to do all of this before the exams'</i></i>
		Sam	Teacher stress	Putting pressure on you	<i>'which puts pressure on me in Year 11 to kind of catch up' <i>'Of course they want to see good results, especially if they put in as much work as they do to try and get you to where you are. And again, for certain people there is that feeling that you let down your teacher if you don't get</i></i>

Resiliency & Coping	Locus of control & Self-efficacy beliefs	James	Feeling in control	Reframing experiences to stay in control There's nothing you can do about it Coursework gives you control The grade takes your control away by defining you Preparing for the exam Playing sport Deciding to get a good nights sleep	<i>the grade that you're expected to get'</i> <i>...if you didn't do well...I think probably...I'd feel quite disappointed. But that's life, you've got to get on with it and see what other options are available afterwards. Because even if you get bad grades you're not going to...not just going to stop there, so...see what happens'</i> <i>'Well I just think whatever I get I get and...'</i> <i>'Coursework I was alright actually because you can control it. You know...what the question is, you've got a length of time to complete it and you can ask for help and stuff like that...coursework was better because you could control the environment that it is in'</i> <i>'...you put all the work in and you've done all you can, and then when it gets to exams...all that hard work in the last two years has just gone in an hour and a half or whatever'</i> <i>'...Because...you've done all the revision but actually...it...the letter on a piece of paper defines what you've done, so you want...you just want to do the best you can'</i> <i>'...what can I do...before exam what can I do to try and improve my grade'</i>
		Annabelle	Developing self awareness	Becoming more in control Reflecting on GCSEs Feeling something is within your reach Planning in revision breaks Distracting yourself	<i>'The more strategic I am the less stressed I feel because I have a plan'</i> <i>'GCSE I was really overwhelmed'</i> <i>'I think it makes me kind of strive more to achieve'</i> <i>'OK. What do I need to do? I'll do my best subjects first because I'm more likely to remember it and then I do my worst subjects a bit later on'</i> <i>'...distraction is a massive thing that I use, especially if I'm revising and it's just not going in'</i>
		Mark	Believing you can cope	See challenges as opportunities Reframing thinking Compartmentalising thoughts Choosing to have a life balance Using positive affirmations/mantras	<i>'I was disappointed, yeah, but it spurred me on. I was disappointed but it's motivated me to do more this year'</i> <i>'I was happy with my results bar one or two; I got what I needed'</i>

				Being pragmatic/rationalising Taking ownership of feelings Being self-aware/reflecting Using school resources	<i>'And then I think it then I just put that mind set aside for the time being. Like I don't really care about that right now. I just want to do things'</i> <i>'I had everything I needed'</i> <i>'I've learnt that let your results, let how you do in lessons determine how good you are, not how...what your brain thinks'</i>
		Ellie	Recognising what is within your control	Believing you are autonomous Compartmentalizing stress Making external attributions/people making you feel out of control Employing emotional coping strategies Reading books Distracting the mind	<i>'And it's a lot more independent so I get more work done'</i> <i>'Well I feel like if you know the topics that you need to cover and any coursework that you need to do, if you can then plan out'</i> <i>'I do a lot of exercise as well. I do martial arts...so that always helped. So if I ever got in a bad mood because I was...I was stressed about something, it would give me a way to let that out without crying like most people did'</i> <i>'I read quite a lot/ It gives me an escape into something else and then it just like lets me kind of relax a bit while I'm doing something else'</i>
		Sam	Feeling out of control	Uncertain of whether can cope Distracting the mind Playing sport Choosing when to see friends	<i>'I think it affects you as a person because it's...it has an effect on your life. And if you can comprehend that, if you know that in the future this will affect you in some way, and if you don't exactly know how to deal with it, then it can cause you to have some possible...anxiety, you don't really feel like you have control over it'</i>
Attachments & Adolescence	James	Attachments and adolescence	Adult expectations Not letting adults down Teachers expectations add pressure Teachers as secure attachments Expectations help build resilience Being rejected by teachers Being successful means losing attachments Life balance	<i>'I think that maybe the higher students got left behind a little bit because the students that weren't excelling, the teachers' attention was on them because they felt like they were more important because they wanted to get their grades up. But actually the higher students were then left to work independently, which some people prefer, but some students need help'</i> <i>'But during lessons it's very much those who are struggling...especially when it was getting towards GCSEs, those who were struggling'</i>	

					<p>would get more attention than those who were...not struggling' <i>'like getting better sleep'</i> <i>'Definitely going to sleep earlier...because you feel like you...it just helps your brain and stuff like that'</i> <i>'I do a lot of sport...you can forget about what you're doing...anything going really: Football, cricket, badminton...swimming'</i></p>
		Annabelle	Having secure attachment figures	<p>Having a tutor who knows you well Having a containing space Teacher availability Talking with parents Being supported to problem solve</p>	<p><i>'My tutor, who I had since Year 7, knows me really well and helps me a lot'</i> <i>'he'll just sit me down and talk to me about it my family is strongly for talk through your problems'</i></p>
		Mark	Trusting/respecting key adults	<p>Looking up to Father Going beyond expectations from self and others Seeing other's expectations as supportive Teachers always available Being a teenager Seeing your friends Playing computer games</p>	<p><i>'It's probably because...how I was brought up. I definitely got it from my dad. So it's sort of just...what I was brought up to believe about the world and that'</i> <i>'he was always on me to make sure I was doing my work, to make sure I'm doing my homework and that, to make sure I'm revising'</i> <i>'I always wanted to exceed their expectations'</i> <i>'So you allow yourself to have that free time...'</i> <i>'Yeah. Because I can't just focus on exams all the time'</i></p>
		Ellie	Having dedicated adults to support	<p>Helping to motivate Being available and consistent Engaging in hobbies</p>	<p><i>'They definitely gave a lot of support, especially to people that they could see were being really stressed out. I mean even if they weren't voicing that - but if you could tell that someone was pushing their friends away because they wanted to go off and do even more work than they'd already done, they'd make sure that they were OK. And if they needed any help they would kind of always be there'</i> <i>'I mean some of the teachers that I had last year that I've got this year again, were here from seven in the morning until eight o'clock at night just talking with different students and helping them with any work that they needed help with'</i></p>

		Sam	Parental expectations	<p>Having an older sibling Teachers are not as pressurising Teachers are available</p>	<p><i>'Like from...at home I know that I've got pressure from my parents to try and do well...Well my dad didn't really place that much pressure on me; he was more I just want you to do well, and as long as you're happy with your results that's fine with me. He has his expectations, he would like for me to do well and he has a specific goal that he would like me to reach. So he would for instance want me to get a B in PE, which I didn't manage to get in the end. But my mum is a bit more forward. She had the thing of, you will pass your exams. I don't want to see any failed exams whatsoever'</i> <i>'When she said failed...'</i> <i>'Below a C. Because where...the way my parents were brought up, they seem to think that is...anything that is below a C nowadays just doesn't get you anywhere in life. So they just place it below their standing for their expectations'</i> <i>'I feel more pressured by my parents just in general because I know...I feel as if I'm not as smart for instance as my sister, because she is incredibly clever and always has been'</i> <i>'Coming back after school during certain days of the week'</i></p>
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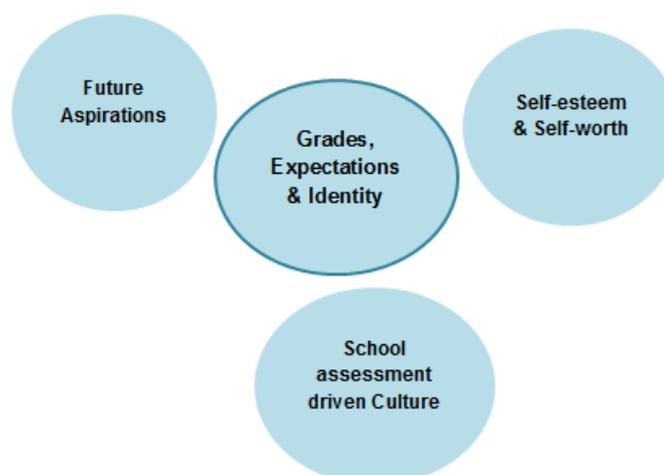
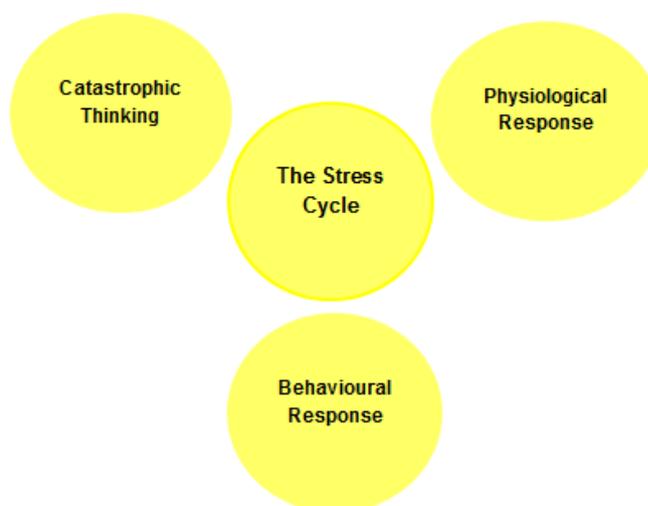
Appendix D6: Creation of Overarching Concepts from Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Subordinate and emergent themes	Subordinate and emergent themes	Subordinate and emergent themes	Subordinate and emergent themes	Subordinate and emergent themes
James Physiological Response Bodily Sensations	Ellie Mental not physical Not recognising bodily sensations as stress	Mark Feeling pressure Tension in your body	Annabelle Physiological Response Feeling ill and tired	Sam Nervous feeling in body Feeling not right Franticness/panic
Thinking Process Catastrophic thoughts and over thinking Future oriented thoughts Worried about failing	Future oriented thoughts Exaggerated and over generalized Failing	Having exaggerated thoughts about future On the day of the exam Before opening results	Catastrophizing Negative statements about failure Wanting to give up Vicious cycle	Worrying/nervous thoughts Different time points across year Thinking of the future Negative internal dialogue Linked to nervous feeling Use of imperatives such as 'must'
Behavioural response Stress as a barrier Avoidant ways of behaving Belief in not being able to cope Social comparison	Altering your behaviour Staying away from peers Rumination with peers	Choosing helpful behaviours Avoiding peers and parents	Unhelpful behaviours Putting off revision Letting work build up Comparing self with others	Altered behaviour following thoughts Repetitive behaviours Fidgeting/energised
Future opportunities University and opportunities Getting the highest grades A good future is contingent on grades Being a top achiever Competition with peers Language used by school staff	Further education Perceptions of failure Needing certain grades for university Teachers speaking about exams constantly Teacher stress	Being motivated to achieve Getting positive outcomes for yourself Being competitive with yourself	Pursuing a specific career Setting high expectations Determination to achieve Goal setting Teachers put you on a pedestal Teachers seem stressed	Uncertain about future aspirations Not sure if should follow sister Academic/practical route Excessive mocks administered by teachers
Identifying self with grade Being a top/high achiever Expectations of self in relation to others Past performance and confidence The mock exams shape beliefs Taking a confidence knock The grade and your self worth/value	Your future is contingent on the grade Teachers reinforce messages	Being pragmatic about your grades It is not the end of the world Learning from past performances Pressure on teachers Teacher accountability for grades	Having your confidence knocked Excessive mock exams Letting yourself down Letting teachers down	Not feeling good enough Past experience of mock exams Overwhelmed with coursework Managing feelings of failure Trying to see exams as one part of your life Teacher stress

Your relationship with a subject				
Feeling in control Reframing experiences to stay in control There's nothing you can do about it Coursework gives you control The grade takes your control away by defining you Preparing for the exam	Recognising what is within your control Believing you are autonomous Compartmentalizing stress Making external attributions/people making you feel out of control Employing emotional coping strategies	Believing you can cope See challenges as opportunities Reframing thinking Compartmentalising thoughts Choosing to have a life balance Using positive affirmations/mantras Being pragmatic/rationalising Taking ownership of feelings Being self-aware/reflecting Using school resources	Developing self-awareness Becoming more in control Reflecting on GCSEs Feeling something is within your reach Being determined	Feeling out of control Uncertain of whether can cope
Attachment and adolescence Adult expectations Not letting adults down Teachers expectations add pressure Teachers as secure attachments Expectations help build resilience Being rejected by teachers Being successful means losing attachments Life balance Playing sport Deciding to get a good nights sleep	Having dedicated adults to support Helping to motivate Being available and consistent Engaging in hobbies Reading books Distracting the mind	Trusting/respecting key adults Looking up to Father Going beyond expectations from self and others Seeing other's expectations as supportive Teachers always available Being a teenager Seeing your friends Playing computer games	Having secure attachment figures Having a tutor who knows you well Having a containing space Teacher availability Talking with parents Being supported to problem solve Having down time Planning in revision breaks Distracting yourself Not feeling guilty	Parental Expectations Having an older sibling Teachers are not as pressurising Teachers are available Distracting the mind Playing sport Choosing when to see friends

Key of Colour Coded Superordinate Themes

Physiological Response	Catastrophic Thinking	Behavioural Response
Locus of Control & Self-efficacy Beliefs	Attachments & Adolescence	Future Aspirations
Self-esteem & Self-worth	Assessment driven School Culture	





Appendix E1: Partially Transcribed Student Data with Initial Notings according to Overarching Concepts and Superordinate Themes (Harrison)

Overarching concept	Superordinate themes	Notes/Quotes/Phrases	Exploratory comments	Compare/Contrast
The Stress Cycle	Behavioural response	You can't sleep as you are thinking about exams. You would be thinking I don't want to fail.	Alterations to daily routines. Talking about self in third person. Are they trying to distance themselves from experience?	This is similar to Mark's experience of feeling very little stress at the start of the year as the exams are far away.
	Physiological response	Feeling better the further away that exams are.		Sam also spoke about behavioural changes such as sleep being affected. James appeared to be able to sleep well.
	Catastrophic thinking	When just taking one exam in Year 10 it felt a lot less stressful as there was more time to fit it in.	Distance/timescale.	
Grades, Expectations & Identity	Future Aspirations	Getting under a C is failure . As anything under that companies don't really like.	Perceptions of failure. Making external attributions/speaking about other's expectations here.	This is similar to the reasons why Ellie felt so stressed.
	Self-esteem & self-worth	There's always that "rivalry" with your friends as to how you did. In a fun/friendly way. "I want to get straight A's in my A-levels. As that's what people look at...I want to get a scholarship." "I'm separate" from the grade. "Pressure that teachers and parents put on you because they want you to do well and then you feel you have to because otherwise you'd fail them." "They've worked hard for you to get you where you are so...so there's kind of pressure on you if you fail them...as they've tried to get you where you are...so you then feel pressure because of that." "...yeah they do [get stressed] a lot of them do...they just seem different they're not themselves...they're not as fun as they used to be...tense...because they no they need to do well...because they can be under scrutiny...if you are expected to do well then they want you to do well otherwise it looks bad on them." "one of them [teachers]...in lessons he said I was lazy and didn't do anything...but I did he just didn't see it...quite often for the few weeks running up to our exam he'd quite often say...you need to get an A and yeah that did put pressure on"	Competition with peers. He seems to see this as healthy. Very clear goals for self. Does this help him cope? Grade and self. Boldly uses 'I' – proudly. Very clear identity of being separate. Teacher expectations. Combines these expectations with perceptions of failure. Very astute perception of teacher stress. Appears older than age. Is he annoyed at teachers here?	Like James he comments on rivalry. Like Annabelle he has clear goals. Is this protective? He is the most aware of teacher stress compared to other peers.
	School driven assessment culture			

Appendix E2: Appendix F1: Partially Transcribed Staff Data with Initial Notings according to Overarching Concepts and Superordinate Themes (SENCo)

Overarching concept	Superordinate theme	Notes/Quotes/Phrases	General comments	Compare/Contrast to student experiences
The Stress Cycle	Catastrophic thinking Physiological Response Behavioural Response Self-awareness	<p>"I think you see it in different forms...some get tearful...some don't understand that it is stress they're feeling...in others it's behaviour issues and other's just go very very quiet and it's really hard for them to grasp that what they are feeling is stress and for us to help them identify it a lot of the time. But you do definitely see it in a lot of different forms...as they get older I think they notice it and understand it a lot more but you do definitely see different types of stress definitely linked to school that they cannot necessarily say 'I'm stressed'...it's just something will go wrong and they may not understand why that's going wrong...we see that quite a lot."</p> <p>"...for years 10, 11...I think there's an element of disorganisation...it's almost like they say to you I just can't do it...and that's the words that come out of their mouth. It's like they have a mental block."</p> <p>"...they have rows and arguments with friends and at home and they come in with all this baggage...and they take it back [to home] and it's because they are feelings very very stressed...I don't think they've been given the cues to maybe understand that stress is quite normal and they're allowed to feel stressed and to identify it is part of how to deal with it...so everything has to be a big drama rather than I'm just feeling a bit stressed."</p> <p>"...you do see it really differently. I mean have students who just don't talk and they'll completely isolate themselves and you kind of think something's wrong here"</p> <p>"...she just hit a threshold where that stress and anxiety she couldn't contain anymore...her bodies way of saying I need help, you may not be acknowledging it but we need to do something about how you feel."</p>	<p>Different forms of stress/continuum Very assertive tone.</p> <p>Self-awareness</p> <p>Behavioural manifestations. Staff comment on what is directly observable, however they don't know for sure yet she is speaking in an assertive tone?</p> <p>Uses stress and anxiety interchangeably. What does she mean by this?</p>	<p>This appears to coincide with the stress cycle as students described. Gives the impression she has had a lot of experience with this.</p> <p>Self-awareness There were students who were not able to understand physical sensations of stress or who were not aware that they were stressed at all. Do staff have more awareness than students at times?</p> <p>This corroborates Leo's account of how his behaviour changed. He became more grumpy.</p>