Ticking the box: FE learners' and lecturers' lived experiences of GCSE English re-sits

Azmol Hussain

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Sunderland for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2024

Abstract

This research explores the unintended consequences of what may be perceived as a well-meaning national educational policy. It concedes that mandating GCSE English in Further Education (FE) for 16–18-year-olds who have not achieved the 'gold standard' of Grade 4 may appear to be a praiseworthy goal. However, indications from the findings suggest that this policy's inflexible and indiscriminate implementation has done more harm than good. This damage is not limited to learners, but also extends to everyone else involved in the delivery process: lecturers, managers, and senior leaders. A constructive-interpretivist framework methodology is adopted, employing semi-structured questioning, observations, and document analysis to explore the lived experiences of teachers and learners. Findings indicate a possible malaise inside and outside the classroom - so much so that one teacher has described her re-sit class as 'death within four walls.' The research further explores to what extent existing College practices, policies and strategies meet the challenges of low-motivation, disengagement, and low-achievement for GCSE English learners or are mere 'tick box' exercises to satisfy the requirements of various stakeholders.

The aim is that findings can be drawn upon by lecturers in FE wishing to offer a better learning experience to those studying for GCSE re-sits in English. Managers may also benefit by finding insights into how internal changes, such as timetabling, might lead to better outcomes for all those concerned. The research concludes with some policy recommendations for GCSE re-sits. These recommendations are based on the reality of the lived experiences of teachers, managers, and learners. The importance of this research is directly related to the gatekeeping nature of GCSE English, the outcomes of which may determine learners' access to higher education or professional occupations and, by extension, their opportunities for upward social mobility.

Keywords: Further Education, GCSE English Re-sits, Engagement, Motivation, Achievement; Condition of Funding Policy

Dedication

To the sacred and beloved memories of my mother and father. From my mother, I have learned to be brave, to think independently, and to be hopeful. From my father, I have learned the importance of education, being truthful, and morally upright.

I wish both lived long enough to see my graduation.

My Lord! Be merciful to them as they raised me when I was young. [Qur'an 17:24]

Acknowledgements

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my wife, Fatema, whose unwavering support and belief in my abilities were a constant source of encouragement throughout my PhD journey. Without her, completing this work would have been impossible. My daughter, Safa, also inspired me in unexpected ways, adding joy and motivation to my efforts.

My entire family showed great interest in my research, providing the courage I needed to persevere during challenging times. I am also immensely grateful to my colleague, Nora, for her invaluable help in keeping me grounded and ensuring my work remained coherent and meaningful. I would also like to thank Najib, my nephew, for his helpful suggestions.

Special thanks go to Gary Husband and Marcin Lewandowski for their exceptional supervision. Their endless suggestions significantly improved this work. I also appreciate Maggie Gregson and the SUNCETT team for organising outstanding training sessions.

I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to the research participants. Their honesty, willingness to share their experiences, and often profound insights were invaluable. Without their contributions, this research would not have been possible.

Lastly, I extend my gratitude to the ETF for funding the initial part of this research.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Introduction

It is a dark, dismal morning in December, and the clock strikes 10. I walk into a classroom where my colleague is teaching her GCSE English re-sit class. There are only three students present. I ask her where the rest are. She looks at me, trying to figure out if the question is rhetorical or if she should be concerned that a Development Coach for Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) is asking her this question. After contemplating for a moment, she replies, “How the hell should I know?” I promptly exit, enter the next class, and ask the same question. This time the teacher laughs loudly; the reason for this is not apparent. I see some learners amble in, 20 minutes late to the class, without any apology. These students were doing the same GCSE re-sit in my class two years ago and continue to repeat the course in the forlorn hope that they might pass this year. I look through the window into another class. Only two students seem to be engaged with the lesson; the rest either have their phones out to entertain them or rest their heads on the table.

OFSTED’s inspection of London Metropolitan College (institution anonymised for confidentiality) in December 2019 brought many of the issues I have just observed to a crisis. The College was judged as ‘Requiring Improvements.’ Specifically, the inspectorate was scathing about the quality of the English provision: ‘They (London Metropolitan College) have not secured enough talented teachers in … English’ (OFSTED, 2019). Since then, the English Department has been placed by College management under *special measures*, mostly in response to our disappointing achievement and engagement rates. This special measure requires us to improve our Key Performance Indicators (KPI), such as the ones mentioned above, within a specified time. Following the inspection, the Assistant Principal retired, and three other experienced lecturers have decided to leave the profession. When asked, these lecturers report that their departure was prompted less by the special measures and more by the re-sit policy and the range of issues surrounding it. Unfortunately, the subsequent OFTSED inspection in 2022 found limited improvements in the provision of GCSE English at the College.

Using London Metropolitan College as a research setting, this thesis aims to disentangle the learners' and lecturers' responses to a policy that forces them to re-enact such disappointing scenes year after year. The *Condition of Funding Policy* requires the majority of those who have not passed GCSE English from the ages of 16 to 18, and often beyond, to continue re-sitting the course. Although the discourse around the *Condition of Funding Policy* places the learners at the heart of the system; in practice, they can often find themselves marginalised in a system that asks them to continuously repeat their failures. Some students have not passed on their third attempt, and the prospects that they would pass on subsequent attempts does not seem likely. I was reminded of the human element of the GCSE re-sit policy when I messaged one of my more conscientious learners after becoming concerned that she would not attend her final GCSE exam. Here is her reply on Microsoft Teams:

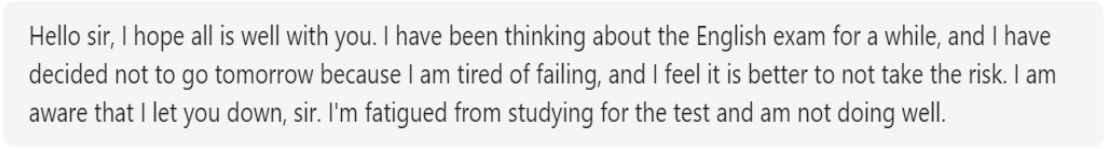


Figure 1 Teams message from an unhappy learner

My reply to this message was 'Please come and see me, we can talk about it.' In reality, I didn't know what to say to her. I could sense the anguish and anxiety in her message. I counselled her as much as I could, but she still decided that the 'risk' was not worth it. She is not alone in making such calculations: approximately 15 percent of our learners every year fail to even attend their exams at our College.

Indeed, Rodeiro (2018, p.24) finds that 'the probability of improving the grade in GCSE English… decreased with an increasing number of resits in the subject.' As discussed fully in the Findings chapter, students have developed many well-tried methods of responding to this perceived imposition. These strategies range from outright rejection (not attending a single class) to displaying persistent problematic behaviour in classes. However, it is worth noting that not all learners are failing, and some have a positive experience of GCSE re-sits, although they remain far too few.

The systemic failures with the GCSE re-sit policy are made even more manifest when we look at the raw statistics. The first chart (Figure 2) shows the attendance rates for London Metropolitan College learners over two consecutive years, broken down by months. The second (Figure 3) shows the achievement of high-grade pass at Grade 4 or above for our learners, compared to the national average.

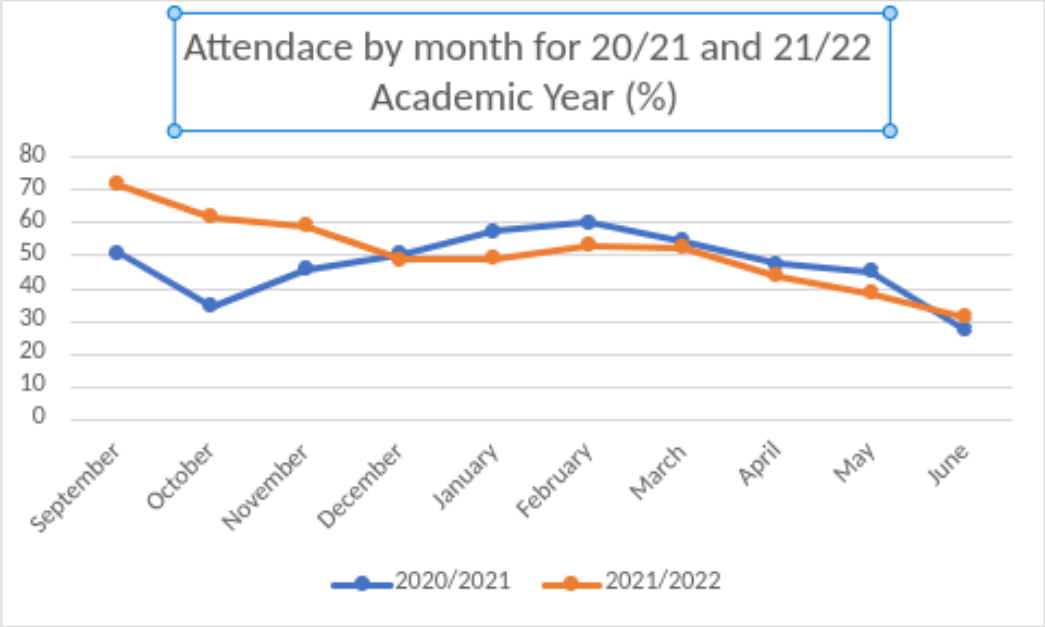


Figure 2 Comparison of attendance rates between academic year 20/21 and 21/22 (Date provided by London Metropolitan College, 2024).

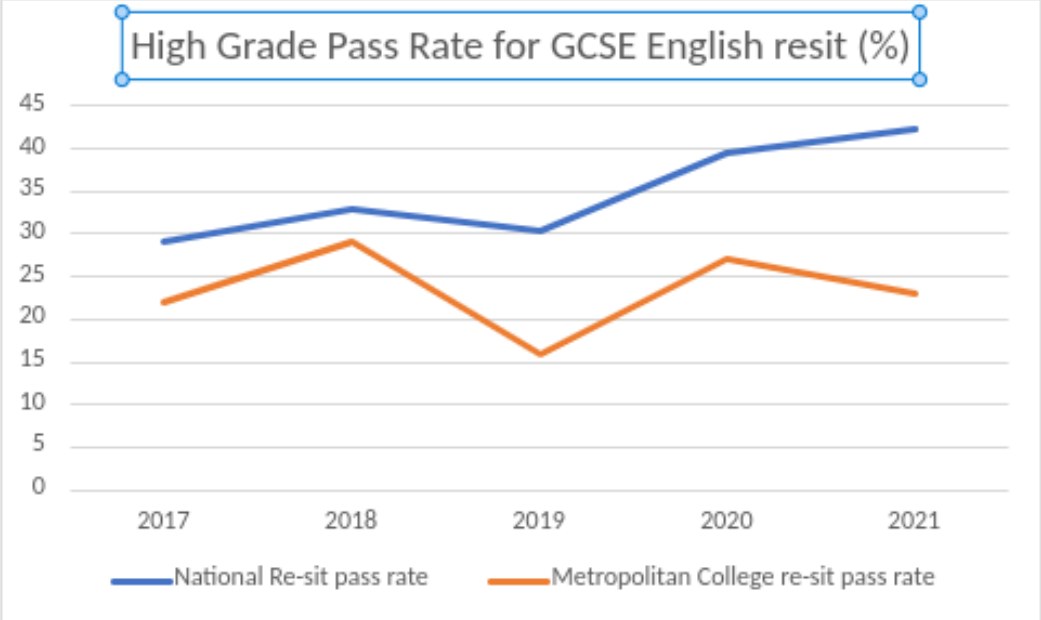


Figure 3 Comparison of high-grade pass rates (grade 4 plus) between London Metropolitan College and national average over time (Date provided by London Metropolitan College, 2024).

It is immediately apparent that the attendance started badly for both academic years (50% for 20/21 and 72% for 21/22) and ended even worse (approximately 30% for both academic years). The question of why London Metropolitan College's attendance rate is so low has not to date been looked at in any methodological manner and this is something this research seeks to remedy. Each lecturer and manager offer their own anecdotical explanations for this, ranging from poor timetabling to miscommunication with the learners. Regarding Figure 3, our College's high grade pass rates are consistently lower than national re-sit high grade pass

rates. The causes of such differences have also not been researched systematically, with teachers and managers again offering anecdotal explanations, which are often at odds with each other. What needs to be recognised is that even when lecturers effectively decided learners' grades during the COVID-19 pandemic, the high-grade pass rate remained lower than the national average (for London Metropolitan College 23% in 2021 vs the national high grade pass rate of 42.3%).

1.1 Research aims and related research question(s):

This research seeks to deepen our understanding of GCSE re-sits, thereby enabling us to improve the experiences for learners, lecturers and managers. Furthermore, this research also aims to uncover the factors influencing low engagement, motivation, and achievement rates in GCSE re-sit English courses, which are commonly observed in FE colleges across the country. Another aim of this research is to shed light on why a number of the policies aimed at improving learners' experiences of GCSE English have consistently failed. These polices include restricting access to the College for learners with low attendance and contacting their parents via phone calls and texts to garner support. It seems that whilst these policies are well-intentioned, they do not address the problems of learners' and lecturers' lived experiences of GCSE English and, as a result, often appear on a trajectory to fail.

The research questions framing this study are as follows:

1.1.1 What are the learners' lived experiences of re-sitting GCSE English?

The concept of experiences has deliberately keen kept broad, encompassing learners' overall hopes, expectations and concerns regarding the GCSE re-sit course. The learners' lived experiences are explored through the lenses of their motivation, engagement and achievement. Unfortunately, lecturers too often view the provision of the course from their own vantage points rather than from the perspectives of their learners. Recently, for example, to coincide with Black History Month, our Department used authors from BAME backgrounds as key texts. Yet, the impact of this on learners' motivation, engagement and achievement has not been evaluated and it was simply assumed that this initiative was a positive thing.

1.1.2 What are the lecturers' lived experiences of teaching GCSE English re-sit course?

While much research has been conducted on teachers' experiences in primary and secondary schools, the experiences of FE lecturers remain less explored. GCSE re-sit lecturers often

repeatedly teach the same students the same content for more than one academic year. Data at this stage of the research suggests that this harms lecturers' well-being. The relationships built on previous years of teaching often carry on into the new academic year. Moreover, previous research has not investigated the impact on lecturers' morale of a majority of their learners failing repeatedly. This study also explores the strategies lecturers use to increase their learners' motivation, engagement and achievement in relation to the GCSE English re-sit course. In addition, it also investigates how the lecturers explain the success or failure of such strategies. More broadly, I am interested in understanding the experiences of being a lecturer tasked with delivering the GCSE re-sit provision at this research setting.

1.2 The rationale for the research

The genesis for this research can be traced back to the 2018/19 academic year, when I was teaching a challenging GCSE English class. The learners before me were learners I had taught the year before but had once again failed their exams. When I explained the task for the lesson to the learners, four of them said to me, "What's the point of all this? We couldn't pass before, so why are we doing it again?" I couldn't reply to this question. As a result, I became apprehensive about teaching this class. Behaviour was, as expected, problematic. Later that year, I decided that I no longer wanted to teach GCSE English and focused exclusively on teaching Functional Skills. While this course presents its own issues, student disengagement is less of an issue.

When I searched for existing research that could support an understanding and offer a rationale for my learners' and my own emotions about re-siting GCSEs, I realised that this was a topic that was not comprehensively researched previously and that this 'gap' needs to be addressed. Morris *et al* (2024) find this gap in research 'remarkable' given the 'scale of resits, the relatively low pass rates and the salience of the issue for policymakers and post-16 providers.' Indeed, after a systematic approach to identifying existing literature, they only discovered 5 studies that focuses on GCSE English re-sit compared to 40 for maths (*ibid*). What little research that does exist is in the form PhD theses that touch on my topic of interest, but they do so incidentally in relation to some other research interest or priority. For example, Lloyd's (2021) PhD thesis explores the 'learning identities' of vocational students re-taking GCSE English. She achieves this by applying the construction of 'Figured Worlds' to theorise the phenomenon of GCSE re-takes. In contrast, I am more concerned with learners' and lecturers' lived experiences of the course. Similarly, Whitehead's (2021) thesis looks at the impact of peer tutoring between A-Level learners and GCSE re-sit learners, focusing on the perceived impact of tutoring programmes on learners' educational goals and

social relations. Bowser-Angermann's (2019) thesis is one most similar to my own effort. Her primary research question is, 'How is the policy of compulsory GCSE maths and English for 16-19-year-olds being experienced by students and teaching staff at one Further Education College?' (*ibid*, p.4) However, whilst I employ the principles of phenomenology, she uses vignettes and critical incidents.

This research lacuna, at least in terms of published peer-reviewed research, raises an interesting question about who should be responsible for researching the FE sector. As Gregson (2020, p.1) recognises, there is a lack of practitioner-researchers in our sector. He attributes this to:

> *a number of factors including high workloads, a sense of isolation among busy practitioners and a research landscape in which practitioners in the sector often see themselves as having little or no place.*

My research points to the ways in which practitioners are well placed in conducting research in the FE sector as they have intimate access to the research settings. Buckley and Husband (2020, p.435), whilst acknowledging the long teaching commitments as a 'practical barrier to research engagement,' are, however, hopeful that the FE research environment is changing: 'The current discourse around the expansion of FE practitioner research in FE is gaining momentum and publications in recent years have seen a sharp increase in FE led momentum.' This is hopeful indeed given that Gregson, Gregson and Spedding (1999, p.37) argue that FE 'practitioner research is uniquely capable of taking context and local knowledge seriously.'

Moreover, I hope that since I have practical first-hand experience of the issues I am researching, other practitioners may find my research credible, trustworthy and convincing. As Gregson (2020, p.2) notes, a great deal of research conducted upon FE 'is never read, let alone acted upon, by a wider audience of sector practitioners. Therefore, this research does not have much impact upon practice.' This poor state could be because a great deal of research is done upon lecturers by outsiders. After all, practitioner research is so vital because 'practice is the arena where ideas from other types of research and theories generated by those in HE and elsewhere are tested and challenged' (Gregson, Gregson and Spedding, 2019. p.37).

To conclude this section, I would like to draw attention to the image below (Figure 4). During the Summer term 2022, I came across this scene, and I thought it aptly summarises our current knowledge of learners' and lecturers' experiences of GCSE English re-sits. My hope is that the 'unknown error' is replaced with 'known errors' through my research.

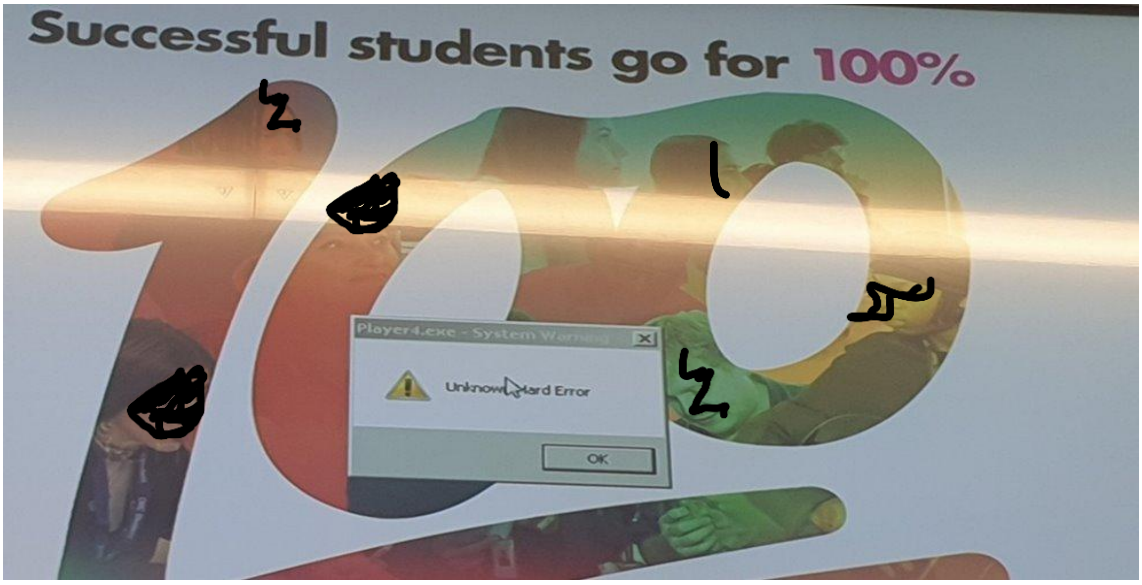


Figure 4 Picture of a display over the entrance of London Metropolitan College

1.3 London Metropolitan College- London's top vocational FE college

Commenting on the breadth of the FE sector, Kessell-Holland (2000, p.24-25) makes the perceptive comment that it is 'reassuringly heterogeneous.' He warns that:

> *Attempts to homogenise a teacher or learner experience, even in the context of one subject across one age-band (for example teaching of GCSE resit cohorts) consistently require mitigation for differences found across the system.*

Therefore, researchers can only speak authoritatively and credibly of discoveries in reference to a small cohort of teachers, students, and organisations (*ibid*). Despite this inherent limitation, discussing my own research setting, a place with which I am intimately familiar, is both a 'pragmatic and realistic place to start' (*ibid*).

London Metropolitan College's central campus is at the corner of the historic Tedding region of London. The new campus, which opened in 2011, is a RIBA award-winning building, recognised by the Word Architecture Festival for architectural excellence. The total cost of the building is £103 million. Although it is beyond the scope of this research, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the cost as many felt that the money could have been used more wisely, especially in increasing lecturers' pay so that there is parity with other teaching professionals across different sectors, such as primary school and secondary school teachers. Like many other colleges in England, the College merged with the North London Prime College, forming the Central London College Group. However, the research is situated at the Redding Campus, where the researcher is based.

Figure 6 External image of London Metropolitan College

Figure 5 Interior view of London Metropolitan College

Three notable features of the cohort need to be outlined. Most of our students are from BAME backgrounds (Figure 7), are from outside the Tedding catchment area (Figure 8) and most are from low socio-economic backgrounds (Figure 9).

Academic Year	BAME Background Head Count	Total head count	As a percentage of total head count
20/21	3155	3259	96.8%
21/22	1842	2689	68.5%
22/23	1632	2817	57.9%

Figure 7 Number of learners from BAME background. (Data provided by London Metropolitan College, 2024).

In terms of specifics, learners from African backgrounds constitute the majority, followed by 'Any other ethnic group.' This is worth nothing as students from BAME backgrounds may experience the educational system differently from British White learners.

Academic Year	Learners from Borough outside of which the College is located	Total head Count	As a percentage of total head count
20/21	3167	3259	97%
21/22	2625	2689	98%
22/23	2659	2817	94%

Figure 8 Number of learners from outside of Borough to the College. (Data provided by London Metropolitan College, 2024).

As discussed above, most of our students attend this College from outside of the catchment area. This could indicate that the learners are trying to distance themselves from their peers or need a 'fresh start.' For example, there is anecdotal evidence that some learners are part of gangs and choose this college to escape other gangs.

Although a proxy for measuring socio-economic background, the table below (Figure 9) shows the number of students eligible for free school meals.

Academic Year	Eligible for free school meal	Total head count of students between 16-18	As a percentage of total head count
20/21	2227	3259	68%
21/22	1996	2689	74%

Figure 9 Number of learners eligible for free school meal (Data provided by London Metropolitan College, 2024).

This is again worth noting as there is well-established research linking socio-economic background to educational attainment (*e.g.* Early *et al*, 2022). In relation to GCSE re-sits, economic disadvantage too often plays a decisive role in chances of achieving high pass

grades. Belgutay (2017) shows that significantly fewer young people entitled to free school meals (FSM) achieve a grade 4 than the general population. Shockingly, in some extreme cases such as Wealden in East Sussex, just 1.8 per cent of those with FSM entitlement achieved a high pass grade in their re-sits compared to 27.7 percent for their better-off peers (*ibid*).

1.4 The English Department at London Metropolitan College

Now shifting focus to the English Department, where this research is situated: the Department sits under the English, Maths and Skills Career Cluster, headed by an Assistant Principal. Two Curriculum Managers support the Assistant Principal. We also have three full-time permanent lecturers, three hourly paid lecturers and one agency lecturer. What is notable about the Department is that many lecturers teach across both GCSE and Functional Skills curricula. There is a high staff turnover within the Department, with all the lecturers having started with the Department within the last six years and most within the last two. Moreover, there is a perceived difference, even among senior leaders, in the commitment and capability of agency staff compared to permanent staff. For example, the College's self-assessment states that the learners are more likely to be unhappy with their educational experience when taught by an agency lecturer than a permanent staff member. Indeed, as we shall see in the Findings and Discussion chapters, lecturers' employment status can also have an impact on their own well-being and engagement with their work.

1.5 English Department's perception of itself (Self-Assessment Review)

The College publishes a yearly review of English provisions called *the Self-Assessment Review* (SAR), upon which future curriculum provision is planned. The SAR document is an assessment of the Department's self-perception (London Metropolitan College, 2022c). Using OFSTED's grading, where 1 is Outstanding, and 4 is Inadequate, the Department assigns itself a score for the following areas: Quality of Education; Behaviour and Attitudes; Personal Development; Leadership and Management; Overall Effectiveness.

In 2020/21, the following grades were given by the Assistant Principal in consultation with curriculum managers of the English Department:

Quality of Education	Behaviour and Attitudes	Personal Development	Leadership and Management	Overall effectiveness
4	4	4	4	4

Figure 10 Outcome of English Department's SAR review (London Metropolitan College, 2024).

The justifications for such low grades are many. Primarily, the Department is concerned with a lack of learner engagement, demonstrated through low attendance to both classes and exams. The blame is firmly put upon the inadequate timetabling process, which resulted in both GCSE English and Functional Skills English classes starting four weeks later than vocational classes. Moreover, lack of robust and consistent tracking of learners' progress is blamed for creating a 'nebulous' picture of where the learners are in their learning journey and what the learners need to do to achieve high grades. Furthermore, the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) is questioned. Whilst sessions are planned comprehensively with excellent resources, these do not translate well into lesson delivery. The lessons are judged as being disjointed and not flowing smoothly. As a result, the learning process becomes confusing for the learners. Moreover, the diagnostic and initial assessments are unsuitable and fail to address gaps in learners' knowledge (London Metropolitan College, 2022c).

What is interesting to note is that the College's formal lesson observation process failed to identify any of this. In fact, 80% of the teachers are rated as Grade 1 or 2 in the English Department, with only two teachers receiving Grade 3 and none receiving a Grade 4. Again, these grades are based on OFSTED's framework. The discrepancy between our SAR and class observations has led to heated discussions at the senior leadership level and contributed to our Department being put under special measures.

1.6 College's Attendance, Engagement, and Behaviour Policy

This section discusses two of the College's policy documents and their relevance to my research: the *Student Learning and Behaviour Policy* (London Metropolitan College, 2022a) and the *Attendance Policy* (London Metropolitan College, 2022b). The focus here is more descriptive than evaluative.

London Metropolitan College's approach to attendance and engagement is underpinned by The *London Metropolitan College Method*, which is a 'framework for the way we approach the student experience, including our delivery of teaching, learning and assessment…' (London Metropolitan College, 2022b). This "method" is at the heart of the *Attendance Policy*. The document states that 'we know that good teaching and learning and excellent support… are a key part of driving high levels of student attendance' (*ibid*). The *Policy*, however, also recognises that external factors, such as caring responsibilities or the need to

provide financially for learners' families, is also a challenge that many learners face. To mitigate against these issues, the College offers various support such as bursary payments, free laptops, and travel support. As we will see during the interviews, the students and the teachers are not always aware of these support packages, and sometimes the application process can be very daunting for the learners. Despite this, the 'College is committed to actively promoting and encouraging 100% attendance and punctuality for all our students…' (*ibid*). The consequence of having attendance below 85% is that the learner may not be able to progress to the next level of study. However, this *Policy* statement is contradicted by practice. Many senior members of the College explicitly mention that we are not a "selective College but a recruiting College" and that we should not turn anyone away. The implication is that even if their attendance has not been in line with the *Attendance Policy* the previous year, we should still enrol them this academic year.

Under the lecturer expectations section, the lecturers are required to promptly contact learners absent from lessons after class and record the reasons provided on the College's information system, Promonitor. This is the crux of the problem for many teachers. It is feasible to contact a handful of absent students, but when the attendance rates are, for example, only 30%, then this task becomes almost impossible. The *Policy* goes on to state that the teachers should ensure that the learning experience in the class delivers an 'impactful, enjoyable experience, so that learners understand the value of high levels of attendance,' (*ibid*) thereby linking attendance to what the lecturers do or not do.

The College's *Student Learning and Behaviour Policy* support the *Attendance Policy*, with the latter being the key document to enforce disciplinary measures on learners. The *Policy* states that 'absence without permission or other good reason from scheduled classes constitutes misconduct' (London Metropolitan College, 2022a). However, the consequence of such misconduct is a lengthy process which involves at least five stages of disciplinary escalation. Upon reaching the end of the five stages, students are only provided with a written warning with action plans linked to them. As a result, what sanctions are available to lecturers should learners disengage from their learning remains unclear.

1.7 Wider problems within the FE Sector

Many of the issues discussed above in relation to London Metropolitan College are prevalent across the FE sector. In a memorable episode of *Family Guy*, the American cartoon satire, Peter and Lois, the parents of Chris, are called into the principal's office because he is underperforming in his studies. The principal states that Chris should attend "the vocational school." Lois, taken aback, replies, "don't you have to be Italian to go to one of those schools." Her comment is meant to be pejorative. Unfortunately, FE colleges are perceived as something similar: 'FE is a really great place…for other people's children' (Kessell-Holland, 2020, p.35). The sector is described in 2005 by Andrew Foster in his eponymous Report as the 'neglected middle child between Higher Education and schools.' (FE News, 2010). So, what are some of the pressing problems with FE?

It maybe be argued that there is a pervasive and ingrained notion that FE attracts learners who the schools do not want to keep for their sixth forms. Underlying this belief is the widely accepted, but artificial separation between the vocational and academic divide. Those learners who achieve highly in their GCSEs often go to sixth forms and study A-Levels, but those who fail to achieve are sent to FE Colleges. As with many contentious issues, there are elements of truth in this. Hemsley-Brown (1999, p. 88) discovers in her study of post-16 choices of learners, 'all students…classified as upper middle/middle/lower middle class favoured academic routes and working-class students (with the exception of two students) favoured vocational training or employment.' This view is echoed cogently by a learner in a study conducted by Fuller and Macfadyen (2012, p.92):

> *...when I told my friends I wanted to go to college they just assumed it was because I wasn't expecting to my pass my GCSEs... I guess it's cause 'college' itself has a really bad ring compared to sixth form.*

Indeed, those who attend FE colleges have lower average GCSE attainments than those who attend sixth forms. Meschi, Vignoles and Cassen (2014, p.192) note, for example, that higher 'achieving pupils being more likely to enrol in a school sixth form than in an FE college (or indeed a sixth form college).' This has potential consequences for FE colleges. The learners may, for example, already be disillusioned with the whole educational system even before they reach FE, and this could have profound consequences for motivation, engagement, and achievement. Secondly, FE also attracts more non-traditional learners than sixth forms. For example, many of our learners are first-generation immigrants and others who have been out of formal education for a variety of reasons. There are often large gaps in learners'

knowledge, forcing FE lectures to draw on a range of strategies in order to mitigate their negative impact.

1.8 Throwing a spanner into a broken machine: COVID-19 and GCSE English re-sit

This section provides some reflection on the impact that COVID-19 has had on the Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) in GCSE re-sit English and its continued, ongoing negative effect. It was on the 23rd of March 2020 that the first lockdown was announced, with the Prime Minister calling the pandemic 'the biggest threat this country has faced for decades.' For lecturers, this posed a unique problem: teaching in FE has always been face-to-face, and all our training was premised on that custom and practice. The sense of panic from senior leaders and lecturers was palpable. I was involved in providing training on effective online teaching, even though I was also learning alongside the rest of my colleagues. Many of the learners did not engage in their online lessons, and indeed, the average attendance was in the low 40 per cent. Even of those that did log on, many just did not respond to any questions or contribute. Perhaps many just logged on and went back to sleep. "Can you hear me?" became a source of humour for teachers across the country. This situation was, of course, more widely spread than my research setting, as König, Jäger-Biela and Glutsch, (2020) document with reference to Germany. It was like firefighting without training and suitable apparatus.

COVID-19 continues to impact our TLA post-lockdown in three profound ways, despite the seeming normality at London Metropolitan College. Firstly, there are significant gaps in our learners' knowledge and there is a concern shared by my colleagues that learners are just not ready for the GCSE curriculum. As OFSTED (2022a) mentions: 'Gaps in knowledge and skills were particularly evident in areas that could not be taught remotely,' such as music, drama and fine arts. I would argue that the gap extended to all subjects, including English and maths. Secondly, there is a sense amongst my colleagues that secondary teachers have inflated the grades for their learners during the *centre-assessed grading* (CAG) process. Thus, many learners who would normally be suitable for the Functional Skills curriculum now meet the *Condition of Funding* criteria for GCSE and must, therefore, be entered only for GCSE English. Lastly, there is a concern that many learners have experienced trauma and mental health issues during the lockdown, which affected learners' motivation and engagement with their studies, and this pernicious legacy continues until now.

1.9 Policy background for English GCSE re-sit mandate

1.9.1 The historical context of English subject provision in the FE sector

Smith (2020), in his assessment of English subject provision in the FE sector, notes that it has had a 'turbulent history.' Policies and funding allocations have led the sector to witness the introduction of Basic Skills, Key Skills, Functional Skills (FS), and compulsory GCSE in the last two decades. Of these, only Functional Skills and GCSE remain. Basic Skills was portfolio-based and delivered to students on an individualised basis, whereas Functional Skills requires students to apply knowledge of English to real-world situations such as applying for jobs or writing letters of complaint. GCSE English had historically been segmented into foundation and higher papers. This is no longer the case; there is now only one examination paper. In contrast, Functional Skills English is divided into five levels, beginning with Entry Level 1 and going up to Level 2, which is theoretically equivalent to a Grade 4 Pass at GCSE. Although both these qualifications co-exist, they are not regarded as being of equal parity. For most learners, Functional Skills are seen as a 'stepping stone' qualification towards GCSE.

Overall, the picture of English provision in FE is one of muddled and ever-changing policies. As Smith (*ibid*, p.16) observes, 'These changes alone chronicle the significant upheaval and policy storms that Further Education students, teachers and institutions have weathered.' The lecturers are, of course, often at the blunt end of these changes. They have had to adopt to the requirements of a new qualifications, devise new curricula, and pin their planning to new specifications.

1.9.2 The Re-take (*Condition of Funding*) Policy

The genesis of the retake policy can be traced back to the 'Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report' (Wolf, 2011). Unfortunately, this report exemplifies a policy with good intentions that resulted in unintended negative consequences. The intention of the Report is to investigate 'how we can ensure that vocational education can provide for progression to higher learning and employment' (*ibid*, p.6) As Wolf (*ibid*, p.7) rightly pointed out, there are hundreds of thousands of vocational learners who move in and out of education and short-term employment and that the 'staple offer for between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort is a diet of low-level vocational qualifications, most of which have little to no labour market values.'

The report also recognises that 'English and Maths GCSE (at Grade A*-C) are fundamental to young people's employment and educational prospects' (*ibid*, p.8). Maths and English are explicitly linked to employability: 'Good levels of English and Mathematics continue to be the most generally useful and valuable vocational skills on offer.' Analysing the data from young people who were 15 in 2005/6, the Report established that 37% of the cohort achieved neither Maths nor English GCSE A* - C. Of this group, only 2% achieve both by age 18 (*ibid*, p.83). The report lays the blame for this troubling situation not on the learners' motivation or ability in Maths and English, but on perverse funding incentives, which steers learners towards qualifications that they can easily pass (that is to Key Skills) instead of one that 'stretch [and reward] young people' (i.e., GCSEs) (*ibid*, p.83). The criticism offered of Key Skills English as a substitute for GSCE English seems valid: Key Skills qualifications were multiple choice assessments, which were online and on-demand. Notably, the qualification, in fact, had no written component for English. Therefore, they were not providing an adequate diet of maths and English for 16-19 cohorts (*ibid*, p.84). Indeed, the Report reaches the conclusion that, 'No other developed country allows, let alone effectively encourages, its young people to neglect maths and their own language in this way' (*ibid*, p.83).

It is in this context that the Wolf Report (*ibid*, p.15) recommends that students who are under 19 and do not have GCSE A*-C in English and/or Maths should be required, as part of their programme, to pursue a course which either leads directly to these qualifications. Government's response to the Report was overwhelmingly positive and accepted the above policy immediately (DfE, 2011). The Government's discourse also emphasised that businesses were not satisfied with the level of maths and English that the learners possessed, and this re-sit policy was presented as a remedy. Alison Wolf, writing in 2013, comments that the GCSE re-sit policy was 'the single most important [recommendation] I made' (The Huffington Post, 2013).

1.9.3 Discontent with the re-take policy and future directions

There has, however, been widespread dissatisfaction with the compulsory GCSE re-sit policy from many stakeholders. Pearson's (2022) report on *The Future of Qualifications and Assessment in England*, whose panel of experts includes two former Secretary of State - Lord Baker (1986- 1989) and Lord Blunkett (1997-2001) - maintains that:

> *In the post-16 phase, a GCSE 'one-size-fits-all' approach has failed too many learners… [and] a significant number of life chances are impacted by the belief that only a GCSE qualification can evidence the Mathematics and English capabilities they need to progress* (*ibid*).

The report argues that there was a need for an 'urgent rethink' of the policy of re-take and that there may be other Level 2 qualifications that are more 'age-appropriate' (*ibid*). This conclusion is surprising given that Pearson is one of the beneficiaries of the re-take policy as it generates more revenue for Pearson as an Awarding Body.

This message of policy rethink was echoed by the Labour party, who in 2018, argued that it would end the 'remorseless cycle' of resits and allow alternative qualifications to demonstrate required standards in English and Maths (Weale, 2018). Angela Rayner, the then shadow education secretary, stated that the re-sit policy was unsatisfactory because:

> *Instead of empowering them for the love of learning, they are going to be feeling like they are failures because they are having to take exams that are really not going to make any differences to them at a future date* (Quoted in Worth, 2023).

Labour's policy was welcomed by Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, who argued that 'there was no point in compelling large numbers of students to keep resitting a qualification with diminishing results. It is demoralising for both them and their teachers…' (*ibid*). Barton also described this as 'the misery of the resit system' (*ibid*). Many teachers are also scathing about the retake policy. A report conducted by the Nuffield Foundation (2020) finds that 80% of the teachers did not support the current re-sit policy for maths. Instead, they believed that students should do the exam when they are ready, which may mean that GCSE resit becomes a two-year programme instead of just one year. A children's charity, Impetus, has also joined the above stakeholders in their criticism and pointed out that 'young people are five times more likely to pass their driving test at 17 than to catch up with their GCSE' (Impetus, 2018).

What may be viewed as a surprise is that the Annual Report from Her Majesty's Chief of Inspector for Education, Children's Services and Skills 2017/2018 (OFSTED, 2018, p.10-11) also summed up the current disquiet with the retake Policy:

> *We continue to be worried about the effectiveness of the government's policy to require learners who have not achieved a Grade 4 in English and/or mathematic to continue studying for a qualification in these subjects… [And] the impact of repeated 'failure' on students should not be underestimated.*

Given what may be perceived as the widespread concerns with the *Policy*, it is no surprise that it would be subject to modifications. In the 2019 – 20 academic year, learners who previously achieved a Grade 2 or below can take a GCSE qualification or Functional Skills Level 2 (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2024). However, this does not apply to students who have achieved a Grade 3 or Grade D. Therefore, this only impacts a small

number of students, and most students must continue re-taking GCSEs until they pass at Grade 4. Although this concession might seem to be moving in the right direction, another recently proposed policy will seriously undermine the movement towards alternative qualifications. In response to the Augar Review of Post-18 Education (House of Commons Library, 2022), which aims to make higher education more equitable and sustainable for students and the taxpayers, the government plans to introduce new minimum entry requirements for university student loans: effectively those who do not achieve passes in GCSE English and maths will be ineligible for student loans. If this plan is implemented, many students will be denied a university education because of a questionable policy that insists on making GCSEs the only evidence of academic competency. This turn away from just offering GCSE for post-16 learners but continuing with alternative provision of English and maths has been, surprisingly, supported by Alison Wolf. She argued that Britain should follow Germany and Sweden by having a range of alternative curricula that went up to age 18 (Parker, 2019).

Despite what may be viewed as the widespread discontent with the re-sit policy, a 'flood' of English and maths re-sit is expected for 2023/24 academic year following tougher GCSE grading (Adams, 2023). Nearly 38,000 more learners will be required to do their GCSE English again compared to previous year, adding further pressure on already stretched colleges and sixth forms. Luckily, the DfE is beginning to recognise the financial scale of the issue and have stated that they will invest additional £150 million per year for two years (Camden, 2023).

Indeed, the DfE has further emphasised its commitment to the re-take policy by bringing in minimum teaching hours for both GCSE English and maths (Camden, 2024). From September 2024, full time learners doing re-takes will be expected to do minimum of 4 hours of maths and 3 hours of English or the provider will risk losing funding under *Condition of Funding Policy* (*ibid*). The Education and Skills Funding Agency (2024) stipulates that 'this study should be stand-alone, whole-class, in-person teaching...' (*ibid*, 2024).

1.10 Turning the lens onto the researcher: Positionality and reflexivity

Early in his academic career, Frank Coffield learned a crucial lesson: that positionality matters. Young Coffield, idealistic, educated and urbane, enters a world that he does not understand i.e. 1980's Durham and encountered a 'great difficulty at the beginning in understanding the dialect' (Coffield and Borrill, 1983 p. 527). While conducting a participatory observation at a youth centre in a deprived part of Durham, Coffield becomes unstuck when he tries to establish authority. During a particularly difficult incident, he was challenged to a fight outside and could barely extract himself from the situation without risk of serious personal harm. This episode underscores the importance of carefully considering researchers' positionality. The violence Coffield faced stemmed from being perceived as an outsider—an 'other' with different values and experiences from the research subjects—who was unsuccessfully attempting to assert his status in the situation.

Therefore, at the outset of this research, I would like to consider my positionality lest I, too, become subject to such ostracisation. Positionality concerns the lenses through which we view the world and the research that we conduct within it, or 'how we see ourselves and others' (Cohen *et al*, 2018, p.306). While some aspects of positionality are generally regarded as fixed, such as our age, social and cultural background, *etc*. others, such as ideologies, personal life history, and political views, are widely accepted as being more fluid (Holmes, 2020, p.2).

It is also important to consider my positionality because qualitative research is never value-free, and who we are can often impinge upon how we conduct our research. As Williams (2016, p.46) states, 'Social research is…shaped by internal and external values. The latter are themselves grounded in (often implicit) moral values.' This acknowledgement necessitates a reflexive approach to educational research. Reflexivity suggests that the 'researchers should consciously and deliberately acknowledge, interrogate, and disclose themselves in the research, seeking to understand their part in, and influence on, the research' (Cohen *et al*, 2018, p.303). Braun and Clarke (2022, p.13) underline the importance of reflexivity to qualitative research by citing it as 'the most important companion for your adventure.' Reflexivity, therefore, is not a product, but a process which weaves throughout the research: 'Reflexivity involves routinely reflecting on your assumptions, expectations, choices and actions throughout your research process' (Finaly and Gough, 2003, in *ibid*, p.14). Thus, the situated selves, entrenched in the webs of meanings, shape and inform what is noticed, or not noticed (*ibid*). Being Reflexive ultimately 'reduces the likelihood of developing a poor-

quality analysis through either fitting data to pre-existing ideas or shallow interpretation' (*ibid*, p.44). What follows is an attempt to identify my positionality through reflexivity.

Locating my positionality is not easy, nor is it fixed. I am a lecturer in the English department of London Metropolitan College, and a Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) Development Coach, responsible for promoting excellent practice at my research setting. The latter position is part of our quality department. I see myself as an experienced lecturer, having benefited from more training opportunities than most lecturers as part of my coaching role. I also teach fewer hours than most lecturers (0.5 contact hours). The barrier here is that the participants in this research, especially other lecturers, might be circumvent in what they reveal to me owing to my position, least it reflects poorly upon them. Indeed, in the past, I have been a mentor or Development Coach for many of my colleagues and have had a role in their professional development. The same concern also applies to the learners who participate in my research. Would they genuinely discuss their experiences of English with an English lecturer? Considerations of power in such encounters, both with colleagues and learners, are at the forefront of my mind. I am conscious that I have status and institutional power which might be greater than the participants in the research, and that could lead to biases and false reporting.

Another issue that I need to reflect on is my own experience of going through the English educational system as a first-generation immigrant and my orientation towards the value of education. I come from a long line of educators, and thus education was the central driving force in my childhood. Before my father passed away when I was only eight years old, he told me his last wish was for me to be educated. Indeed, educational attainment was the single crucial aspect of my personality growing up. I was born and grew up in Bangladesh, where educational provision was suboptimal, and the notion that the English educational system offered a world of opportunity was ingrained in me early. I need to be conscious of this personal relationship with education as many of the research participants may not feel the same way about their education, and the temptation to displace my educational values onto others needs to be avoided. Furthermore, I also had to re-take my GCSE English for medical reasons, and my experience of re-sitting was incredibly positive, and this could also influence my judgement of others' experiences.

Social class and race are additional factors that place me at incongruous with many of my research subjects. I am now middle class, although from a working-class background, with views on education that mirrors the former. Many learners undertaking GCSE re-sit courses are from working-class backgrounds, as discussed previously. Their priorities could be

different from mine; for example, they might need to work part-time to supplement their families' income. This could potentially lead to a tension between survival and education. Moreover, although I am a member of an ethnic minority, I am fortunate to have had teachers who are professionals and did not discriminate against me. Nor did I feel that the curriculum was ethnocentric and exclusionary. Race may have had more of an impact on my research participants' lives than it had on mine. The concern here is that I do not let my own idiosyncratic experiences cloud my orientation to my research, so that I project my experiences onto others.

It may be argued that we do not carry out research removed from the social reality in which we are actors. However, being mindful of my positionality and being a reflexive researcher, I attempted to bring forth my own biases and try to account for them in this research. How I attempt to do this will be covered under trustworthiness and reliability in Chapter on Methodology. As if to justify the notion that positionality and reflexivity are of paramount importance, a valued colleague made me aware that in the discussion above I had omitted to discuss that I am also a researcher, in addition to all my other roles within the College.

1.11 Key definitions

The following key terms play an essential role in this research, and here I define them as they relate to my research: motivation, engagement, and achievement. Motivation is a nebulous concept that many people institutively understand but find it harder to pin down in definitional terms. I find Ryan and Deci's (2000, p.54) definition of motivation to be the most useful for my research purpose:

> *To be motivated means to be moved to do something. A person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is thus characterized as unmotivated, whereas someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated.*

Achievement is defined as achieving a Grade 1 to 9 result in the GCSE examination, with 9 being the highest possible grade. This definition is critical for curriculum managers, as it is one of the key performance indicators they are measured against. 'High-grade achievement' is gaining Grades 4 to 9. This roughly corresponds to grades A* to C under the old GCSE grading scale. Achieving the latter is a requirement for admission to most universities and professions. Crucially the learners are compelled to re-take GCSE English until they achieve a minimum of Grade 4.

Engagement is defined as 'active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions with social and physical environments' (Furrer and Skinner, 2003, p. 149).

Engagement can, thus, be juxtaposed to disaffection, where 'individuals are alienated, apathetic, rebellious, frightened, or burned out…' (*ibid*). In 2022, the College ranked individual learners' engagement using a traffic light system, with green being those who fully participate and red being those who refuse to do any work. When teachers make such judgements, they are relying on their observations of the learners in the class. Engagement, of course, includes attending the class and being punctual. Our College's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for attendance is 85%.

1.12 Thesis structure

This research is divided into Chapters. Chapter Two provides a literature review that surveys the existing contribution to the study of engagement, motivation, and achievement as it relates generally to education first and then more specifically to the FE sector. Chapter Three is the methodological chapter, which considers my epistemological and ontological stances in this research, as well as exploring my research ethics and practice. An argument is made for preferring an interpretivist framework over a positivist alternative. How I ensure trustworthiness in my research is also outlined in this chapter. Chapter Four is the methods chapter, which focuses on the more concrete aspects of data collection. My chosen methods are critically analysed for strengths and weaknesses, and my choice of specific methods is justified here. Chapter Five looks at how my data is analysed with reference to thematic analysis (TA). Although alternatives to TA are recognised, the chapter makes an argument for the suitability of TA over alternative approaches. Chapter Six provides the findings of my research, which are organised according to themes. A variety of evidence is provided to support each theme. Chapter Seven discusses my findings in relation to the literature review. The aim is to see if my findings either support, oppose or illuminate the previous findings. The thesis concludes with some remarks on the research questions posed, as well as offer some recommendations for lecturing practitioners, managers and government policy makers.

1.13 Chapter summary

This introductory chapter supplies a context for my research, which is founded upon my own poor experiences of teaching re-sit GCSE English, an experience which is shared by many of my learners. I suggest that this dissatisfaction with the re-sit GCSE policy manifests itself in lack of motivation, engagement and achievement. From this, I formulate my research questions, which are concerned with the lived experiences of lecturers and learners in the provision of GCSE English. The focus then shifts to my own positionality, which is essential because this is practitioner-led research, and the *self* plays an important part in that research.

This chapter also analyses aspects of my research setting, including policy documents that impact on my research. I also consider the wider policy background to the GCSE re-sit mandate, situating it in the concerns of the state to build a more educated workforce.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores a selection of literature that helps in informing, illuminating and illustrating my research. The justifications for this literature review are three: Firstly, this review will allow me to establish the gaps in the existing literature regarding experiences of GCSE re-sit learners and lecturers. Although the metaphor of 'Cinderella Sector' is less applicable to the FE sector as it was perhaps two decades ago (see Gregson, 2000), the sector is still somewhat left out of the researchers' gaze, who often favour studying schools and universities. Consequently, substantial research gaps still exist. This is despite the valiant effort of University of Sunderland's SUNCETT team and a number of dedicated research journals, including *Journal of Post-Compulsory Education* and the recent issue of *Education and Training Journal* (Volume 66, Issue 5). This issue explores the challenges of recruitment and retention in post-compulsory sector, both nationally and internationally. Despite these strides forward, quality peer-reviewed research is somewhat lacking, leading me to occasionally rely on contextualised research, such as valuable short-studies conducted by FE teaching practitioners and funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). Secondly, this review will help situate my research into the broader field of existing research, allowing me to see how far my findings correspond to the existing literature (see Chapter 6, Discussions). Thirdly, I hope to avoid unnecessary duplication of prior scholarships in this field by researching what has already been established. It might be unethical to make demands on participants' time when the problem has, for example, already been explored from multiple perspectives.

2.1.1 Literature review methodology

This research employs narrative review approach, which requires the researcher to use their professional judgement regarding the pertinence of existing literature for their research questions. Crucially, the researcher is not expected to cover the entire gamut of the existing literature on a specific topic. Narrative review is often contrasted with systematic review, the purpose of which is to 'evaluate and interpret all available relevant research evidence in a defined field' (Gaw, N.D, p.7). Since my research explores the perennial issues/theories of

education, such as motivation, engagement and cultural capital, etc. taking an expansive systematic approach might overwhelm the researcher with sheer volume.

In terms of the practicalities of conducting the literature review, my key terms were derived from my research questions and my theoretical interests. Here is a sample of searches I conducted:

- GCSE re-sit or resit; GCSE re-sit or resit and English
- GCSE English re-sit or resit and learners' experiences
- GCSE English re-sit or resit and reforms

For my question relating specifically to lecturers, I used the following key terms:

- Further education or FE and lecturers and GCSE re-sit or resit and experience
- Further education or FE and lecturers and workload concerns
- Further education or FE and lecturers and current issues

The list above of key search terms is not exhaustive. Where the results of search were scarce, I expanded the term to include teachers or students in other settings, such as schools. Those searches were conducted in Google Scholar, ERIC database, and University of Sunderland's online library platforms. To ensure the quality of the research selected, I considered how cited they were, and the reputation of the journal in which they were published in. Also, strong preference was given to peer-reviewed articles. In terms of parameters of the review, the theoretical searches were not limited to time or space. For example, much of the cited work on motivation and engagement come from North America and are often two decades old (See section 2.2). However, in terms of the literature on FE, the search was (mostly) limited to UK and from 2016 onwards, as this was the year when GCSE reforms were introduced. Where relevant and influential literature was discovered, I used the snowball method to acquire further research to consult. In fact, this was my preferred method for acquiring further research and often yielded the greatest results.

As noted in the introduction chapter, my research questions are concerned with the lived experiences of learners and lecturers engaged in GCSE re-sit. To conduct my research, I focused on three specific aspects of lived experiences: motivation, engagement and achievement. The decision to reduce the abstract notion of *lived experience* to these three aspects is justified because these are the College's key performance indicators (KPIs) for GCSE re-sits. Furthermore, during the OFSTED inspection in 2019 of our College, the focus remained on these three aspects. Lastly, the newly established *GCSE Resit Hub* located at

University of Warwick held a series of 'Spotlight Sessions' for practitioners and they also focused on the same three aspects (GCSE Resits Hub, 2024).

The literature for each of these three areas is examined firstly from a general, theoretical perspective. Then, the review will move on to how they relate to education generally and, lastly, I zoom in to focus on the FE sector and GCSE re-sits.

2.2 Theoretical perspective 1: Modern motivational theory (Self-Determination Theory)

This section focuses on the justification of selecting Self-Determination Theory (SDT) for my research. My focus than shifts to exploring literature that used SDT successfully to understand learners' motivation, with special emphasis on the FE sector. Lastly, I also explore lecturers' motivation for working within the educational sector, especially with reference to the FE sector.

2.2.1 Why use Self-Determination Theory (SDT) for my research?

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) forms the major theoretical framework for my research on learners' and lecturers' motivation. I have chosen to apply this theory to my research for three reasons: Firstly, SDT theory can incorporate and elucidate other theories of motivation such as Csikszentmihalyi's (2014) concept of *Flow* and Bandura's (1977) *Self-Efficacy Theory*. This is important as it makes SDT inclusive of other approaches, and therefore, has more purchase on explaining motivation than any singular approach. As Evans, (2015, p.66) states:

> *STD is a relatively comprehensive theory of motivation, focused not only on the role of particular social, cognitive, or emotional factors, but more broadly on the kinds of behaviours humans exhibit when they interact with social environments.*

Secondly, SDT has been applied to numerous studies to explore learners' motivation (*e.g.* Standage, Duda and Ntoumanis, 2005; Niemiec and Ryan, 2009; Evans, 2015). Therefore, a body of work already exists that I can use as a foundational springboard for my own research. Thirdly, SDT seeks to explain 'human behaviour across cultural and political boundaries' (Evans, 2015, p.67). This idea particularly appeals to me as many of my research participants are from multi-cultural backgrounds, and a theory that is Eurocentric would be problematic.

2.2.2 Central Elements of SDT

In constructing SDT, Ryan and Dei (2000, p.68), the main theorists behind SDT, make some ontological assumptions regarding human nature. They state that 'the fullest representations of humanity show people to be curious, vital and self-motivated' (*ibid*). A point that they reinforce when they state that 'built deeply into human nature is a robust propensity to learn and actively assimilate knowledge and cultural practices' (Ryan and Deci, 2009, p.171). Humans, therefore, strive to learn, master new skills, and apply their talents to shape their world (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p.68). Yet, they also acknowledge that this positive spirit can be crushed and people can expand a vast amount of energy in unproductive avenues such as passively watching televisions, and thus become 'apathetic, alienated, and irresponsible (*ibid*).' The impetus of their research is to investigate which social environments foster psychological well-being or ill-being:

> *Thus, its [SDT] arena is the investigation of people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self- motivation and personality integration, as well as for the conditions that foster those positive processes* (*ibid,* p.68).

Intrinsic motivation

In exploring the nature of motivation, SDT considers locus of motivation: whether people are motivated because they value the task at hand and have an abiding interest in it or if there is an external, coercive force being applied (*ibid*, p.69). It may be argued that the consequences of these two sources of motivations have important implications for performance, confidence, and excitement, *etc*.

Intrinsic motivation (IM) refers to behaviour that is satisfying and enjoyable and crucially is not 'contingent upon any outcomes separable from the behaviour itself' (Legault, 2016, p.1). Examples would be a child enjoying a game of football during the sunny summer mornings with their friends or drawing superhero characters and giving it as presents to their siblings. We do it for no other reason than it is fun, and because humans are curious, playful and inquisitive (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p.70). Froiland and Worrell (2016) argue that IM has been positively associated with many constructs, such as long-term achievements and reduction of anxiety during homework and schoolwork. Indeed, their study of ethnically diverse students in America replicated previous studies that also concluded that intrinsic motivation is positively associated with achievement and engagement. Sennett (2008) provides the example of the engaged *craftsman* as the quintessentially IM individual, who cares neither for money nor praise but is driven towards excellence and mastery. He gives the example of a conductor

who is oblivious not only to the strain he places on others when he requires continuous practice, but also unaware that he might be losing his own position because he is costing the orchestra's manager extra money in wages. Furthermore, those who are highly internally motivated are also likely to experience a state of *flow* (Graef, Csikszentmihalyi and Gianinno, 1983). *Flow* is defined as an enjoyable state where the individuals become so engrossed in the activity that they lose awareness of time and space (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975 and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Achieving *flow* is important because it keeps the individual engaged in the activity and returning to it (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Of course, for my research, the key question is how lecturers can create sufficient conditions for IM and *flow* given that many of our re-sit learners have negative experiences with GCSE English.

However, Deci and Ryan (2000, p.70) do not consider the causes of IM, which they consider to be an 'evolved propensity' and therefore inherent to all humans. However, it may be argued that we cannot just explain the existence of IM by reference to some vague notion of 'evolved propensity.' The idea is that humans will naturally incline towards activities that they enjoy, yet what, for example, of those who are clinically depressed from childhood, or have developmental disorders that mean they are not able to interact with the world in usual way? Perhaps we should not make such blanket statements without some firmer scientific basis, such as one based perhaps on neuroscience.

It may be asserted that what SDT does well, however, is look at what conditions increase or diminish IM. Deci and Ryan (1985) have formulated a sub-theory, termed Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), which aims to explain variability in intrinsic motivation. This theory looks at social conditions which lead to either IM flourishing or not. CET argues that IM's variability can be accounted for by considering the three following fundamental social needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness (*ibid*; Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Competence

Competence is concerned with the desire to feel effective in our abilities, skills, and interactions (Evans, 2015). Factors that conduce towards competence include feedback, communications, and rewards (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Of course, it is easy to accept that positive performance feedback would enhance IM; however, some students are often the worst judge of their performance. I have known some brilliant students who simply lacked the belief in their own competence, even when reinforced by external agents, yet they were motivated. How this observation fits in with competency and IM needs more investigation. Furthermore, competency seems to me to be a trait that is likely to increase and decrease with

the task at hand, and very few students, or teachers for that matter, might feel competent all the time. For example, in GCSE English some students state that they feel confident with certain questions and yet feel bewildered by others. How this variability in competence in tasks impact IM also requires further consideration.

However, I concur that competence can be a motivating factor. Evidence from music students, for instance, shows that 'experience of competence and achievement have motivating influence, while experience of excessive difficulty and inability thwart the competence need' (Evans, 2015, p.68). This idea of competency relates well to Bandura's (1977) *Self-Efficacy Theory*, which is concerned with whether an individual believes that they can carry out behaviours required to produce desired outcomes. Those with elevated levels of self-efficacy are also more motivated to act. Conversely, those lacking a keen sense of self-efficacy can often shy away from challenging tasks. As Seifert (2004, p.137) shows, self-efficacy is 'correlated with achievement-related behaviours, including cognitive processing, motivation, self-worth and choice of activities.' In relation to my research focus, Ruddle (2024) notes that re-sit English 'students come to FE colleges feeling like failures, because they don't quite measure up the grade-four yardstick of perceived success.' Although Ruddle (*ibid*) makes a generalised statement here, to what extent this assertion applies to my participants remains to be seen. If many of the GCSE re-sit learners do indeed have feelings of low-competency, what can lecturers do to improve their motivation is an area that is worth exploring in my research.

Autonomy

Autonomy is a further prerequisite for IM (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Autonomy shares the same conceptual space as notions of independence, freedom, and self-governance (Evans, 2015, p.70). To be autonomous means to be the source of one's own action. Researchers should, however, be cautious in judging autonomy to be synonymous with laissez-faire approaches to teaching. As Jang, Reeve and Deci (2000, cited in Evans, 2015) argue, sometimes structure can lead to autonomy in students. What autonomy does require is a sense of 'perceived locus of causality and personal volition' in the individuals (Legault, 2016). Moreover, Deci *et al* (1981, in Grolnick and Ryan, 1986) establish that in classes where the teacher's style is more controlling over autonomy-orientated, the students report lower intrinsic motivation to learn, as well as lower feelings of self-worth and competence. In music lessons, for example, a practical way of encouraging autonomy is by providing 'rationales when providing instructions (e.g., explain the benefits of drilling scales…' (Evans, 2015, p.72). Dickenson

(1995, p.166) shows that when the 'learner sets the agenda, learning should be more focused and more purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term.'

However, in relation to autonomy, Lewandowski (2022) argues that for all its benefits, early expectation of autonomous behaviour may be counterproductive, as not all learners have the developed the psycho-cognitive skills to benefit from such learning freedom. In relation to GCSE English re-sit, the question remains to what extent the learners, who may have failed their English GCSEs multiple times, have the pre-requisite psycho-cognitive skills to benefit from autonomy. Secondly, can we meaningfully speak of autonomy when the learners are mandated to do GCSE re-sit because of governmental policy. Indeed, Morris *et al* (2024) argue that the 'forced' nature of GCSE re-sits can be problematic because it can 'reinforce a sense of failure for young people.' Furthermore, Niemiec and Ryan, (2009, p.139) note the relationship between exams and students' autonomy in clear terms: 'Students' autonomy can be supported by teachers' minimizing the salience of evaluative pressure and any sense of coercion in the classroom.' The question this quote raises is whether it is ever possible to minimise the salience of 'evaluative pressure' and 'coercion' in the classroom given that the GCSE requires all learners to sit an exam at the end of their course.

Relatedness

Relatedness forms the last wellspring from where IM originates and is nourished. Relatedness is concerned with forming meaningful and supportive relationship with others. To relate with others meaningfully requires us to eschew being concerned with obtaining material or other types of selfish advantages. Such social relationships can occur in educational settings between the learners and the teachers and between the learners themselves. Bloom (1985, cited in Evans, 2015) explores the changing notion of relatedness between concert pianists and their teachers over time. In their formative years, the young musicians have an informal, playful and enjoyable relationship with their teachers. This changes in the middle years, and teachers emphasise technical skills development and higher standards. In the final years, the teachers have higher standards and there is a mutual relationship dedicated to mastery.

Furrer and Skinner (2003) also underline the importance of establishing a strong sense of relatedness to academic engagement and performance, and ultimately, motivation. They (*ibid*, p.149) hypothesise that a sense of relatedness:

> *trigger energised behaviour, such as effort, persistence, and participation; promote[ing] emotions, such as interest and enthusiasm; and to dampen negative emotions, such as anxiety and boredom.*

However, where relatedness is weak, the converse is true (*ibid*, p.149):

> *Children who feel unconnected to key social partners should find it harder to become constructively involved in academic activities; should more easily become bored, worried and frustrated; should be more likely to become disaffected.*

Their study, involving 641 students, largely confirms the above hypothesis. They conclude their research by arguing that promoting relatedness should be a priority for schools as it has manifold benefits (*ibid*, p.160).

Amotivation

Amotivation occupies the other end of the spectrum from IM. Ryan and Deci (2000, p.72) describe amotivation as 'the state of lacking the intention to act.' Amotivated people either do not act at all, or just go through the motions of acting (*ibid*). As Barkoukis *et al* (2008) state that, amotivated individuals do not seem to have specific purposes or goals. In sum, it is a state where individuals lack both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to act. Legault, Pelletier and Green-Demers (2006) note that the absence of academic motivation can lead to feeling of frustration and hinder productivity and well-being.

Amotivation is related to the notion of *learned helplessness*. Maier and Seligman (1976, p.3) find that 'dogs exposed to inescapable and unavoidable electric shocks in one situation later failed to learn to escape shock in a different situation where escape was possible.' Humans, they also found, when confronted with negative outcomes which they believe are outside of their control, passively accept it and do nothing, even when they have the power to make changes. Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) further demonstrate that *learned helplessness* can either be specific to a situation, for example, to writing a story, or it can be global, which may include a learner's orientation to studying itself. This idea of *learned helplessness* is akin to Dweck's (2017) notion of a *fixed mindset*, where individuals believe their intelligence, talent or personality is not malleable. Therefore, they're either born with natural giftedness or not. Consequently, if an individual needs to exert effort to achieve an outcome, this is confirmation that they are not suitable for this task in *fixed mindset* psychology.

Barkoukis *et al* (2008, p.40) outline four distinct types of amotivated behaviour: (a) the belief concerning the lack of ability to perform an activity, (b) the belief that adopted strategies will not produce the desired outcomes, (c) the belief that the activity is too demanding for the individual, and (d) the belief that even high effort is not adequate for successful task

performance. Legault, Pelletier and Green-Demers (2006) construct a similar taxonomy of amotivation, but add that thwarting of autonomy, competence and relatedness support can lead to amotivation.

Ntoumanis *et al* (2004) explore the prevalence of amotivation amongst students doing compulsory physical education (PE) classes in Britain. They find that those who were amotivated often displayed avoidance behaviours by not either not attending or seeking illegitimate reasons to miss PE. Even when they are present, they display disruptive behaviour such as talking or just standing aimlessly. The perceived causes of amotivation included helplessness beliefs, such as learners thinking they were not good at sports, or that they were not the sporty type: "I am Asian; we do not do this" (*ibid*, p.204). Significantly, students make several suggestions to reduce amotivation. They range from 'PE lessons should be made more fun' to 'I would rather not be assessed by the teachers' (*ibid*, p.210). An example of amotivated behaviour in GCSE English re-sit class is provided by Bowser-Angermann and Draper (2022, p.51). They describe a learner who seems to be focused on anything but his lesson:

> *He's 16. Sat there (he'd say). Determined. Resistant. Furiously drawing. Intense attention to detail. Manic. Focus downwards onto the cover of his English class book. Trying to disappear himself into the drawing, away from the class. Huddled over the cover, meticulously drawing. Figures and shapes and animals all over the front cover with his black biro. Anything but here, with us, now. He did not want to be there.*

In relation to amotivation, the existing literature does not seem to cover GCSE re-sit English classes *directly*, and I hope my present research will cover this lacuna. Specially, I would like to explore if amotivation exists amongst GCSE re-sit learners, and if it does, is it specific to GCSE English or is it global across all of learners' studies. Furthermore, I will also explore how amotivation manifest itself in practice. For instance, do learners just not attend their classes or do they become disruptive whilst attending? Following on from Ntoumanis *et al*'s (2004) study, I want to also elicit learners' suggestions in relation to reducing amotivation in GCSE re-sit context.

External Motivation

It may be argued that while some tasks may not provide much intrinsic motivation, but we also cannot accept the amotivated state of non-engagement. In such a situation, we need to use incentives to motivate the individuals. Once incentives become part of the motivational formula, we move our discussion on to External Motivation (EM). External motivation is defined by Ryan and Deci (2000, p.71) as the 'performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome,' apart from the activity itself. However, EM is not a unitary concept, but more of a continuum. As Ryan and Deci (*ibid*, p. 71) state:

> *Whenever a person (be it a parent, teacher, boss, coach, or therapist) attempts to foster certain behaviours in others, the others' motivation for the behaviour can range from amotivation or unwillingness, to passive compliance, to active personal commitment.*

Therefore, SDT recognises distinct types of EM, and they vary in terms of the degree to which they are experienced as autonomous (i.e., whether the perceived locus of casualty is from within the individual or originates externally from the individuals.) The diagram below (Figure 11) summarises the four different types of EM. Of the four types listed below, external and introjected regulation are classified as 'controlled reasons for acting' (Guay, 2022, p.2) as the causality is external, whereas identified and integrated regulation are recognised as autonomous (*ibid*).

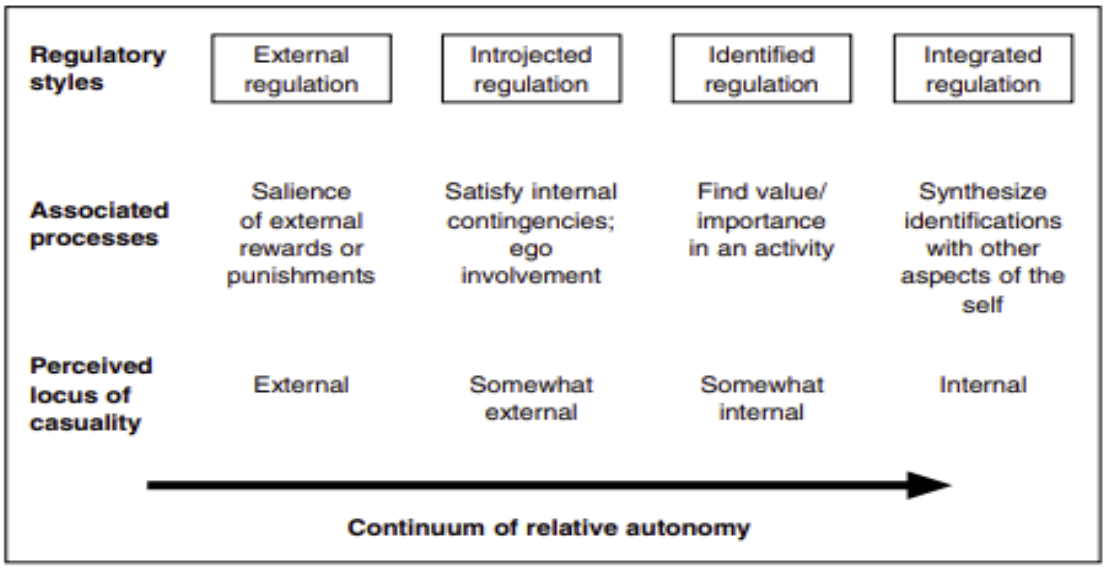


Figure 11 Overview of types of external motivation. Adapted from Ryan and Deci, 2000

External regulation:

External regulation is the least autonomous type of EM (Niemiec and Ryan, 2009). The locus of causality is external for actions, and behaviour is enacted to either avoid punishment or to receive a reward. For example, a learner might study for an exam because their parents promised them the latest games console if they pass, or if they fail, they will have their pocket money privilege revoked. Niemiec and Ryan (2009, p.137) note that such behaviours are poorly maintained once the 'controlling contingencies' such as grades are removed. This view is reinforced by Howard *et al* (2021), whose meta-analysis of student motivation and associated outcomes shows that external regulation is not associated with either performance or persistence, but as SDT predicts, with decreased indicators of well-being, such as anxiety and stress.

However, there is some evidence that such an approach may align in an educational setting. Burgess, Metcalfe and Sadoff (2016) carry out an experiment with 10,000 students in 63 low-income high schools. They offer £80 incentives per half-term to learners who improve their attendance, work and behaviour. Their findings are surprising: whilst those who are academically able did not improve their exam grades, but those who are underachieving improve their pass rates by up to 10%. It could be argued that such an approach would not be suitable for many educational settings: most educational establishments have increasingly limited finances. Our College group has on average 3,000 students doing GCSE English per academic year. If they are provided with £80 each, this would amount to £240,000. Also, such an approach would detract from the humanistic values of education, where learning is its own reward. As Niemiec and Ryan (2009, p.134) state, using rewards as a controlling condition can lead to the 'feelings of joy, enthusiasm, and interest that once accompanied learning [being] replaced by experiences of anxiety, boredom, or alienation.' Educational Maintenance Support (EMS) also provides some evidence of the positive impact of financial incentives on educational outcomes. The scheme was introduced in 2004 and provided 16-19 students from low-income families with support of up to £30 a week for staying in education. Whilst the scheme remains in place in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, it has ceased to operate in England in 2011. Chowdry and Emmerson (2010) find that this scheme significantly increased FE participation rates for those who were eligible (participation increased from 65% to 69% for 16-years old and for 17-year-olds, the participation rate increased from 54% to 61%). Moreover, in those areas where EMA was available, the likelihood of getting qualifications also increased (*ibid*).

High-stakes testing (HST) is another form of external regulation. Externally set tests is often used as a carrot and stick approach to improving educational outcomes across the globe- those schools which perform well are rewarded and those who falter are sanctioned. Ryan and Weinstein (2009) look at the impact of using HST as a controlling factor and find that it can lead to several negative outcomes. They argue that although there is immediate compliance as a result of HST, however, 'people tend to exert the least effort required to gain rewards or avoid punishment, and a side effect is often diminished self-motivation' (*ibid*, p.226). This is because 'controlling motivational strategies have been empirically shown to foster more superficial forms of learning, and to undermine more autonomous and engaged forms of motivation' (*ibid*, p.226). Additionally, when tests are too challenging, as they are for many of our GCSE re-sit learners, they tend to 'discourage rather than inspire further effort' (*ibid*, p.226). After all, since HST are meant to be uniform, based upon 'one size fits all' approach, they are not optimally challenging for most individuals and thus can lead to amotivating outcomes (*ibid*, p.226).

Introjected regulation

This type of EM refers to behaviours performed because of internal pressures, for example guilt, shame or ego-enhancements and self-worth (Guay, 2022; Deci and Ryan, 2000). Examples would include students doing homework because they feel guilty not doing it. In this sense, whilst the regulation has been partially internalised, it is not considered integrated to individual's conception of the self. Therefore, this form of behaviour regulation is experienced as controlling instead of autonomous (Niemie and Ryan, 2009).

Howard *et al*'s (2021) meta-study of student motivation and associated outcomes find that this type of motivation is positively correlated with persistence as well as achieving performance goals. Also, as predicted by SDT, it is also associated with greater incidence of anxiety. Kırkağaç and Öz (2017) study the relationship between academic motivation and achievement amongst pre-service English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. They find 'a positive and statistically significant relationship between Introjected Regulation and academic achievement' (*ibid*, p.104). Gillison *et al* (2009) explore the experiences of introjected regulation of sports' and/ or exercise amongst adolescent boys and girl. Whilst this study is not directly concerned with education, their findings that there are differences in how boys and girls experience introjected regulation differently may have implication for my study. They discover that not only is introjected regulation congruent with high levels of physical activity, but specifically for boys, introjected regulation is linked with social factors such those concerned with having obligations towards peer approval, and enhancing their self-

worth (*ibid*, 2009, p.315). Concerningly, 'boy's participation would be predicted to cease when the culture changes to remove these external controls, as is the case of leaving school' (*ibid*). Girls, in contrast, report introjected regulation for physical activities as more commonly related to threats of loss of fitness and guilt at not being able to adhere to a healthy lifestyle (*ibid*, p.316). Whilst these findings relate to physical exercise, it would be interesting to see if they also apply to our learners studying GCSE re-sits in English. More specifically, how do peer pressure work in relation to our learners' orientation to GCSE English?

Identified regulation

Ryan and Deci (2000, p.62) perceive identified regulation to be a more autonomous, and thus, more self-determined, form of regulation. The essence of this regulation is that the 'person has identified with the personal importance of a behaviour and thus accepted its regulation as his or her own' (*ibid*). They provide an example of 'a boy who memorizes spelling lists because he sees it as relevant to writing, which he values as a life goal, has identified with the value of this learning activity' (*ibid*). The motivation here is extrinsic because the boy is memorising the list not because he finds it interesting or inherently rewarding, but because of its possible instrumentality in improving his writing.

Since the regulation process is accepted by the individuals, 'the person does the activity more willingly' than other types of external motivation (Deci *et al*, 1991, p.329-330). Ntoumanis (2001) notes that it is often too hard to disentangle the unique effects of intrinsic motivation and identified regulation because they often resemble each other. Guay *et al* (2010) argues that students who endorse such autonomous types of motivation are 'more persistent and cognitively involved in their tasks, experience more positive emotions and have better grades' (*ibid*, p.713).

Integrated regulation

Integrated motivation shares the same terrain as IM and 'makes it difficult to distinguish empirically' between the two (Guay, 2022, p.3). It is also the most autonomous type of EM (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In this type of EM, 'integrated regulation is congruent with other values and needs' (Guay, 2021, p.3). The action is performed because it is part of who the person is (*ibid*). As Howard *et al* (2021, p.3) mention, 'individuals assimilate the enactment of a behaviour into their sense of self such that the behaviour becomes a fully congruent element of their identity.' Niemiec and Ryan (2009, p.138) provide an example of this type of regulation: 'a student might study medicine because doing so enables her to enter a profession in which she can help those in need, which is consistent with her abiding values and

interests.' Despite sharing many characteristics with IM, it is deemed as subset of EM because the performance is done to attain an outcome instead of the inherent interest or joy.

Howard *et al* (2021, p.3) mention that this form of EM is rarely studied for learners because school aged children are too young 'to have integrated academic demands into their identity.' The same point is echoed by Guay (2021, p.3) who states that 'this type of extrinsic motivation is rarely assessed in studies on children and adolescents whose identity is still developing.'

2.3 Motivation and FE Learners

Here my focus shifts from the theoretical level to the consideration of levels of motivation exhibited by learners in FE setting. This section does not explicitly look at GCSE re-sit learners in FE, as it is covered in the next section.

Baird, Rose and McWhirter (2012) explore the differing aspirations of FE college learners compared with sixth form learners. The researchers conceptualise the notion of aspirations within the framework of SDT, where intrinsic aspirations are linked to people's inherent nature and focuses on meaningful relationships, personal growth, *etc*., whilst extrinsic aspirations such as wealth, fame and image are seen as a means to other ends. Using survey as their method, they ask 928 learners in FE (including both college and sixth forms) to outline their goals, hopes and plans. They find clear differences in responses between educational settings and aspirations. FE college students cite career goals most frequently (27%) and cite education as an aspiration less frequently (19%). Moreover, FE college learners cite wealth (10.6%) as one of their primary aspirations. In contrast, sixth form learners cite educational aspirations more highly (27%) and career aspirations less frequently (25%). The conclusion Baird, Rose and McWhirter (*ibid*, p.304) reach is that 'students from general FE colleges are less likely to foreground educational aspirations than students from sixth form colleges and schools.' These findings may reflect the academic-vocational divide that exists in our education system, where the more academically able often go to sixth form and therefore, are naturally more inclined to have academic aspirations. If, as this research suggests, FE college learners are more career orientated and sixth form learners are more concerned with educational progress and attainment, such as attending university, where does that leave re-sit GCSE English course? Do FE college learners see GCSE English as an academic subject rather than a vocational subject, and therefore, has less relevance for their future aspirations? Despite attempts to position GCSE English as a vocational subject at the research setting, we have yet to investigate whether it is accepted as such by the learners.

Wallace (2014) builds on the above argument but argues that the lack of motivation that FE learners display can be traced back to national educational policies that shaped the vocational curriculum. The thrust of her argument is that the reasons for the low levels of learners' motivation cannot only be suitably explained by 'deficit models,' where the cause of amotivation is a consequence of something lacking in either the lecturers or the learners. She argues that a broad-based vocational curriculum based on the premises of a liberal educational model incorporating literature and politics has been discontinued in favour of preparing them to demonstrate their 'competence against a set occupational standard' (Wallace, 2014, p.349). Therefore, their learning is reduced to nothing more than 'can-do' tick box exercises which fail to engage the learners' enthusiasm 'for deeper levels of understanding or for learning *per se'* (*ibid*). A report published Civitas (2010, in Fuller and MacFadyen, 2012, p.87) reinforces this point by suggesting that:

> *Many vocational courses are rarely connected to the world of connected to the world of work, have little academic content and tend to be offered to low attaining, lower-income students that since we are moving toward a knowledge-based economy where skills have been devalued and there is ambivalence towards vocational education, motivation may be depressed for those entering FE colleges to undertake vocational studies.*

Gregson and Gregson's (2024) argument further support Wallace's (2014) position. They state that vocational education in English has lost sight of a more humanistic development of the individuals in return for narrowly defined, often 'mechanical, behaviouristic conceptions of knowledge, skills and competence' (*ibid*, p.9). In worst cases, 'all that is needed for a person to be able to be 'competent' is to be able to successfully perform the "skills" (at worst) only once (at best) in a narrow range of circumstances and contexts' (*ibid*, p. 9). This argument has profound implications for my research. If the learners on a study programme, say Applied Science, see education in terms of meeting certain criteria and being able to demonstrate certain abilities in the laboratory, where are they afforded the chance to deeply engage with some of the more profound questions that a more humanistic education more encourage?

Indeed, over the past seven years in GCSE English classes, I have frequently heard learners inquire whether the material being taught would appear on the exams. If informed otherwise, they would often disengage. Education is often simply reduced to passing units and exams. Disengagement in English, therefore, is perhaps more a function of the clash between the aims of vocational education (which learners studied for more hours and which learners choose) and the ultimate aim of GCSE English, which is to '...encourage genuine enquiry into

different topics and themes' (AQA, 2014). Indeed, the idea that assessment predominates the curriculum of some vocational courses at the expense of other goals is also recognised by OFSTED (July 2023, in Gregson and Gregson, 2024, p.6): '[Excessive focus on assessments] can result in the administration of assessment driving the curriculum planning and limiting teaching time.'

Another source of learners' amotivation, whose locus is outside of both teachers and learners, is the impact of the 1988 Education Reform Act (Wallace, 2014). This act introduced quasi-market reforms to the post-compulsory sector. The consequence of this Act is that education providers must compete with each other for learners; and perhaps 'inevitably in a culture of competition, it is the schools, not the students, who have the final choice over who will stay on after the age of 16' (*ibid*, p.351). The decision is often based on academic achievement at GCSE level. Therefore, the students are not making a free and informed choice on where to study, and as a result many learners are finding themselves with no option but to attend local FE college by default and doing courses that they have not in effect chosen (*ibid*, p.351). This can cause resentment amongst leaners as the course they eventually study may not coincide with their needs or aspirations (*ibid*).

Fuller and MacFadyen (2012) further look at post-16 decision-making and its relationship with motivation. They find that for many learners from lower-income families, the Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) they receive is inadequate for number of reasons. Firstly, learners from socially disadvantaged backgrounds do not always have appropriate support structures outside of school, and secondly, schools themselves are incentivised to provide biased information because of the competitive nature of education, as one responded to their survey state regarding the advice they were provided by their school '...mostly they say 'stay on at sixth form or get a job'- nothing about the colleges…' (*ibid*, p.92). The result of these two deficiencies is that learners often do not know which course is suitable for them and haphazardly enrol on a course: 'I found this by accident…' (*ibid*). This often leads to amotivation.

2.4 Motivation and GCSE re-sit learners

Wallace (2017, p.97) borrows from the semantic field of business to argue that 'selling maths and English' to FE learners is extremely difficult and requires 'the hard sell' (*ibid*, p.100). This, she argues, is because re-sits can provoke extreme emotional reactions, which range from fear of being thought of being a failure to experiencing boredom as learners associate English with the 'boring side of school curriculum' (*ibid*). Wallace (*ibid*), like many others,

also underscores how learners' previous negative experiences of English at school can undermine their confidence (*ibid*). Lastly, for many of the learners a sense of hopelessness can prevail, which may make them feel like they are stuck doing a subject that they do not have a realistic chance of passing (*ibid*). Wallace (*ibid*) presents a series of case studies of individual lecturers who have used different strategies to motivate their learners. Of particular interest is Sly Cunningham's approach to motivation, which emphasises rewards and sanctions. In concrete terms, he spends the first session with the learners exploring the question that many learners have, 'what's the point of doing GCSE English?' and helping them discover their own answer. The learners feel they are listened to, which is welcome change for many of them as they might have experienced previous lecturers dismissing such questions. Cunningham also links the response to this question with learners' future employability opportunities by emphasising just how many jobs require English and maths qualifications.

Ruddle (2024) also maintains that a source of amotivation amongst FE learners towards re-sit GCSE English can be their previous negative experiences of GCSEs at schools. Indeed, Fuller and MacFadyen (*ibid*, p.93) find that many learners chose vocational studies instead of A Levels because the latter was seen as being as proscribed as GCSEs. The learners are of the view that college would offer 'a learning experience that would be in stark contrast to that of school (*ibid*, p.93).' Many students speak of how being placed in a low 'set' in school for GCSEs negatively impacted on their educational experience. Consequently, many learners in the study identify themselves as 'academic failures' (*ibid*, p. 98). The authors subsequently contrast these negative experiences of school to the learners' positive experiences of colleges and argue that this is partly down to the fact that they had chosen the course they are studying. This study raises two questions this research aims to address: if learners have had negative experiences of GCSEs in school, how does that impact on their levels of motivation for GCSE English re-sit and secondly, does the fact that they are compelled to do GCSE re-sit impact on their levels of motivation?

The notion that forcing learners to study has an impact on their subsequent motivation is also investigated by Bellamy (2017) with regards to GCSE maths re-sit. She uses semi-structured interviews of 30 learners to explore learners' voices on 'forced' GCSE maths re-sits. She finds that the learners are aware of the peripheral position of maths in FE setting compared to secondary schools. The conclusion she reaches is that the 'students attend their main vocational course out of interest and choice (in theory at least)' (*ibid*, p.2). This is in direct contrast to maths-sits, which is an 'obligatory qualification intended for a school context' (*ibid*, p.2). Indeed, she finds that only 45% of the learners take a positive or neutral position

towards maths, but this is overshadowed by a minority of learners who described the subject as "death" or "suicide" (*ibid*, p.2). She also discovers that the 'set' they are placed in secondary school continues to impact on their perception of maths in FE setting: 'for almost all my interviewees, what defined their relationship with maths in their eyes, was the set they were put in' (*ibid*, p. 4). This study only looks at maths re-sit learners, so my research will also seek to explore if the finding applies to English re-sit learners: were they also placed in lower 'sets' and if yes, does this continue to impact on their subsequent orientation towards GCSE English in FE college?

Robey and Jones (2015), in contrast to the above arguments, maintain that many of the FE re-sit learners actually became more motivated to re-engage with maths and English because they are concerned with progress, particularly in education and employment. As one learner in their study states, 'I feel different about it now. I've realised it's more important and I should have listened and attempted it at school… Because nowadays employers are only looking for people who's getting C grades in maths and English' (*ibid*, p.25). Similarly, Anderson and Peart (2016) explore how FE colleges re-motivate learners re-sitting GCSEs in English and maths. They use one semi-structured group interview and two fully structured individual interviews of eight learners to understand their experiences. One of their key findings is that all the participants felt de-motivated at secondary schools, which resulted in doing the minimum amount of work. In contrast, many of the respondents see GCSE re-sit as a second chance, where they can achieve because they have a relationship with their teachers based on professionalism and mutual respect. One of the respondents stated that lecturers 'treat you like a person, not just a kid' (*ibid*, p. 203). Higton *et al* (2017) also reinforces this point. They (*ibid*, p.9) establish that one of the central features of FE teaching is that:

> *Colleges make a point of changing the style of relationship between the teacher and student compared to that used in schools. Colleges adopt an adult-to-adult relationship that is based on understanding the students' concerns, encouraging them to think differently about the subjects and themselves and increasing confidence*.

Their research also finds that many FE providers use external motivating incentives, such as offering the students an early examination entry (often in November rather than in June) if their attendance and work reaches satisfactory standards (*ibid*). However, as the authors of the report recognise, such incentives may end up sending the signal that English and maths are just an obstacle to overcome and not something that is inherently worthwhile (*ibid*). Therefore, such approaches are not 'harmonious with the message that most providers are trying to promote, which is that English and mathematics are important subjects' (*ibid*, p.53).

For Ruddle (2024) motivating learners requires offering them a choice over the texts and topics that is being explored in the classes. He decides to do this after realising that it is 'unfair' that teachers get to pick the texts 'when it's the students themselves who will have to do all the work' (*ibid*). Allowing learners autonomy via voting for texts has an immediate impact: 'students responded more positively to the extracts that they had chosen' (*ibid*). One the added benefits of allowing the learners choose the text is that it is unlikely that they would have studied the text previously, which is a common problem when lecturers rely on texts provided by AQA exam board. This notion of learners having a choice is underpinned by 'dialogic pedagogy' (Draper, 2020, p.46), 'where teachers and students engage in a critical interrogation, questioning and investigation… where the student perspective is central (*ibid*).' Not allowing such agency to the learners and lecturers could engender a 'restricted curriculum' based on lack of ambition, which can 'seep into the souls of FE teachers, which in turn creates a demoralised classroom' (Bowser-Angermann and Draper, 2022, p. 55).

Truby (2024), a practising English lecturer, also argues that motivating learners doing English re-sit is a difficult task, and one that many lecturers fail to achieve. He encourages his learners to be motivated by facilitating a whole class discussion about 'what works for them in the classroom' (*ibid*) and allowing the learners to do a free-writing task regarding 'what they want to get out of the year ahead' (*ibid*). These tasks, he argues, allow for more intrinsic motivation since it highlights any aspect of English that the learner might enjoy, even 'if only a little bit' (*ibid*).

Kay (2021) writes as an experienced manager of English and Maths in FE. Therefore, the book is more prescriptive than most academic studies. One-way lecturers in FE can enhance learner motivation, argues Kay (*ibid*), is through creating 'contextualized resources,' which means 'basing English and maths resources around vocational course topics' (*ibid*, p.54). Whilst acknowledging this approach's efficacy, Kay (*ibid*) rightly notes that this can put immense pressure on the lecturer's workload: after all, a single lecturer may have learners from dozens of vocational areas. Rangu *et al* (2019) carry out a pilot study of contextualisation intervention in English and maths through which lecturers used vocational-based examples in their classes. Their finding points to the apprehension that lecturers feel in using contextualising knowledge for GCSE exams, which are essentially vocationally agonistic. Moreover, contextualisation assumes all learners enjoy their vocational classes, and this is simply not true (*ibid*). Indeed, Crisp *et al* (2023) note that despite many lecturers re-contextualising 'curriculum content to incorporate texts and examples… [to] motivate and engage' (*ibid*, p.59) learners, 'evidence relating to the value of these approaches in terms of students' actual academic attainment, however, is less strong' (*ibid*).

Kay (2021) also asserts that emphasizing the wider, personal benefits of English and maths is 'regularly used in classrooms up and down the country' (*ibid*, p.56). This can take the form of displaying positive aspirational statements across the college such as 'if you get a grade 4 in your English and maths GCSEs, you'll get a better job and make more money' (*ibid*). There is an obvious danger here of instrumentalising education and making it a means towards some other ends than education itself; but for those unwilling, sullen learners who are not motivated at all, this may be a successful approach. This approach can be made even more effective by establishing a link between GCSE English and maths employment and careers: '… contacting leading figures and giving them the opportunity to speak about how their English and maths have aided their success can work wonders' (*ibid*, p.60).

2.5 Teachers' motivation

Why someone wants to become a teacher is a perennial question that many of us entering the profession often ask. The corollary question, of course, is why we remain in the profession that it is often devalued by society. Han and Yin (2016) argue that the impetus for research into teacher motivation derives from teacher shortages witnessed across western countries. Moreover, they (*ibid*, p.2) also maintain that teachers' motivation is a crucial factor related to several variables in education, such as learners' motivation, teachers' well-being, educational reforms, etc. Given that motivation is crucial to individual and organisational performance, it is surprising to read that:

> *Research into the motivation of teachers is limited both internationally and, more specifically, in relation to the English system of education which has undergone a series of rapid, multiple and systematic changes since the 1988 Education Act which are likely to have affected teachers' motivation and morale* (Addison and Brundrett, 2008, p.79).

This statement remains generally true now as it was before, although there are some promising research carried out using SDT framework that illuminates teachers' motivation.

Reeve and Su (2014, p.350) argue that the usual antecedents of entering the profession include a desire to work with children, the joy experienced while teaching, and the wish to contribute to shaping the next generation. Other factors include reversing social inequalities, enjoying generous holidays, and being inspired by an initial spark from a teacher. I would be interested in knowing what motivated the participants in my research to enter the profession. Indeed, from SDT perspective, why one becomes a teacher is essential. This is because

teaching engagement and well-being 'are not so much the product of *what* one is striving for as they are *why* one is striving for it' (*ibid*, p.350). This distinction between *what* and *why* often manifests itself within SDT framework as intrinsic and extrinsic goals (*ibid*).

Addison and Brundrett (2008) research on what motivate and de-motivates primary school teachers and establish that the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation distinction is also very relevant to their finding. Their research finds that the principal motivators are, surprisingly, extrinsic such as positive responses from children, or generally whether the children are well-motivated. Conversely, good salary or renumeration is mentioned by only a small minority as a key motivator. Indeed, their research also establish that those external motivators such as children behaving badly, or inadequate resources are also key areas of discontent for the participants. This distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for teachers is important because, as Reeve and Su (2014, p.350) argue, 'people who pursue a goal for intrinsic reasons, compared to those who pursue that same goal for extrinsic reasons, experience more favourable levels of adjustment, learning, performance, and well-being.' Indeed, Watt and Richardson (2008, cited in Reeve and Su, *ibid*) confirms that those who have intrinsic reasons to teach have better levels of instrumental effort and persistence (*i.e.* amount of preparation for a class, how long they stay in the profession, how open they are to personal development, etc).

Ushioda (2011, cited in Han and Yin, 2016, p.8) consider some of the negative factors that cancelled out motivations. This includes stress, 'inhabitation of teacher autonomy, insufficient self-efficacy, inadequate career structures, content repetitiveness and limited potential for intellectual development.' Sugino (2010) explores demotivation amongst 97 college teachers in Japan. The top demotivating factors in his research are to do with students' attitudes, including the use of mobiles in class, as well as sleeping in lessons. The second cause of demotivation for the participants are inadequate classroom facilities, teaching materials and curriculum. Lastly, the working conditions such as long meeting hours, paperwork, low pay are also pointed as being common de-motivators. It would be good to explore if my participants also share these common ideas about what de-motivates them.

Indeed, there is research to show that autonomous motivation (*i.e*. intrinsic) for teachers is 'positively associated with one's feeling of personal accomplishment- the sense that teaching enables one to fully realise one's abilities and feel satisfied' (Roth, 2014, p.8). The converse is also true, when teachers invest considerable efforts to non-autonomous motivations, those efforts are accompanied by feelings being drained and exhausted (*ibid*). This is often referred to as teacher 'burnout.' Roth *et al* (2007) finds that those teachers who are autonomously

motivated are able to wither disturbances and obstacles, thus reducing the chances of 'burnout.' The factors that enhance or diminish teachers' autonomous motivation, and by extension their well-being, is outlined in Reeve and Su (2014), and can be reduced to 'support verses pressure from above, from within, and from below' (*ibid*, p.352). Support versus pressure from above refers to how 'constructive versus coercive teachers experience interactions with administrators and parents' (*ibid*). Whereas support versus pressure from below refers to teachers' perception of their learners' motivation (*ibid*). They conclude that the more pressure the teacher experiences from above and below, the more 'they tend towards emotional exhaustion' (*ibid*). This finding is supported by Pelletier *et al* (2002) who find that excessive pressure from above and below leads to teachers becoming less self-determined, and consequently they also exhibit controlling behaviour towards their own students.

Roth's (2014) also makes the point that initial autonomous motivation to enter the teaching profession is often not enough to sustain a career in the field, as far too many teachers leave the profession within the first few years. He argues that the three psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy is crucial to increasing intrinsic motivation. In practical terms, the feeling of competence can be hampered by unsureness around the job, where there is lack of information to perform their job properly or feeling uncertain about what the management wants them to do. Interrelatedness is concerned with the feeling of belonging and connecting with others (*ibid*). This includes deriving motivation from fostering a warm, caring and affectionate relationship with other teachers or managers. Autonomy in relation to teachers' job is concerned with whether what they do 'corresponds with one's values, interests and needs' (*ibid*). In practice, this could mean the opportunity to design one's curriculum, shape one's pedagogic approaches, and seek ways engage with CPD to develop oneself.

2.6 FE lecturers and their motivation

Perhaps surprisingly, there is a notable paucity of research concerning the motivations of FE lecturers, with an even greater scarcity pertaining to those teaching GCSE re-sit English. This may be indicative of the marginal role that English subject lecturers in FE are perceived to occupy within the British educational system

In 2022, ETF conducted a landmark survey of 4,253 teachers, trainers, support staff and managers working across FE to garner their views on issues of importance to them. 82% of the respondents state that the most rewarding aspect of their job was 'inspiring students, changing lives and making a difference' (*ibid*). The survey concludes that professionals in the

sector are 'overwhelming motivated by their determination to make an impact on the lives of learners' (*ibid*). Unfortunately, the survey also finds that 9% expressed mental health/stress and student behaviour as their biggest challenges. In addition, 23% found excessive paperwork, reporting and poor administration systems as frustrating aspects of their job (*ibid*).

Mckelvey and Andrews' (2006) research, conducted prior to the above study, find similar results with trainee lecturers entering the FE sector. They establish that before their placement at colleges, the trainees are 'strikingly enthusiastic about teaching. Many had been attracted to teaching in the first place out of a 'desire to pass on knowledge or love of a subject…' (*ibid*, p.361). However, many of the trainees become disillusioned at their placements. Factors such as job insecurity as well as general low morale help to cement such feelings. Indeed, many are unprepared for the levels of dissatisfaction they encounter: 'People are to a man and woman disgruntled, fed up' (*ibid*, p.362). This inevitably shapes the trainee's own motivation to the profession, with some abhorring such cynicism (*ibid*). Whilst this research is dated, I would like to explore if such sentiments are still present, even amongst those who are more established in the sector.

Wallace (2014, p.347) notes a different reason why many lecturers enter the FE sector. When embarking on their training, applicants are often asked why they chose FE over schools. Many trainees make references 'to their belief that learners in this sector are there because they want to be and are therefore likely to be more highly motivated and better behaved than those who are still in school and subject to compulsory attendance.' However, their first day observing experienced teachers at work is often enough to illustrate that this is not always true (*ibid*). It seems that this issue compounded by the mandatory nature of the GCSE re-sits as far as English lecturers are concerned.

Kay (2001, p.94) speaks to FE English and maths lecturers, acknowledging that 'motivating yourself and others seem a difficult challenge at various points during the academic year.' He opines that common place advice that workplace should be a place where we repress our emotions should be ignored as it is detrimental to our motivation. He advises that continuous motivation requires 'looking after yourself,' 'avoiding negativity' and staying 'positive.' His work, whilst dealing with staff motivation, is more of a 'how to do' list instead of academic research on staff motivation. He acknowledges that demotivating factors in our sector includes 'additional workload, challenging behaviour, lack of funding and lack of parental support…' (*ibid*, p.84). He also mentions the pernicious role that lesson observations, which are often judgemental, can have on lecturers' motivation (*ibid*). In terms of how to increase motivation amongst lecturers, Kay suggests that continuous professional development (CPD)

can be a vehicle (*ibid*, p.89): ‘CPD is extremely powerful motivator as it helps teachers to achieve their personal goals, while also empowering them to develop as practitioners…’ (*ibid*, p.89). Morris *et al* (2024) also make the important point that many of the lecturers delivering English might not have subject specialism, and providing suitable CPD becomes even more pressing. It would be worth exploring if my research participants also see CPD in such lights, or merely see it as another imposition.

2.7 Theoretical perspective two: Approaches to understanding achievement

This section of the literature review shifts focus to consider perspectives on academic achievement. As above, I take a 'funnel approach' to look at existing research. First section considers the problematic relationship between motivation and achievement. In section two, general theoretical outlines of educational achievement are provided. This is done with a discussion of the notion of cultural capital, as well as consideration of the impact of race/ethnicity and social status on educational attainments. Finally, the last section considers what role lecturers/ teachers play in supporting learners' achievement. At this stage, it is worth nothing that I could not locate any relevant literature on what achievement looks like for FE lecturers, and therefore, this research contributes to creating new knowledge in this aspect.

2.8 Motivation and achievement: a complicated relationship

Muijs (2022) asks the intriguing question of whether motivation or achievement comes first. He points out that many findings have noted that the best way to increase motivation is through achievement and mastery itself. Thus, 'the effect of attainment on motivation is stronger than the effect of motivation on attainment.' (*ibid*, 2022). Although he also acknowledges that the relationship between motivation and achievement is reciprocal: 'performance certainly has an effect on motivation, but the reverse is also true.' Thus, whilst it might make some sense in using a variety of approaches to increase motivation, but 'focusing on strategies that improve learning remains the most important strategy' as 'attainment has the greater effect on motivation than *vice versa*' (*ibid*, 2022). This argument reverses the traditionally assumed relationship, which posits that motivation leads to greater achievement. Muijs (*ibid*) argument is also problematises Liu and Hou's (2017, p.43) uni-directional explanation of the causal link between motivation and achievement:

> *Intrinsic motivation influences school achievement through the change of the behaviour engaged in school. When students are highly intrinsically motivated, they are more willing to solve the relevant task, love the subject, and thus choose to do the school work; the increase of the school behaviour and engagement promotes the final outcomes.*

The direction of causality between achievement and motivation is an important debate as it can have implications for pedagogic practice. If motivation leads to achievement, as is traditionally assumed, then educators should focus on increasing students' motivation first.

Conversely, if the opposite is true, the educators should focus on academic skills and knowledge.

2.9 Academic achievement

This section begins with a critical introduction to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. I then look at several studies where this concept has been successfully used and assess whether their findings can be applied to my research.

2.9.1 The concept cultural capital

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) different conceptualisation of *capital* has been used by several researchers to explore underlying sociological causes of unequal academic achievement. Indeed, OFSTED's (2019) new inspection framework mentions that educational institutions need to provide the learners with 'the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life.' What Bourdieu, with his often-piercing anti-establishment ethos would make of this is uncertain. Bourdieu sees the notion of capital as multi-dimensional (1986, p.242): capital can be economic, which manifests itself in property rights and money, or it can be social, which is made of social obligations and connections. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it can be cultural, 'which may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications' (*ibid*). Indeed, Bourdieu (*ibid*, p.243) saw a direct link between cultural capital and unequal educational achievement by different social classes:

> *The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success...*

Although Bourdieu saw capital as having many dimensions, Edgerton and Roberts (2014, p.195) recognise that these forms of capital are 'mutually constitutive' in so far as economic capital often affords time and resources to develop the children's cultural capital, which often results in educational and educational success, which further 'contributes to the accumulation of economic capital' (*ibid*).

The concept of cultural capital, however, has not been uniformly understood by educational researchers (*ibid*). In North America, cultural capital has been taken to mean:

> *(1) appreciation of 'highbrow' cultural tastes and seen as (2) 'conceptually and causally' distinct from other knowledge or ability involving technical skills or competence (i.e., human capital)' (ibid, p.195).*

Stopforth and Gayle (2022, p.681), however, understands cultural capital in slightly different way, theorising it be 'the accumulation of a set of skills, knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours which have been sanctioned by the 'dominant' classes in society, and which are then converted into more desirable educational outcomes.' More specifically, this translates into greater familial involvement in middle-class activities such as going to the theatre and reading for pleasure (*ibid*, p.681)

The specific mechanism through which cultural capital translate to greater academic achievement is investigated by Sullivan (2001), who interprets Bourdieu as maintaining that whilst cultural capital differs with social classes, the education system presupposes the possession of cultural capital. If learners from lower socio-economic background do not possess such cultural capital, than success in the education domain remain difficult to attain. Indeed, Bourdieu is explicit in making this argument (1977, p.494 in *ibid*, p.3)

> *By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture*.

Therefore, the children of the 'dominant class' are primed to succeed in the educational system because there is a congruence between their home and school experiences or culture. Goldthorpe (2007, p.3) states in this regard:

> *These children will share a common mode of speech, style of social interaction and aesthetic orientation with their teachers, and neither the content of what they are taught (syllabus) nor the manner in which they are taught (pedagogy) are likely to appear strange to them. The converse is, of course, true for working-class children, who see school culture as a hostile environment where they feel out of place.*

Despite its uptake with scholars across the world and from differing political orientations, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as an explanatory tool in understanding unequal educational attainment has been challenged. Goldthorpe (*ibid*) argues that Bourdieu uses prose that is so obscure that it is liable to be misunderstood or misapplied. Others have also suggested that the concept of cultural capital lacked clarity, which presents a 'sizable, and no

trivial, operationalisation challenge' (Stopforth and Gayle, 2022, p.682). Consequently, many studies appear to adopt a definition that is either convenient for them or is readily applicable to their dataset (*ibid*). The fundamental critique of cultural capital theory, however, is that it is essentially cyclical reasoning: 'it is circular to treat educational level as a proxy for cultural capital if one is trying to assess whether cultural capital does in fact help to determine the educational levels reached by individuals' (Sullivan, 2001, p.7). Indeed, Sullivan (*ibid*) also argues that 'Bourdieu fails to show that parental cultural capital is inherited by the children, and that this is the mechanism through which higher-class pupils tend to attain higher educational credentials than lower-class pupils.'

Many empirical studies have sought to apply the concept of cultural capital to understand academic achievement. Stopforth and Gayle (2022) consider the relationship between parental social class and GCSE attainment through the perspective of cultural capital. Their finding accords with other existing research: 'The empirical analyses convey the important message that engagement in highbrow cultural activities is not important, but reading activities are influential' (*ibid*, p.692). Indeed, it is difficult to understand the causal link between, for example, visits to the theatre and improvement in academic work. In the same way that visiting a football match would not mean that you are more able in physical education classes. Reading, conversely, does lead to improvement in educational achievement because being able to process language is directly applicable to scholastic work (*ibid*). Sullivan (*ibid*, p.20) also explores the explanatory power of cultural capital to account for differentiated educational attainment at GCSE. Her findings also show that we 'can see that the effect of reading is significant, and the effect of participation in formal culture is insignificant' (*ibid*). She also makes a further point that educators are not prejudiced against working class because they lack cultural capital. This is because teaching as a profession has declined in status enormously, and therefore, teachers often do not constitute the elite.

Smith and Duckworth (2019, p.37) note that in FE many learners feel 'ignored' and 'invisible' in the classroom because they do not possess aspects of the dominant culture, and thus, are often posited as having a 'deficit.' This often contrasts with the middle-class learners:

> *[The]...cultural capital a middle-class child brings from home (e.g. a knowledge of books or experiences of going to the theatre) makes a vital contribution to them achieving success in accruing of qualifications* (*ibid*, p.37).

Therefore, middle-class children's success can sometimes appear to be 'natural,' rather than a result of mobilising their 'inherited' familial advantages. Conversely, the failure of the

working-class individuals is often attributed to 'deficits' (*ibid*). Their research also finds that many of the working-class learners did not fit in schools, had their tacit knowledge undervalued, and their social and cultural values deemed as inappropriate (*ibid*). These are different manifestations of symbolic violence. Consequently, these learners are less inclined to take an active part in their education.

Verhoeven (2001) offers a sophisticated critique of current GCSE English language provision using *popular language ideology* as an analytical tool. Whilst she does not refer to cultural capital as a concept, her work illuminates how the concept operates in the framing of the English National Curriculum. By language ideology, she means:

> *Ubiquitous set of diverse beliefs, however implicit or explicit they may be, used by speakers of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity* (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 497 in *ibid*).

Some of the pernicious language ideologies includes the idea that:

> *Some regional and social varieties of English are 'incorrect forms of English' e.g. nonstandard dialectal forms such as 'we was'' and that 'youth sociolects are ungrammatical and thus is 'incorrect English'* (*ibid*, p.3)

Consequently, the march of these incorrect uses of English is seen as affecting the language to its detriment (*ibid*,). Unfortunately, many teachers and DfE staff also subscribe to these beliefs, and this impacts upon certain segments of the society more negatively than others. In the context of my research, many of my learners are, as stated above, from minority as well as low socio-economic backgrounds. In many cases, they speak multi-cultural London English. There is often an estrangement between official language ideology of the GCSE English curriculum and my learners' background. As Verhoeven (*ibid,* p.4) demonstrates, many of the proscribed text choices are 'far removed from any contemporary socio- and ethnolects or regional dialects used by GCSE students themselves.' Bowser-Angermann and Draper's (2022) notion of restricted English curriculum further augments this idea: restricted curriculum, they contend, 'actively discourages students in its narrow referencing systems, standardised linguistic-strangling rules and regulation' (*ibid*, p.56). They also explore how such restricted curriculum can penalise minority learners who have their own idiolects (*ibid*).

There are more subtle ways that language ideologies impede on specific types of learners. For example, AQA GCSE English Language, Paper 1, Question 3, always uses the same phrasing: 'how has the writer structured the extract to interest you as a reader?' This can be 'problematic with re-sit students, who do not think of themselves as readers and are inclined

to answer: 'I am not interested as a reader'' (*ibid*, p.6). Therefore, 're-sit students especially' might gain the perception that the standard language is not their language, but the language of professionals such as teachers and exam boards who want to 'show them up' (*ibid*, p.7).

2.9.2 Social status and educational achievement

Elliot Major and Parsons (2022) employ a longitudinal approach to find that the outcomes of assessments of children's abilities at the age of three and five strongly correlates with outcomes for GCSE English and maths at the age of sixteen. Shockingly, they also find that 27% of learners who are assessed to be below expectations at the age of five fail to go on to achieve Grade 4 or above at the age of 16. When they probe further into the causes of such failures, they discover that the learners who fail to achieve at GCSEs share some common characteristics: they are twice as likely to be from a single-parent family, their parents are three times as likely to have little to no education and they were more likely to be living in a workless household.

The correlation between socio-economic factors and educational outcome is a topic that is well researched, and most of the findings seem to agree with Major and Parson's (*ibid*) findings. Parsons *et al* (2014), for example, also carry out a longitudinal study to establish the impact of parental worklessness on two specific cognitive outcomes: reading and mathematics. They find that being exposed to repeated parental worklessness at an early age is associated with reduced literacy and mathematical attainment scores compared to those living in working families.

Furthermore, the impact of family structure on educational attainment has also been prominently researched. Standing (1999, p. 118) notes that the 'consensus amongst educationalists in Britain is that there should be a 'partnership' between the home and the school in which parental involvement is central.' The argument here is that working-class parents somehow do not live up to this implicit contract. This 'contract' involves the:

> *Provision of a 'positive learning environment', and the organization of routine household tasks to fit the school day. Parental involvement means helping with homework, helping in the classroom as classroom assistants, reading with your child, taking part in activities and outings, and doing 'extracurricular activities'...attending meetings* (*ibid*, p.118)

Such parental involvement depends implicitly on the nuclear family, with the father working outside of the home and the mother assuming traditional homemaking roles and

responsibilities (*ibid*). In relation to single-parent families, given that the mother is already overburdened with her role as a mother, she often finds added involvement with the child's schooling tiring. Despite the inherent unfairness of the mother often taking on extra responsibilities, Standing's (*ibid*) research showed that many of the mothers try their best, often without acknowledgement or support.

Gillies (2005) explores how middle-class and working-class parents use different terminology to describe their children. The middle-class, for example, often describe their children as being 'bright,' emphasising their intellectual competencies. Therefore, it is the adults (teachers, in most instances) responsibility to make sure their children's potential is reached. Working class, in contrast, emphasise their children's ability to stay out of trouble. Higton *et al* (2017) bring some of these points back to GCSE re-sits. They (*ibid*, p.50) note that a GCSE re-sit providing institution report that some vocational students fail to see the necessity of gaining better qualifications in English and maths as 'their parents have been financially very successful in skilled trades and have achieved this without these qualifications.'

It may be argued that one of the insidious ways that class impinges on educational achievement is through teachers' expectations or lack thereof. Mortimore *et al* (1988, summarised in West and Pennell, 2003) find that teachers make very different assessments of their learners' academic abilities based on their social backgrounds. An example includes teachers judging learners from non-manual backgrounds as being of higher ability. Indeed, they reach the conclusion that 'higher teacher expectations may be one factor that contributes to the greater progress in reading and writing made by the non-manual compared with manual pupils during junior school' (*ibid*, p.32). This assessment also extends to behaviour, with pupils from semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds seen as being worse behaved.

This finding is confirmed by Dunn and Gazeley (2008, p.452). These researchers argue that whilst existing literature on working-class underachievement looks primarily at learners' home life, stronger focus should be placed on the 'actions and assumptions of teachers... if working-class under-achievement is to be effectively addressed.' They found that 'although it was seldom explicitly acknowledged, teachers' tacit recognition of pupils' social class positions was a key factor in their constructions of pupil underachievement' (*ibid*). One of the mechanisms whereby lower teacher expectations cause lower achievement is through teaching sets, where many of the working-class learners are placed in 'lower sets' and are inevitably at greater risk of underachievement. In a shocking quote, a teacher in the study says this about a learners' ability:

> *He knows he is a spanner and he can't do much and he's correct. He lives out his own low expectation of himself. (Teacher X about Pupil Four, identified as working class)* (*ibid*, p. 456)

In relation to this study, a pertinent theme is that whilst it is evident that the teacher had low expectations of the learner, he also attributes low expectations to the learners as well. It is also noteworthy that in this study, teachers very much reinforce the academic and vocational dichotomy with regard to their expectations of learners:

> *The majority of pupils identified by teachers as working class were judged to be unlikely to achieve five or more A*-C GCSE passes or to go on to higher education. They were seen to be more likely to go to college and vocational courses or to employment. The failure to enter university was only seen as disappointing in the case of a pupil identified as middle class* (*ibid*, p. 459).

Wallace (2014, p.17) confirms that the lecturers make assumptions about learners based on their home lives: 'there was a general consensus that standards of behaviour at college were primarily influenced by learners' home environment...'

The above two studies raise some questions I would also like pursue in my study. Firstly, are teachers aware of their learners' socio-economic background, and secondly, does that influence the expectations they have of the learners? Furthermore, given that many of learners in our classes for GCSE English re-sit have failed more than once, is it even possible for teachers to have high expectations of them?

With the ongoing cost-of –living crisis, it may be argued that the pernicious impact of poverty may become even more of a causal factor in explaining low-achievement amongst working class students. Indeed, The All-Party Parliamentary group for Further Education and Lifelong Learning (2023) looked specifically at the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on FE learners, and concluded that:

> *With rising food and energy costs compounding, FE students are struggling to prioritise their studies over maintaining and working more hours to make ends meet* (*ibid*, p.3).

Many of the FE learners reported that the cumulative effect of increasing costs means that they cannot prioritise their courseload and classes (*ibid*, p.4). As one 16-year-old learner in the report stated, 'I am struggling to meet deadlines due to having to support my family (*ibid*).'

The notion of the impact social class is reinforced by this statistic: Disadvantaged students, measured by whether they are eligible for free school meal, are around a third less likely to pass their re-sits than less-disadvantaged students in 2022/23 (Maris, 2024).

2.9.3 Ethnicity and educational attainment

Since most of the learners participating in my research are from ethnic minority backgrounds, it would be remiss of me not to investigate the relationship between ethnicity and educational attainment. Whilst it is undeniable that there are variations in educational attainments between ethnic groups in the UK (see figure 12 below), the causes of such differences are not agreed upon in the existing literature.

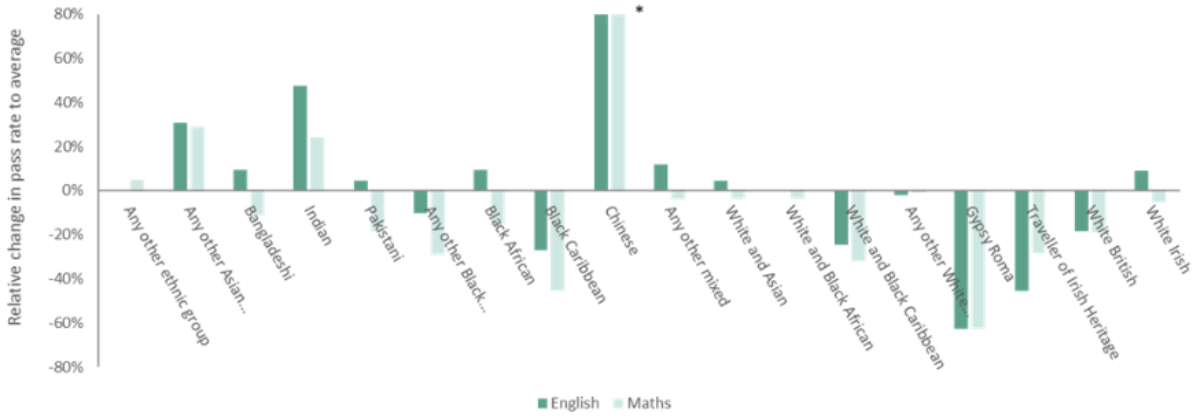


Figure 12 : Race and educational attainment. DfE (2023, in Maris, 2024).

The graph above illustrates the GCSE pass rates for re-sit learners for 2022/23 according to ethnicity. Chinese learners perform significantly better than learners from other backgrounds. Unfortunately, learners from Black Caribbean, Travellers of Irish and Gypsy Roma background have the worst outcomes (Maris, 2024). Despite the differences between ethnic groups, it is important that we do not take a static view of such statistics. For example, learners of Bangladeshi background had long been identified as underachieving, however, this picture has recently changed. In 2021, 60.6% of Bangladeshis achieved grade 5 or above in English and Maths compared to the national average of 51.9% (DfE, 2022 in *ibid*). Kirby and Cullinane (2016, p.1) recognise this fact about statistics:

> *In the past ten years, Bangladeshi, black African and Chinese FSM pupils have improved substantially more than the national average. These three groups have improved by more than 20 percentage points since 2006 on the benchmark of five GCSE measure, while the national average has improved by about 13.5 percentage points.*

Attempts to understand the causes of variations between different ethnic group's educational attainment has a long history. In 1979, for example, the Rampton Committee was established to investigate the educational provision for children from ethnic minority backgrounds. In locating the source of underachievement amongst West Indian children compared to other Asian and White children, the Committee found that 'unintentional racism, together with a variety of other reasons such as curricula and teaching materials and the negative effects of discrimination in the labour market...' were the leading cause (West and Pennell, 2003, p. 81). It appears that minimal changes have occurred since that time.

Demie (2003, p.243) summarises the state of current research into ethnic, particularly black, underachievement as having coalesced into four factors:

> *Stereotyping, teachers' low expectations, exclusion and headteachers' poor leadership on equality issues can perpetuate low attainment and disengagement from learning by ethnic minority pupils.*

Gillborn (2012) explores many of these issues in his inaugural professorial lecture, arguing that institutional racism, backed by a spurious science of intelligence, has a detrimental impact on minority learners' achievement. Others, such as Macpherson (1999, p.361), argue that the 'National Curriculum fails to reflect adequately the needs of a diverse multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society.' Such acknowledgment that the curriculum does not reflect the interests, or the needs of ethnic minority learners has led to the 'decolonise the curriculum' movement, which seeks to redress this deficit.

The focus on race, however, does not explain why African students achieve better than Afro-Caribbean learners as both groups are 'black.' Consequently, references have been made to ideas of differing aspirations. Kirby and Cullinane (2016, p.5) note that in relation to aspirations, 'some groups, such as black African, appear to have higher levels of aspiration than others, with pupils showing greater interest in schooling, despite relatively high levels of poverty.' Of course, we need to be careful in following such lines of research as it might lead to the rather unpleasant conclusion that certain ethnic groups have less fewer aspirations for the children than others. This is a conclusion that requires extraordinary evidence to support, and any research that reaches such conclusion should be looked at carefully.

Outside school factor is also used to explain differential educational outcomes amongst minority learners, and these often take an intersectional approach linking ideas of class with

ethnicity. Rothon (2007, p.314) asks the question to what extent can ethnic disparities in educational attainment be explained by social class. The result she reaches is unsurprising:

> *Because GCSE performance is so stratified by class, it would be expected that a great deal of the poor performance of the Pakistani/Bangladeshi group is explained by their position in the class structure... [and that] the findings support these expectations*.

One of the mechanisms through which class impacts upon achievement is that of schooling in poorer areas, with lower levels of investment and lower quality of provision. Whilst this finding seems conclusive, the issue remains why some groups such as Bangladeshis have increased their performance in GCSEs, as evidenced above, whilst at the same time have not improved their class status accordingly (Li, 2021). McCallum and Demie (2001, p.157) reinforce this point about the links between class, ethnicity and educational attainment as not being conclusive:

> *African pupils obtained GCSE results that were only slightly poorer than those of English/Scottish/Welsh/Irish pupils and substantially better than those of Caribbean pupils. This is in spite of backgrounds that were less favourable.*

2.10 Teachers, teaching and educational achievement

Notions about what constitutes good teaching and learning and their relationship to positive academic outcomes have been explored since the beginning of human society. Ibn Khaldun (2015, p.607), the 14th-century North African polymath, for example, pondered on what pedagogic approaches lead to successful learning. He argues that the most effective method of instruction requires threefold repetition of a topic. Firstly, as an overview, secondly the topic is revisited at a higher level and thirdly, the teacher leads the student back again to their study to ensure they are solidly grounded. He bemoans the ineffective teaching he encounters amongst his contemporaries:

> *We have observed that many teachers of the time in which we are living are ignorant of this effective method of instruction. They begin their instruction by confronting the student with obscure scientific problems... They think that that is experienced and correct teaching… In actual fact, they confuse [him]…*

The notion that effective teaching is the cornerstone of academic achievement is deeply entrenched in governmental, academic and teaching practitioners' thinking processes. Although OFSTED's (2019) Educational Inspection Framework (EIF) makes no explicit demands on what teachers ought to be doing, it does have a series of expectations. Teachers

must have good subject knowledge, present their subject clearly, check learners' understanding systematically, provide clear feedback, etc. And the list goes on making substantially more demands. It may be suggested that the message here is that successful teachers will need to make sure that they do what is listed in the inspection document, and failure to do so is evidence of inadequate teaching, with learners not getting the best educational experience.

Burgess, Rawal and Taylor (2022, p.1) argue that the concept of teacher effectiveness is a 'black box,' in that it 'describes the outcome of what teachers do, without giving much of a clue as to how to work towards improving it.' Their findings suggest that the choices teachers make in the classroom, for example, in GCSE English, encouraging peer work, predicts higher GCSE results. In fact, they boldly state that if two students with similar characteristics were placed in two classes, with one class adopting a more traditional (presumably lecture-format approach) and the second student was placed in a class with a teacher who encourages significantly more peer interaction, the second would score higher by three percentile points (*ibid*, p.2). They also establish that the most effective teachers benefit low-ability learners more than high-ability learners. The paradox that can be observed in most schools is that the most effective teachers are placed with the higher sets. The reason could be that high-ability learners already have a set of successful strategies to move their learning forward, and therefore, they can do well even in the presence of a less 'talented' teacher. This research leads a number of questions that will be explored in my own research: firstly, do lecturers agree with the findings that different approaches to English lessons matter; secondly, which teaching strategy do they prefer; and lastly, how do they know that their approach is more successful than alternative approaches.

Similarly, Hattie (2003) looks at the primary source of variance in student achievement and finds that teachers account for 30 per cent of achievement variance, whilst schools account for 5-10 per cent. Therefore, 'excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence on achievement (*ibid*, p.4). From synthesising over 500,000 studies on influences on student achievement, he concludes that feedback from the teacher is the most crucial factor. Other teaching variables that lead to greater student achievement included instructional quality, direct instruction, and class environment (*ibid*, p.4). Indeed, Hattie (*ibid*) differentiates between expert and experienced teachers, noting that years of service do not necessarily lead to teachers becoming an expert. Some of the qualities that separate expert teachers from the experienced are (*ibid*, p.5):

> *Expert teachers can: identify essential representations of their subject, can guide learning through classroom interactions, can monitor learning and provide feedback, can attend to affective attributes, and can influence students' outcomes.*

Husbands and Pearce (2012) mainly confirm Hattie's findings, recognising that effective pedagogies give serious consideration to pupils' voice, have clear long-term outcomes as well as short-term goals, build on prior knowledge, scaffolds pupils' learning, use a range of techniques and strategies, encourages higher-order thinking, embed assessment for learning, is inclusive and considers the diverse needs of the learners.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TRLP) for over a decade, which involved over 100 educational research projects (summarised in Gregson *et al*, 2020). From this TRLP, there emerged ten principles which 'focuses upon important and enduring issues in education' (*ibid*, p. 5). These principles can be used as a guide for effective teaching and learning (*ibid*). For my research, the following principles are important: Principle 3: Effective pedagogy recognises the importance of prior experience and learning. As noted previously, our GCSE re-sit learners have often done the qualification many times, I would like to investigate if the lecturers are taking that into account when they are planning their sessions. Principle 4: Effective pedagogy requires learning to be scaffolded. My concern here, and it is something I am keen to find out, is whether teachers are providing too much scaffolding and not fading the support once it has served its purpose. Principle 6: Effective pedagogy promotes the active engagement of learners. I would like to investigate if the lecturers are taking steps to make the learners more active and what form this intervention takes.

2.11 Theoretical perspective three: Approaches to understanding academic engagement

The thesis now examines the theoretical frameworks that inform my research on academic engagement. As previously, the focus starts with more theory-based approaches and then moves on to its applications in various educational research settings, including the FE sector. This section also explores the literature around one specific indicator of engagement in education: attendance. Lastly, the discussion shifts to looking at various aspects of lecturers' engagement with their work in the FE sector.

2.11.1 Why academic engagement matters

The existing literature on academic engagement explicitly links ~~it~~ with many positive outcomes for the students. Finn and Zimmer (2012, p.97) maintain that the concept of engagement has emerged as a means of understanding and improving the academic achievement of students whose performance is 'marginal or poor.' They further state that 'because of its direct relationship with academic performance and inverse relationship with negative outcomes, school engagement has been viewed as a protective factor with respect to educational risk' (*ibid*, p.98-99). Fredricks *et al* (2004, p.59) similarly argue that the concept of school engagement has attracted increasing attention from scholars and policy practitioners as a 'way to ameliorate low levels of academic achievement, high levels of student boredom and disaffection, and high dropout rates in urban areas.' School engagement is, therefore, seen as an 'antidote to such signs of student alienation' (*ibid*, p.60). Alrashidi *et al* (2016) find an even more expansive role for the concept of student engagement. They argue that researchers and educators have 'exhibited a growing interest in the concept of engagement as a way to improve disaffection [and] to increase successful student achievement levels…' (*ibid*, p.41). Apart from the educational value of student engagement, there are also other positive social impacts. Wang and Fredricks (2014, p.732 cited in Alba and Fraumeni, 2019, p.3) find that:

> *School engagement and delinquency and substance use are mutually reinforcing over time. Specifically, changes in adolescents' delinquency and substance use were predicted by their early levels of behavioural and emotional engagement in school.*

Abla and Fraumeni (2019), however, problematise the often-assumed uni-directional cause and effect linkage between engagement and positive educational outcomes. They argue that such understanding has a 'chicken-and-egg' quality to it; do students become more engaged because they are successful or does success make them more engaged?

For my research, I am also interested in the concept of academic disengagement. The concept of disengagement is often spoken of implicitly in the literature as being the opposite of being engaged. I aim to explore the notion that whilst engagement has been linked to academic success, to what extent does academic disengagement link to a poverty of educational experience in the FE setting. Moreover, given that many learners have failed their GCSEs multiple times in the past, is engagement enough to succeed. More generally, the impact of doing the same mandatory course year-after-year on learners' engagement has not been explored sufficiently in the existing literature. Although much of the literature that does exist tends to mention that engagement is malleable (Alba and Fraumeni, 2019), with changes in the levels of engagement happening over the educational lifecycle of a learner, there is no research which explores the trajectory of engagement for learners doing GCSE re-sit. Were they, for example, engaged in their English lessons at secondary school, or even at the beginning of the current academic year?

2.12 Typology of engagement

Academic engagement is a multifaceted construct which is reflected in the existing literature. Fredricks *et al* (2004) maintain that engagement can be sub-divided into three conceptually related, but distinct aspects: behavioural, emotional and cognitive. Although their division is the most popular, and represents the 'American approach,' the 'European approach,' as represented by Schaufeli *et al* (2002) takes a more psychological angle. The latter focuses on vigour, absorption, and dedication as indicators of engagement. Vigour represents the willingness to continue with the task in the face of difficulties and shares the same conceptual landscape as resilience. Absorption involves full concentration and being engrossed in the task. Lastly, dedication is characterised 'by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge.' (*ibid*, p.74). For the purpose of my study, I have decided to focus on Fredricks *et al's* (2004) approach to engagement as it is more represented in existing studies and they have provided measurements of each sub-type, which can readily be applied to my research.

2.12.1 Behavioural engagement

This type of engagement is concerned with positive conduct and includes such aspects as adhering to rules of the educational institution, following classroom norms, not displaying disruptive behaviour, as well attending lessons (Fredricks *et al*, 2004, p.62). In practical terms, this conceptualisation also includes taking an active role and participating in learning and academic-related activities such as contributing to discussions, asking questions, and

concentrating on the task, *etc*. (Alrashidi *et al*, 2016). Behavioural engagement typically focuses on directly observable aspects of learning. Therefore, this type of engagement is also considered the easiest to measure. Many researchers have used teacher ratings, lesson observations and self-reported surveys to conduct their studies of behavioural engagement (Fredricks *et al*, 2004). Finn *et al* (1995) use conducts such as completing homework and learners observing school rules as evidence of behavioural engagement. Indeed, it may be suggested that exploring attendance and punctuality rates, as well as looking at progression trackers which are often used in many educational settings, can also be used as evidence of engagement.

2.12.2 Emotional engagement

Davis *et al* (2012) argue that there are inconsistencies in the way that the researchers define emotional engagement. It has variously been conceived as students' feelings of anxiety, anger, happiness or interest in classroom activities (Fredricks *et al,* 2004). Others take a more expansive view, encompassing belonging and caring about the school (Sciarra and Seirup, 2008, summarised in Davis *et al*, 2012). The latter perspective examines emotional engagement through the lens of students' positive and negative feelings about their relationships with teachers, peers, and the school environment, while the former focuses on the emotions experienced during learning activities. In terms of measurement, most studies adopt self-reported measurements, which make use of survey items about a variety of emotions related to school, work and people at school (Fredricks *et al*, 2004). The researcher may ask students about their feelings about the work they are doing, or the relationships they have with peers or teachers. Finally, Fredricks *et al* (*ibid*) note that measurement of this type of engagement is often difficult. The existing research, for example, often does not measure the source of emotions, only the identification of the emotion: 'One student may be happy because of the school community, whereas another may be happy because of classroom processes' (*ibid*, p.67). Lastly, the quality and the intensity of emotions are not always captured in much of the existing research (*ibid*).

2.12.3 Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement is concerned with learners' ability to be strategic or self-directed in their learning. This extends to preferences for challenging tasks, positive coping methods in the face of failure, and more generally, inner psychological investments in learning (Fredricks *et al*, 2004). This type of engagement shares the same conceptual space as intrinsic motivation as both are concerned with inner drive and persistence in the face of failure. More broadly, cognitive engagement concerns itself with the 'strategies such as rehearsal,

summarizing, and elaborations to remember, organize, and understand the material' (*ibid*, p.64). Many approaches can be drawn upon to measure cognitive engagement. Observation techniques seem to be popular. Helme and Clarke (2001, summarised in Fredricks *et al*, 2004) observed maths in classrooms for indicators of cognitive engagement such as sharing of ideas, providing justification for answers and self-monitoring. Finn and Zimmer (2012, p.104) maintain that ''Think alouds,' where students verbalize their cognitive processes during activity' is also another popular approach. However, because cognition is not observable, as opposed to behavioural engagement, it is difficult to assess in practice. To address this, the researchers must infer cognitive engagement from behavioural engagement (Fredricks *et al*, 2004).

Measuring these distinct types of engagement has significant methodological implications for my research. After careful analysis, I concluded that observations and semi-structured interviews are the most effective methods for exploring the multifaceted nature of engagement described above.

2.12.4 Timetabling as a source of disengagement

There is a widely held belief in my research setting that timetabling lessons at the very start of the day, which is 8:45am, and at the end of the day, which is from 4:15pm, can have a detrimental impact on learners' engagement. This section provides a very brief overview of what the existing literature finds regarding this argument.

Edwards (2012) uses data from Wake County, NC covering the period 1999 to 2006 to explore the impact of staggered daily start times on academic performance of middle school students. He finds that an increase in start times by one hour leads to a three-percentage increase in maths and reading test scores for the average student. This, he argues, confirms the hypothesis that, 'as students enter adolescence, hormonal changes make it difficult for them to compensate for early school start time by going to bed earlier' (*ibid*, p.980). This finding is also confirmed by Kelley *et al* (2015), who explore the negative impact of early starts by considering 30 years of sleep and circadian neuroscience research. They argue that early starts for adolescents is particularly damaging as it can lead to:

> *poor communication, decreased concentration and cognitive performance, unintended sleeps, decreased motor performance, increased risk taking and changes in mood pattern, specifically depression* (*ibid*, p.213).

This, they further argue, is not surprising given that adolescents need longer sleep duration than adults. Indeed, they maintain that 'failure to adjust education timetables to this biological change leads to systematic, chronic and unrecoverable sleep loss' (*ibid*, p.211). Delaying school starts seeming to be beneficial even in cultures where students often trade sleep for academic achievement (*ibid*). Lo *et al* (2018) investigate the short-term and long-term effects of a 45-min delay in school starts on learners sleeping pattern and well-being. The result after one month was that the learners' 'total-in-bed' time increased by 23.2 mins. As a result, the participants reported lower levels of tiredness, as well as subjective well-being. This was confirmed when the researchers did a follow-up after 9 months.

In practical terms, Kay (2021) argues that in FE settings, English and maths should be a priority when timetabling by adopting a 'wraparound approach', where maths and English are not the first or the last lesson of the day. This ensures that they are not too tired or too exhausted during these lessons. My research will follow this line of argument to explore if the participants in my study also agree that having a later college start will make a difference to their engagement in classes.

2.12.5 Attendance as measure of engagement- Why aren't the learners here?

The ultimate measure of disengagement is non-attendance to lessons. Although there is a plethora of research investigating why learners do not attend schools, the same does not hold for the FE sector. Here I explore two examples of research that are the exception.

Choudhury (2023) explores the potential barriers to good attendance and punctuality in FE. Her research includes 50 plus participants composed of teachers, students and pastoral mentors, and uses focus groups, written questionnaires and on-to-one discussions to collect data. She finds that there are three potential barriers at her research setting. Firstly, there are both inconsistent reinforcements and insufficient clarity regarding the attendance policy. Secondly, she finds that there is a variability in consequences for non-attendance across curriculum areas and teachers. Lastly, there is insufficient recognition for those who do attend and are punctual. All these factors contribute to the low attendance at her college.

Longhurst (1999) also explores student absenteeism in FE through questionnaires (107 participants) and exploratory in-depth interviews (number not stated). The questionnaire consisted of 65 questions designed to explore students' reasons for being absent in the last seven day. The result of the questionnaire is presented below (Figure 13):

	Rank order by percentage	Index of absenteeism
Illness	80	0.31
Medical appointments	63	0.20
Weather conditions	51	–
Social activities	46	0.21
Doing college work	42	0.17
Transport problems	38	–
With friends from college	38	0.16
Family obligations	37	0.12
Holidays	36	–
With friends not from college	30	0.12
Pretending illness	28	0.10
Seeing boy/girlfriend	24	0.12
Work commitments	22	0.10
Dislike subjects	16	0.07
Dislike teachers	12	0.06

Figure 13 Reasons for students' absence. From Longhurst, 1999, p.64

Given that young people are generally more physically fit and resilient than other age groups, it may be viewed as surprising to find that 80 percent of the respondents had taken time off for illness in the previous seven days. It is also surprising that students are taking time off from college to do college work, but perhaps this reflects the nature of some of the courses which are based exclusively on coursework and assessments. Lastly, dislike of teachers and subjects seems to be surprisingly low here, and I would have expected it to be higher since we know from other research that relationship between teachers and students plays a large role in engagement and achievement (discussed more fully in Section 2.13). One of the aims of my study is to ascertain if similar patterns regarding absenteeism is present in my research setting. Moreover, as Longhurst's (*ibid*) research was carried out pre- *Condition of Funding Policy,* is this research applicable to understanding my participants' absenteeism from GCSE re-sit classes?

2.13 Engagement and GCSE English

The preceding sections (2.11.1 and 2.11.2) are mainly focused on the theoretical elements of engagement; this section now considers the studies which explore engagement in relation to GCSE English re-sits. A survey conducted by National Education Union (2019, in Lough, 2019) of their members asked them, 'how, if at all, are GCSE reforms impacting upon student engagement in education?' The result is overwhelmingly negative, with 61% believing that engagement had decreased and only 7% perceiving an improvement. One participant states that the engagement has become more instrumental: 'Students are engaging with purely exam aspects of subjects, i.e., how to answer an exam question, rather than developing a passion for

the subject.' This is an argument which has found currency amongst other researchers detailed below.

Veitch (2022) explores the lack of engagement in GCSE English re-sits in FE. Using an autoethnographic approach, Veitch grounds his explanation of disengagement in two events from his professional life: an interaction with a learners named Michael and a comparison of two GCSE re-sit lessons. Michael is a re-sit learner doing English, alongside a Motor Vehicle course. Veitch, after setting the work for Michael, is surprised to find that he has stopped writing: 'He's leaning back in his chair, arms folded, staring at the door' (Veitch, 2022, p.126). Upon checking Michael's work, an irritated Veitch states, 'It's a start... but you need some full stops,' Michael replies 'I can't be arsed' (*ibid*, p.127). Veitch adopts a Freirean (Freire, 1974) concept of a 'banking model of education,' to make sense of this interaction. Veitch in the first instance understood Michael's comment, 'I can't be arsed [to use full stops]', to mean that he did not know how to use full stops, and therefore, his role is to 'deposit' more knowledge. Upon later reflection using a Freirean lens, Veitch recognises that Michael's lack of engagement is a rejection of the role of students as meek 'receptacles permit[ing] themselves to be filled' (*ibid*, p.128).

Another source of disengagement, argues Veitch (*ibid*), is the pressure on teachers to 'teach to the exams,' which inevitably reduces the lessons to 'technique-spotting.' After all, teachers are 'under enormous pressure from both sides [school and learners] to grind out the Grade 4s' (*ibid*, p.130). These performativity pressures often limit the possibilities of delivering a genuinely engaging lesson. To illustrate this, Veitch explores two ideal-type lessons: one based on getting the learners ready for the exams- a 'test-teaching lesson', and the other based on Freirean notions of transformative learning. The former is often the default model for teaching by GCSE English re-sit teachers as it is seen as a safer method, yet it comes at the expense of developing interesting lessons that generates conversation and interest. It is worth exploring if performativity pressures similarly constrain lecturers in my research setting to default to lessons that disengages the learners; or how the lecturers balance the needs of high-stake exams with their desire to deliver a lesson that they are proud of. Veitch's (*ibid*) research amplifies Ecclestone's scathing comment on the pernicious impact of performativity in the FE sector (2002, p.182 in Gregson *et al*, 2020, p.85):

> *Performativity accompanied by a subtle ideology of 'risk' and 'risk aversion' ... produces a 'minimalist pedagogy', based on low expectations of learners' potential for intrinsic motivation and critical autonomy... low expectations combined with micro-disciplinary practices associated with assessment and quality assurance regime lead to increased safety and compliance in learning activities.*

The English Association (2024, p.3) also reinforce Veitch's (*ibid*) argument, maintaining that GCSE English has 'become too coupled to assessment.' They further argue that 'assessment drives pedagogy, which means that the students can become passive and disengaged, with 'exam-craft' swamping genuine engagement.' Similarly, Powell (2021) highlights a particularly damaging practice that many lecturers are guilty of: encouraging language feature spotting in classes, which many lecturers falsely believe will help their learners pass their exams. She notes that English teaching world has acronyms in abundance, for example, DAFOREST persuasive techniques. Many a lesson is taught where the learners are required to find techniques in selected extracts, or when they write they are encouraged to apply these techniques. The result is often writing that seems stilted and artificial. The learners are very apt to find techniques, such as rhetorical questions, but cannot explain the impact such techniques have on the audience. She instead advocates an alternative approach where 'open dialogue' between the learners and lecturers prevails. In practical terms, this could mean 'asking questions about a topic that they [the learners] are genuinely interested in' (*ibid*).

A further issue with structuring lessons based on exams and past papers is identified by Ledger (2024), who notes that such lessons are doomed to failure because, 'the fundamental skill which would empower them [the learners] to victory is being roundly ignored' (*ibid*). The skill she is referring to is the ability to read critically. She notes that without the ability to recognise and comprehend the texts fluently, the learner will not understand what the exam paper requires of them. She further argues that it seems naïve to accept the notion that just because the learners are aged 16 and over, they have already acquired the reading skills required to be successful in exams. Wallace (2017, p104) likewise cautions against using examples in classes 'that harp on about the exam' since this takes them back to school, which is often associated with negative experiences.

Collyer's (2021) study of the impact of seating arrangements on four boys' engagement with English likewise touches on exam performativity as a limiting factor. The research setting, a multi-academy trust, recommends that learners sit in rows, silently working alone for extended periods of time. Moreover, the teachers are encouraged to arrange the lessons so that they correlate to GCSE English assessment criteria, and the lessons are centrally planned by the managers. The four learners in the study are deemed underachieving, with each achieving the lowest grade of One in their last assessment. Collyer (*ibid*) outlines two lessons he was mandated to deliver: both essentially encouraging 'language feature' spotting and preparation for the exam. Crucially, the topic of the lessons, vegetarianism, had very little interest for the learners. The learners, predictably, became disengaged with their lessons, 'Stephen [learner

and participant] also harboured disdain for the pedagogical approaches used by the school and did not want to spend his time working in silence' (*ibid*, p.190). Stephen also states that the lessons are boring, and it is a matter of 'getting through it' (*ibid*).

Being a reflective teacher, Collyer decides to change the seating arrangement so that they are seated around a table instead of in rows. Although the boys vocally state that seating arrangements would not make a difference, 'You can change the tables around, but I still won't give a shit' (*ibid*, p.191), engagement improves as a result. Crucially, engagement in the second lesson is also furthered when the teacher allows the learners to follow their own interests, with the learners who had hitherto been quiet contributing more. Collyer felt that if he was afforded the freedom to plan the lessons according to the learners' interests, it would allow the learners to take more ownership of their learning. Therefore, to improve engagement, 'English curricula need to connect with young people's lifeworlds' (*ibid*, p.192). This notion that the English curricula should connect with young people's 'lifeworlds' is also an explicit recommendation of The English Association (2024): 'Include more diverse texts... include more media, non-fiction and multi-modal texts, including... Film, TV... computer games and other digital texts' (*ibid*, p.5). Read (2021) provides another helpful way of connecting to learners' lifeworlds. He provides an example of a learner studying performing arts who fails to engage with GCSE English at all until he is asked to film some videos of himself reading a 19th Century text (*ibid*). He subsequently becomes, 'excited by the prospect' of English (*ibid*).

Indeed, a further aim of my research is to ascertain if the teachers in my project had any preferences for seating arrangements, and if so, why. Moreover, I would also like to investigate if they feel that the lesson plans produced by the curriculum managers (CMs) constrain their ability to engage their learners.

The danger of reducing the substantial contents of the lessons to mere facts, such as feature spotting of language techniques, or divorcing the subject-topic of lessons from the lived experiences of the learners was critiqued by John Dewey over a century ago (1916, p.155 quoted in Gregson *et al*, 2020, p. 275):

> *There can be no doubt that a peculiar artificiality attaches too much of what is learned in schools. It can hardly be said that many students consciously think of the subject matter as unreal; but it assuredly does not possess for them the kind of reality which the subject matter of their vital experiences possesses. They learn not to expect that sort of reality of it; they become habituated to treating it as having*

> *reality for the purposes of recitations, lessons and examinations. That it should remain inert for the experiences of daily life is more or less a matter of course.*

Halligan and Baines (2022, p.9) investigate how teachers engage learners in GCSE English when the learners are placed in the lowest attainment sets. Using a mixed method, which includes lesson observations, semi-structured interviews and drawing on quantitative data, the researchers establish that teachers engage learners through 1) fostering positive student-teacher relationships, 2) using encouragement 3) minimising negative reprimands, and 4) teaching that responds to students' needs. Positive student-teacher relationship is founded upon a relationship of respect and affection. Indeed, the students in the research:

> *spoke explicitly about the link between student-teacher relationships and engagement in lessons, explaining that they were more likely to want to complete tasks, answer questions and ultimately achieve more, if they liked their teacher*.

The argument that relationship is the key to engagement is also made in relation to the FE sector by Robey and Jones (2015). The teachers in this study also use encouragement to acknowledge and promote learning. The learners state that they 'enjoyed receiving praise from their English teachers as it made them feel proud and acknowledge that they were doing well in lessons' (*ibid*). Minimising negative reprimands involves using an 'indirect stop' method to communicate with their learners to stop certain unwanted behaviour. Lastly, all the teachers in the research took steps to make the curriculum accessible to the learners by, for example, breaking down the task and providing sentence starters. For my research, I would like to explore if the teachers in my setting use similar approaches to engage their learners, and what their learners' perspectives were on such approaches.

2.14 What teachers/ lecturers and schools/ colleges do (or can do) to engage learners

Existing literature reveals that teachers are often proactive in facilitating engagement for their learners. The literature also provides helpful suggestions to support teachers engage reluctant learners. This section provides an overview of these pertinent studies.

Alba and Fraumeni (2019, p.4) provide six evidence-based approaches to support teachers with increasing academic engagement. Firstly, they suggest that measuring engagement is crucial as this ensures that educators have a better understanding of how engaged their learners are. Instead of having anecdotal evidence, educators need to have reliable before- and after- evidence. The researchers also argue that educators should focus on building

relationships with their learners. Indeed, communication that may be deemed as insignificant, such as greeting the learners as they enter the class can have significant results. Also, being an authority figure should not mean that the educator is detached and aloof. Subsequently, building relationships by knowing about the learners' interests and hobbies can also help in achieving this. Thirdly, educators should maintain a balance between structure and student autonomy. This need not come at the expense of good conduct and clear expectations. Fourthly, using technology thoughtfully also ensures genuine engagement. They make the pertinent point that 'technology should never be introduced to the classroom without evidence of effectiveness merely because it seems cool' (*ibid*, p.5). For example, too often, teachers use apps such as Kahoot (an online quiz platform) just because they fear that they will be thought of as being old-fashioned if they do not. Fifthly, using good questioning is also very effective for engagement. They recommend using a mixture of pre-planned questions with more emerging questions to support the class to reflect, elaborate and deepen their knowledge. Simple modifications of 'what questions' to 'what if' questions can provide opportunities for productive conversation. Lastly, they suggest that learning should be connected to the 'real' world. This means that knowledge and skills taught to learners should not be divorced from their real-world applications, which can be an antidote to the 'why do we need to know this?' question posed by disengaged learners.

A further route for exploration would be if the lecturers participating in my research use any of these engagement approaches, and if they do, whether they find them effective. Furthermore, also asking the learners about which approaches to engagement they respond to might explain the varying degrees of engagement that one often encounters in GCSE re-sit classes.

In addition, Wallace (2014) makes the convincing case that we need to take non-engagement behaviour such as 'using phones during class time' and 'talking while the teacher is speaking' more seriously. Not only is it so common- she found evidence of it in all 183 classes she observed- but because it can be very damaging: '... Despite being non-serious... all of these have the potential to disrupt the learning of other students who might be better motivated…' (*ibid*, p.354).

2.15 Why we need to think about lecturers' engagement with their work more seriously

A key issue many FE colleges encounter is the retention and recruitment of suitably qualified lecturers. These twin challenges are sometimes linked to issues rooted in poor management practices, often leading to excessive workload and 'burnout' for current staff members (Smith and Husband, 2024). For many lecturers, Bowser-Angermann and Draper's (2022, p.51) description of FE as a 'heartbreak hotel place of work' might resonate.

OFSTED (2022) recognise that the 'pandemic continued to affect staffing in further education and skills providers.' However, FE's recruitment and retention issues were apparent even before the pandemic. The College Staff Survey 2019 Follow-Up (Thornton *et al*, 2020) finds that one in eight (13%) teachers and leaders surveyed for the previous Survey had already left their college of employment. This staffing crisis was also documented by Association of Colleges (AOC, 2022), who find that there are an estimated 6,000 job vacancies just in England's colleges alone, with the average number of vacancies per college being 30. This naturally creates extra pressure on existing staff, who must take on additional responsibilities to cover classes. Smith and Husband (2024) note that this also leads to 'diminishing morale' for remaining staff (*ibid*, p.465). Consequently, this can also lead to a compromised teaching and learning experience for the learners, 'impacting their [learners] academic outcomes and overall satisfaction with their educational journey' (*ibid*, p.465).

Indeed, The College Staff Survey 2019 (Thornton *et al*, 2020) further reinforces the above message, finding that teachers and leaders leave the FE sector because of poor-management (58%) and unmanageable workload (46%). This is against a backdrop of falling investment in the post-compulsory sector. The Institute of Fiscal Studies in their Annual report on education spending in England (Sibieta *et al*, 2021) finds that the funding for 16-19 had experienced the largest reduction in the educational system: 'Funding per student aged 16-18 in further education and sixth form colleges fell by 14% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2019-20' (*ibid*).

Duckworth and Smith's (2019) study explores what factors impede transformative teaching and learning in Further Education. Their findings confirm the poor experience many lecturers face in FE discussed above. They show that 52% of the lectures teach for more than 24 hours per week (*ibid*). This naturally has an impact on the quality of their provision, as those 24 hours of contact time also require planning, marking, chasing up non-attendance, etc. Indeed,

it is left to individual unions to negotiate the upper limit of teaching hours in absence of nationally imposed limits (*ibid*). Their research also found that 29% of the respondents spent over 12 hours on administrative tasks (*ibid*, p.25). We are, therefore, not surprised that 'working in colleges is less attractive...[and] has damaging consequences for the conditions in which transformative teaching and learning takes place' (*ibid*, p.24). Smith and Husband (2024) add another dimension to the above discussion. Transformative teaching requires skilled educators who drive forward innovation and progress within an institution; however, with the inability to retain and attract lecturers, there is a risk of institutional stagnation in terms of being 'unable to adapt to evolving educational needs and advancement in pedagogy and technology' (*ibid*, p.466). This may exacerbate pre-existing societal inequalities as marginalised and underserved communities often bear the brunt of staff retention and recruitment issues (*ibid*).

The issues around sufficient recruitment and retention of qualified staff is not limited to the UK, but it appears to be a global problem with some countries faring better than others in meeting this challenge (*ibid*, p.468). Smith and Husband (*ibid*) isolate three core causes of this recruitment and retention crisis. Firstly, as already mentioned, the workload pressure for many lecturers is overwhelming: 'Teachers in the FE and skills sector often face heavy workloads due to large class size, administrative tasks and the need to cater to diverse student needs' (*ibid*, p.466). This can lead to difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance, which can lead to fatigue and stress (*ibid*). Secondly, limited CPD opportunities is an issue since what is often on offer is 'insufficient and fragmented' (*ibid*, p.467). Without suitable CPD, lecturers can feel stagnant in their employment, as well as feel ill-equipped to meet the needs of their learners, resulting in frustration and disillusionment (*ibid*). The last issue is 'unclear career progression pathways' (*ibid*). Whereas in school, there seems to be a clearly defined hierarchical structure with clear promotion tracks, the same is often absent in FE (*ibid*). This can deter talented educators from entering the profession, as they can often find more lucrative opportunities elsewhere (*ibid*).

To this list of issues, Tully (2024) adds a few more. He notes that lack of competitive pay is a concern, 'especially in shortage subjects like construction where industry salary can be double or triple the sum awarded by FET institutions' (*ibid*, p.515). He also notes that internal observations and the demands associated with OFSTED inspections are significant factors in this recruitment and retention crisis (*ibid*). Munoz- Chereau *et al* (2024) confirm that OFSTED can have negative impacts on FE, including increased workload, reduced wellbeing, reduced staff retention, increased performativity and disempowerment. Tully (*ibid*) also notes that teaching, especially in the FE sector, suffers from low 'status and occupational

desirability' as teaching is often depicted as being suitable for those who are 'unambitious.' This image is reinforced by the fact that FE accepts 'unqualified' teachers, which not only raises questions about practitioner competence but also undermines the concept of the 'skilled teacher' (*ibid*, p.517).

The above factors lead to the overburdening of existing staff, which may also explain Crisp *et al's* (2023, p.53) finding that some in the FE sector are reluctant to engage with CPD sessions. However, the explanation provided by a senior leader for this fact may be incorrect. It is less likely that 'they're sort of set in their own ways. And they've taught the same way the last how many years and so, therefore, they are reluctant to change' (*ibid*). Rather, it may be that too many of them are too overworked to prioritise their own development. Broad (2015) discovers that many teachers operate in 'impoverished networks' which can act as barriers to accessing suitable CPD. These impoverished networks are linked to 'barriers of workload and time constraints' (*ibid*, p.27). More concretely, the intensification of workload in FE over the recent decades has led lecturers to work in isolation- especially for those who are working part-time or on casual contracts (*ibid*). Indeed, she finds that the lecturers find it difficult to access funding, with many paying for their own CPD sessions (*ibid*). This supports Husband's (2019) contention that many lecturers are eager to take part in their development, provided suitable opportunities exists. CPD, as Smith and Husband (2024, p.66) argue, is 'crucial for enhancing retention rates maintaining a skilled workforce.'

To compound the problems outlined above, FE colleges often adopt a 'managerial orientation' to evaluating TLA at the expense of a more 'professional orientation.' Managerial orientation is defined by Gregson *et al* (2020, p. 354) as driven by:

> *the need to measure and define inputs, processes and outputs and places an emphasis on systems and processes, efficiency and effectiveness. Publicly available 'quality frameworks' are used as the basis for examining and reporting on key aspects of an organization's performance.*

It is readily apparent how already over-stretched lecturers would react to being held accountable in such a system where they are, in effect, being treated as 'products' or deliverers of 'products.' League tables, both internal and external, are often the outcomes of such systems. The alternative system, 'professional orientation' based on a 'moral obligation on the professional to continually develop and refine his or her practice and contribute to the development of the profession' (*ibid*) intuitively seems like a more humane way of approaching questions of quality and accountability.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Is 'educational science' possible? Some reflections on the 'aftermath' of the paradigm wars

In a particularly memorable scene from BBC's under-appreciated comedy, *Toast of Tinseltown*, the eponymous hero Toast finds himself in bed with a clinical scientist who is keeping a scorecard of all the men she has slept with, for research purposes. Toast exclaims that this is not very romantic, to which the scientist replies that 'romantic is not a word easily defined in scientific terms.' Whilst comedic in intent, this scene nonetheless succinctly outlines the fundamental distinction between positivist-empiricists and constructivist-interpretivists. Very briefly, and I will expand on this later, 'romantic' as Toast conceives it, is essentially a subjective and socially constructed phenomenon, very much in keeping with the common-sense definition of the term. However, since 'romantic' is neither objective nor independent of our perception, the scientist is dismissive of it. Looking beyond this, these few scripted lines bring to the fore the often hidden and taken-for-granted ontological and epistemological assumptions upon which we rest our arguments and sometimes orient our lives.

Many educational researchers start their journey into methodology by considering a binary framing of positivism versus interpretivism (Coe, 2017a). This seemingly instinctive approach echoes Gage's (1989) assertion that there was a 'paradigm war' waged in the 1960s and 1970s between the 'naturalists,' whom we would now align with positivists in one corner, and the anti-naturalists i.e., constructivists, and critical theorists (most of whom would now come under the school of interpretivism) in the other corner. Hammersley (1992, p.131 in Waring, 2017, p.19) extends this metaphor of warfare:

> *There is no doubt that the 1980s and early 1990s have seen growing debates among educational researchers about methodology, sometimes taking the form of conflicts between incommensurable paradigms in which philosophical terms have been used as weapons.*

Indeed, Seidman (2006, p.1) recalls the stifling 'imperialism' of positivist thinking in his formative years researching during the 1960s when his 'graduate experience was governed by a sense that research in education could be as scientific as it was in the natural and physical

sciences.' The prevailing view was that experimentation, informed by behaviouralist methodology and scholarship, was most worthy of research in education. When Seidman (*ibid*, p.2) raised his hand to object in a class of 60 students that human beings are different from rats since they had the faculty of language, the response from the professor was hostile.

This positivist orthodoxy would come under sustained critiques from multiple fronts, as suggested in the previous paragraph. Although in educational research this attack becomes most virulent in the 1980s, in the social sciences the revolt against 'scientism' ("the view that the natural sciences are a 'supra-historic, neutral enterprise... and the sole model of acquiring true knowledge'" (Bleicher, 1982, p.3 in Usher, 1996, p.18)) has a much deeper and longer history. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist philosopher, for example, bemoaned the hegemonic rise of objectivity as the highest standard of meaning, which ascended at the expense of subjectivity and personalised meaning-making (Cohen *et al*, 2018). This 'imperialism' of positivism is further challenged by the critical theorist, Habermas (1972, summarised in Cohen *et al*, 2018), who maintains that the scientific mentality has reached the unassailable position of being put on a pedestal akin to a religion, which he termed 'scientism.' Therefore, 'all knowledge becomes equated with scientific knowledge' (*ibid*, p.15) whilst neglecting knowledge that can be deemed creative, moral, phenomenological, *etc*.

Before exploring the critiques in greater detail, I present the unique features of the positivist paradigm here. The ontological departure for positivism is an 'external realist' one, where the 'world and phenomena are real and exist independent of perception.' (Coe, 2017b, p.6). Moreover, this world is imbued with truths and immovable and universal laws that govern it. That is to say that these laws are 'time-and context-free,' and therefore, easily generalisable (Waring, 2012). Another way of stating this is that 'the world is fundamentally mechanistic and deterministic, in which human behaviour is governed by laws and is capable of manipulation' (Coe, 2017b, p.6). In epistemological terms, these laws can be discovered by adopting testable hypotheses and generally through the scientific method. The emphasis is on the experimental, verifiable and manipulative (*ibid*). This also entails eliminating 'subjective' factors as far as feasible, often through following open, standardised procedures that can be replicated by others (Hammersley, 2012). As Usher (1996, p.12) states 'the researcher then becomes the 'ideal' of the 'universal knower', interchangeable with all other researchers.' Positivists usually adopt quantitative methods, such as questionnaires and polls.

3.2 Some critiques of the positivist paradigm

Now we can return to the question posed at the outset, 'Is educational science possible?' and the answer is affirmative. Of course, we can borrow from the semantic field of natural sciences, along with their ontological and epistemological assumptions, as behaviourists have done, and we can do so successfully to answer many educational research questions: questions such as how positive stimulus in laboratories can help animals learn. However, if we choose to adopt the positivist paradigm, we are often in danger of impoverishing ourselves, for scientism is a blunt tool and not designed to answer some of the most intransigent, complex and long-standing problems of education. Questions such as how a learner's lived experiences of being placed in a lower set at GCSE English can only be explored through an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm. Therefore, I agree with some of the critics of the naturalist approach identified by Gage (1989, p.4), who argues that the scientific approach may be incompatible with educational research in many instances because science is concerned with a direct, 'one-way causal link,' whereas often there are no 'billiard-ball' causations in educational settings. While the positivists believe that the universe does not behave capriciously (Cohen *et al*, 2018), I maintain that humans often do, and that they do so in an irregular fashion.

Those critical researchers concerned with empowerment and emancipation, like Freire (1974), would also contend that by seeing the world as being fixed and naturally occurring or inevitable, as positivist ontology stipulates, we are defending the *status quo*. Therefore, 'forms of purported expertise that support the dominant forces in society' (Hammersley, 2012) are a natural consequence of positivist research. Indeed, such a rigid ontology precludes, and is anathema to *engaged* research, such as those carried out by anti-racists and feminists, whose main goal is to achieve a revolutionary praxis that leads to the dismantling of systems of oppression.

Indeed, Geertz (1973) offers a foundational critique of positivism in arguing for the indispensability of 'thick description' in explaining social observations. As can be recalled, positivists use sense-perception (often direct observations) as their epistemological springboard; yet Geertz (*ibid*) shows that this can lead to misunderstanding. Imagine a teacher sitting alone with a student, and the teacher winks at the student. Of course, on the surface, this could be very concerning. But should it be? To be concerned is to take a 'thin descriptive' approach, where subjectivity and context are absent. In this sense, unless we know the teacher beforehand, it could even be the consequence of a simple nervous tic. To make sense of this interaction, the researcher needs to use a 'thick description,' one which considers the

subjective meaning attached to the act of winking. Perhaps the teacher was communicating her joy at the student achieving their goals; perhaps the teacher is expressing concern about something, or perhaps the teacher is flaunting all safeguarding concerns and doing something inappropriate. Unless we explore the subjective, we simply will not know. Gadamer (in Usher, 1996) reinforces Geertz in arguing that 'tradition' helps us to frame our interpretations of such events so that we do understand their underlying logic and context. A 'tradition' is a 'background of assumptions and presuppositions, beliefs and practices, of which subjects and objects of research are never fully aware and which can never be fully specified' (Usher, *ibid*, p.18). In sum, 'if the concerns...[are] with meaning within *social interactions,* then confining research to the observable or empirically 'given'... is necessarily to miss out the most important dimension of social enquiry' (*ibid*).

Although I have clearly posited positivism and interpretivism as being distinct from each other, this is a 'methodological purist' position; the distinction is less clear cut in both theory and practice. Pring (2015) shows that the 'warring philosophical traditions' is based on a 'false dualism.' For example, interpretivists argue that the social world is 'constructed,' and that different social groups conceive the world differently. However, for us to even interpret the world, this presupposes the existence of the world independent of us.

3.3 My adopted paradigm and justification

Even though the term positivism is 'now used largely in a negative way' and perceived 'today as little more than a term of abuse' in educational research (Hammersley, 2012), I still need to justify my adoption of interpretivism as my chosen research paradigm. The rejection of one paradigm does not necessitate that I choose its competitor. My research employs a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. The starting point for this paradigm is that the 'idealised and universal logic of the scientific model is inappropriate' for social and educational research (Usher, 1996, p.18). Within the interpretative paradigm, the positivists' preoccupation with control, prediction and generalisation give way to meaning, interpretation and illumination (*ibid*).

Therefore, ontologically, I hold that social phenomena have no independent existence apart from our perception of it. For instance, when investigating learners' lived experiences of GCSE English re-sit lessons, we only have their subjective experiences and perception to help us. This knowledge is by necessity socially constructed, since universal, objective truths about lived experiences do not exist and experiences emerge from learners' interaction with other social beings, such as their peers, teachers, parents, *etc*. Consequently, my concern is not with

discovering general truths, but rather with understanding the meanings that actors ascribe to their experiences.

Since humans can experience the same situation differently, therefore, I also subscribe to the notion that they are 'active participants in the researched world, interacting with rather than reacting to their environment, constructing situations by bringing their own meanings and acting freely' (Coe, 2017b, p.6). Indeed, I see this acted out daily in my classroom, where the same grade given to two different learners can lead to very different behavioural outcomes. Usher (1996, p.18) makes the pertinent point that, 'to explain the social world we need to understand it, to make sense of it, and hence we need to understand the meanings that construct and are constructed by interactive human beings.' This often requires the use of a 'double hermeneutic,' where the participants in the research are making sense of the world (interpreting the world), and the researcher is also engaged in the same task, however, they also have the added responsibility of interpreting the interpretations of the research participants.

A further justification for choosing the interpretivist approach is that the laboratory-like control that positivists advocate, along with the natural-researcher is a *prior foregone impossibility* for my research. I am already enmeshed in a complex web of relationships with my participants; whether as a long-standing colleague, or as a Development Coach, or as a teacher, or as managee. All these relationships are, of course, imbued with meaning that exists prior even to my own existence. For example, a learner will have an expectation of what the role of a teacher is, and this expectation is culturally transmitted through the process of socialisation. More generally, my livelihood is derived from the institution where this research is taking place. George Orwell (2018, p.44), in his inimitable way, shows that one's place in a social situation can impede one's research:

> *To study any subject scientifically one needs a detached attitude, which is obviously harder when one's own interests or emotions are involved. Plenty of people are quite capable of being objective about sea urchins, say, or the square root of 2, become schizophrenic if they have to think about the source of their own incomes.*

I cannot step outside of these expectations and understanding of these inherited/pre-defined roles for the sake of research, but I can be aware of them. The potential impact of these meaningful relationships on my trustworthiness, creditability and reliability is explored below.

3.4 Ensuring quality in my research: between rigor and trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln (1981, p.67) argue that within the scientific paradigms, in the 'struggle between rigor and relevance in the field of evaluation, relevance has run a distant second.' Indeed, in determining the quality of a research, 'the scientific inquirer relies almost exclusively on criteria of rigor' (*ibid*, p.66). Rigor encompasses external validity, reliability, and objectivity, amongst other measures. However, this reliance on the tools borrowed from physical sciences to ascertain research quality has sometimes led to some absurd situations. For example, in the field of developmental psychology, Bronfenbrenner (1977, quoted in *ibid*, p.66) notes the peculiar situation where much of the research is 'the science of strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time.' Being enamoured with laboratory-bound experimentations as the basis of quality, surely positivists have 'lost their sense of the human problem, that generalisation to the authentic significance of the person in the real environment has been sacrificed to the quest for certainty in our knowledge' (Gibbs, 1979 quoted in *ibid*, p.66).

Quantitative (often employed by positivists) research has a very specific and established understanding of both validity and reliability. Within this tradition, most measures of validity look at whether an 'instrument in fact measures what it intends, purports or claims to measure...' (Cohen *et al*, 2018, p.245) More specifically, validity is conceived as being faithful to the following core features: 'controllability, replicability, consistency, predictability and observability...' (Cohen *et al, ibid*) As hinted at in the previous paragraph, qualitative researchers, many grounded in the interpretivist framework, often argue that such measures of validity are unworkable for their research tradition (Brink, 1993). Indeed, situating their research in naturalistic settings, many qualitative researchers would argue that controllability is not only difficult, but also undesirable in most situations (*see* Golafshani, 2003; Bryman and Bell, 2019). The whole point of our research, after all, is to elicit understandings from the participants, and not to put them in strange clinical situations designed by scientists to test some restrictive constructs. Moreover, since humans are in essence different from each other, exact replicability is an impossibility; qualitative researchers would argue instead that the focus should instead be on uniqueness of situations and findings (Cohen *et al*, 2018, p.249.).

Reliability, as conceived by quantitative researchers, is also problematic for qualitative researchers. Reliability within quantitative research is concerned with the 'consistency, stability and repeatability...' (Brink, 1993, p.35) or as Golafshani (2003, p.599) states,

'whether the result is replicable.' Reliability, as understood, cannot be applicable to interpretivist qualitative research as individuals and groups change their minds or have opinions that are contradictory to each other. Difference of interpretation and views is our point of departure, and expecting consistency in views, or even stability in views is not only unrealistic, but it is also a search for 'unhuman-like' behaviour.

In the face of the above critiques of validity and reliability, some qualitative researchers have eschewed these concepts altogether (Brink, 1993), whist others have looked for ways to keep the essence but dispose of the positivists' residues (Bryman and Bell, 2019). Indeed, Bryman and Bell (*ibid*, p.204) borrow Guba and Lincoln's (1994, in *ibid*) concept of trustworthiness as the key criteria for assessing qualitative research and argue that trustworthiness can be achieved through establishing four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Shenton (2004, p.64) notes that these constructs correspond to the criteria used by positivist researchers in the following manner: credibility is used in preference to internal validity; transferability is used in preference to generalisability; dependability is used in preference to reliability; and confirmability is used in preference to objectivity. In the following paragraphs, I illustrate how these constructs are the foundation of my research design's struggle for quality.

Credibility

The notion of credibility is concerned with whether the interpretations presented in a research study correlates with what people said or thought, or as Bryman and Bell (2019, p.204-205) mention, whether the 'study rings true to the people observed.' Simply put, credibility is 'how congruent are the findings with reality?' (Merriam, 1998, quoted in Shenton, 2004). There are various ways of achieving credibility constructs. One way of achieving this is to submit our findings to the people in the study so that they can confirm if it accords with the way they understand and interpret the world. Whilst I find this general idea appealing, I am concerned that this is putting an undue burden on the participants. Indeed, this could lead to self-censorship as we might not be comfortable with sharing our findings with others. Arguably, it is more reasonable for my study that I provide my participants with a summary of my findings before submission and ask them to point out any misunderstandings. This is known as respondent validation (Bryman and Bell, 2019, p.205).

Shenton (2004) further argues that 'prolonged engagement' with the organisation studied leads to greater familiarity with the culture, as well as establishing a relationship based on trust between the parties. Given that I work for the organisation I am studying, and I have

done so for close to a decade, this means that such a level of understanding is present in my research. I have also used multiple methods, including observation and semi-structured interviews, and this helps to triangulate the data collected. The shortcomings of each data collecting method (discussed more fully under each method below) can be overcome when looking at the totality of my research output via different methods. Another form of triangulation used in this research is looking at the research problems from the teachers' and learners' perspectives so that any positional limitations can be addressed. At each stage of the research, I have also had debriefings with my colleague, also a researcher, and my supervisor, and as a result, my vision as a researcher has been 'widened as others bring to bear their experiences and perceptions' (*ibid*, p.67).

Transferability

Unlike positivists, the researchers' concern as an interpretivist is not with whether our findings are applicable over time and space. We take it as a given that our findings are grounded in the specific array of factors that come into play in making this situation unique. Therefore, whether our findings 'hold in some other context, or even in the same context other time, is an empirical issue' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.316, in Shenton, *ibid*.) By empirical issue, they mean positivist issue. One way of dealing with this dilemma (research that is situated in specific context, but practitioners may want to apply it to their own practice) is to provide thick description, as elucidated by Geertz (1973), and mentioned above in this Chapter. It is for this purpose, I have provided a rather detailed description of my setting, including our OFSTED outcomes, as well as background information on our cohorts, in Chapter One. I have also outlined the number of participants in the study, data collection methods, as well as the time-period over which the data was collected, as recommended by Shenton (2004). All these steps go towards addressing the requirement of thick description of the phenomenon under study. By providing as much contextual information as possible, the reader may be able to assess whether the outcomes are applicable to their own situation.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (quoted in Bryman and Bell, 2019, p.205) argue that adopting a mindset around auditability helps to establish dependability. In practice, this involves keeping a thorough record of all aspects of the research process, from the selection of participants, to interview transcripts and methods of data analysis (*ibid*). These data would be available for others so that there can be some assurance that suitable procedures have been followed. Having an auditor is, in theory, a great idea; in reality, this places an undue burden on the person carrying out the audit. The middle ground adopted here is to make available the

transcripts of the interviews, as well as research notes, if future researchers require it. Of course, all the data will remain thoroughly anonymised.

Confirmability

It may be argued that being strictly objective is an impossibility for qualitative research since the main tool of data gathering is the researcher; a researcher who is imbued with prejudices and other assorted human foibles. What we can aspire to, instead, is confirmability, which is 'designed to ensure that the researcher has acted in good faith' (*ibid*, p.206). This means that the researcher ensures that 'as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and the preferences of the researcher' (Shenton, 2004, p.72). One of the ways I achieve confirmability is to have an extensive section on positionality in Chapter One, where I turn the lens on myself and expose my underlying beliefs and values in the hope that I could be more aware of their potential impact on my research. I have also consulted with more senior and established researchers on how to conduct research so that any biases arising from inexperience can be acknowledged, brought to the fore, and addressed.

3.5 Being a phenomenologist without 'bracketing' myself in a phenomenological paradigm

At the onset of this research, I considered a phenomenological approach to be the most suitable for my research aims and goals. As the research evolved, however, I developed a more nuanced appreciation of phenomenology and found that a full application of this research paradigm would not be suitable. Despite this, my research borrows elements from the phenomenological approach. This section outlines my evolving thought process on this topic.

Phenomenology, having grown out of a humanistic concern, seeks to 'accord normal people and their own everyday reasoning higher status in research' (Denscombe, 2014, p.96). As such, it views the traditional concerns of positivists, such as measurement and objectivity, with much suspicion. Phenomenology as a research approach privileges subjectivity, authentic description over analysis, interpretation over measurement and agency over structure (*ibid*, p.94). At the epistemological level, phenomenologists hold that 'our knowledge of the world is rooted in our (immediate) experiences…' (Cohen *et al*, 2018, p.300). It is this experience that phenomenologists seek to describe in an authentic way. Their concern is to capture experiences that are 'pure, basic and raw in the sense that they have not (yet) been subjected to processes of analysis and theorizing' (Denscombe, *ibid*, p.95). As

Neubauer *et al* (2019, p.91) summarise, the goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of experiences in terms of *'what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced.' This stands in direct contrast to positivist approaches which seek to theorise, categorise, and quantify. Thus, phenomenologists seek to see the world through the eyes of others, 'presenting matters as closely as possible to the way that those concerned understand them' (*ibid*, p.96). Moran (2000, p.4) summarises this essence:

> *Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer… Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within.*

What initially drew me to the phenomenological tradition was this need to be authentic to the experiences as they present themselves and being 'prepared to recognise and include aspects of the experience that appear to be self-contradictory, irrational and even bizarre' (*ibid*, p.98). As a teacher, I have often had to deal with situations that, on the surface, seem irrational. For example, a student might tell me that they are only in college because they need to pass GCSE English, yet not attend any classes, or a student might be absent for most classes without notification, yet suddenly send a message towards the end of the year telling me that they would not be attending this week's class. Why are they concerned to let me know about this specific absence, yet not mention anything for the duration of the year?

Despite the obvious appeal of phenomenology for qualitative study such as this, there are essential features that make it unsuitable for my study. Firstly, Husserl (summarised in Moran, 2000) argued that in order to access things as they are, we need to bracket all 'scientific, philosophical, cultural and everyday assumption' (*ibid*, p.11). Whilst this is admirable, I find that this is impossible for my research undertaking. As a practitioner-researcher, I come to the research setting laden with assumptions, values and relationships- and despite my best attempts to put them aside, this is an unachievable goal. Nor do I think that this is necessarily desirable. After all, my own position as researcher-practitioner in this context means that I have access to information and knowledge that contributes to the research.

Secondly, phenomenology focuses on experiences at the expense of theorising or exploring causation. However, my research does seek to understand causation, such as why are some learners not engaging with their GCSE English course or why some learners are more

motivated than others. I also employ models such as Self-Determination Theory, which would not be in accord with the prescription of phenomenology, as the focus is on theorising.

Despite these limitations in respect to my research, I find that phenomenology offers new avenues to explore familiar phenomena for me as a researcher. Primarily, this approach offers participants their own voice within the research, as they are best situated to understand their own lived experiences.

3.6 Insider vs outsider researcher: An artificial duality?

The dichotomous relationship between insider and outsider often manifests itself in unusual ways. An anecdotal incident can help clarify this statement. A new maths manager whom I had just met, proceeded to interrogate me about one of my English classes, which had been problematic from the start of the year. Attendance for the group was abysmal. At one point, there had been up to 100 learners enrolled in this one class, which now composed of "only" 87. She wanted to know what actions I had taken to solve this problem. She wanted me to call up the 56 learners, who had stopped attending because of the large size of the class, to tell them that they would now have a new teacher- the curriculum manager for maths!

This simple incident illustrates the possible pitfalls of being an outsider to an organisation. This new manager did not understand that there was a context to this problem- years of under-investment in our Department had led to us having only 7 teachers for 1400 students. But she also did not understand the power dynamics of our workplace- any request to a staff member, especially one as onerous as this- needs to go through proper channels. Nor did she know that I was the previous curriculum manager for English, and therefore, had a longer-term overview of the issue. This serves to illustrate one point: being an outsider researcher, one does not understand the historical-cultural influences on organisations, and this can be very limiting indeed.

In terms of my research setting, I would be classified as an insider. As stated in my positionality statement, I am someone who has been working within the research setting for the last nine years in disparate roles. As such, I have access to the organisation's 'past and present histories,' which can help generate 'rich and complex' knowledge...' (Le Gallais, 2008, p.145). Indeed, my position within the institution means that I benefit from 'all the advantages of being attuned to the nuances and idioms of a shared language and collective identity' (*ibid*). Despite this, I cannot claim to possess the knowledge Schutz (1976, p.108 in *ibid*) claims insiders typically have:

> *The member of the in-group looks in one single glance through the normal social situations occurring to him and... he catches immediately the ready-made recipe appropriate to its solution...*

Brannick and Coghlan (2007) alert us to some of the potential challenges of being an insider researcher. Preunderstanding, defined as 'such things as people's knowledge, insights and experiences before they engage in a research programme' (Gummesson, 2000, p. 57 in *ibid*), can be an obstacle to quality research because the researcher may 'assume too much and so not probe as much as if they were outsiders or ignorant of the situation' (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007, p.69). Even more seriously, insiders may think that they know the answers 'and not expose current thinking to alternative reframing' (*ibid*). Moreover, managing organisational politics can also be a significant challenge for insider researchers (*ibid*). It is often the fact that the organisation wants to project an image of itself, both to the outside world and within the organisation and indeed to itself! An insider researcher needs to tread a careful path, where they are not only loyal to their place of work, but also to their research. In carrying out my research as an insider, I have given considerable thought to trustworthiness as a guard against falling into some of the barriers described in this section.

On a more philosophical note, I would like to problematise whether the term insider researcher is conceptually meaningful at all. Of course, being part of the institution where the research takes place, either as an employee or a student, would mean that one is privileged to certain types of knowledge that might be unavailable to outsiders, such as an understanding and appreciation of the shared, public culture, or personality traits of certain students or colleagues, or even its recent history. However, in qualitative research we are concerned with the interpretation of meaning that participants assign to their lived experiences, and by necessity such interpretations exist inside their consciousness. We have yet to invent a machine that would allow us to have direct access to their thoughts and feelings, thankfully. Given that is the case, the researcher remains an outsider even if they are in close proximity- both physically and emotionally- to the researched.

I end this section with the image below, which illustrates the importance of situational knowledge that only insiders can possess. What do you see when you see the picture below?

Figure 14 Image taken during the summer term, 2022

At first glance, this seems like a busy class where learners are engaged in productive work. However, this is a deceptive image: What this image does not relate is that there are only 7 learners present, along with two learning support assistants- well short of the 28 learners on that class register.

Chapter 4

Research Methods

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to critically evaluate and justify my chosen research methods. As such, the focus is more on the practical aspects of data collection. The first section considers the nature, benefits and drawbacks of using semi-structured interviews. The second section does the same, but for observations. I then move onto evaluating document analysis as a data collection method for my research. Shifting my focus once again, I consider the logistics of data collection, especially what role technology can play in that. This chapter finishes with a consideration of ethics in relation to my research.

4.2 Research method 1: Semi-structured interviews

4.2.1 Interviews are 'magical'

Interviews are magical: often a stranger, the interviewer, asks prying and probing questions about the most intimate aspects of the interviewees' lives, and as if enchanted, they often reveal all (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This is all done in the name of research, of course. Indeed, Brinkmann (2014, p.277) states that 'qualitative interviewing has today become a key method in the human and social sciences and also in many other corners of the scientific landscape from education to the health sciences.' For the purposes of this discussion, interviews is defined as a 'face-to-face verbal exchange, in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief form another person or persons' (Maccoby and Maccoby, 1954, in *ibid*). Interviews are often placed into a tripartite classification: structured, unstructured and semi-structured. The following section provides my justification for choosing the semi-structured interview approach.

4.2.2 Why use semi-structured interviews?

Semi-structured interviews occupy the golden medium between the confining constraints of structured interviews and the profligacy of unstructured interviews. With semi-structured interviews, I have a clear list of questions or issues that I want to pose to my participants (*see* Appendix 4 for a list of these questions). However, I am prepared to be flexible in terms of the order of the questions asked and to let interviewees have the space to develop their ideas and speak freely on the issues I raise (Denscombe, 2014). Having a guiding set of questions

ensures that the participants can be gently nudged when they go off-topic, whilst at the same time be prompted to provide more detail, if required.

4.2.3 Why not use structured and unstructured interviews?

Miller and Glassner (2004, p.125) note that positivists have as their primary aim the creation of 'pure' interviews- which, following from their epistemic and ontological standing, seek to provide a 'mirror reality' of the social world in a sterilised context. This is an ideal that can never be realised, as I have suggested in the previous chapter. Because of their primary concern with reliability and validity, positivists often choose structured interviews. In such interviews, the researcher has a pre-defined sets of questions that they ask the participants. They actively discourage researchers from going 'off topic' and the impetus of the interview derives from the research agenda (Bryman and Bell, 2019). Indeed, because of their concern with standardisation across the interactions with all interviewees, they are often inflexible (*ibid*).

I consider structured interviews unsuitable for my research because I am concerned with the subjective lived experiences of learners and lecturers involved with GCSE re-sits, and therefore, I would require the flexibility to pursue naturally arising avenues of questioning from such interviews. Brinkmann (2014, p.286) reinforces this point in stating that structured interviews 'do not take advantage of the dialogical potential inherent in human conversations.' Indeed, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.269 quoted in Cohen *et al*, 2018, p.509) argue that when the researcher is aware of what they do not know about their area of investigation, structured interviews would be useful. I (as established in the introduction) do not know about the learners' and lecturers' lived experiences of GCSE re-sits. Moreover, Cohen *et al* (*ibid*, p.531) suggest that, when interviewing marginalised groups - and many of my learners are marginalised - 'the interviewer will need to consider greater use of informal, open-ended interviews (which follow the train of thought and responses of the respondent, and which uses age-appropriate and context-appropriate language) rather than highly structured interviews.'

Conversely, I have chosen not to use fully unstructured interviews because, perhaps ironic given what I have stated above, it provides *too* much flexibility. Unstructured interviews have very little pre-defined structure (Brinkmann, 2014). Often, unstructured interviews explore the life story of the participants, frequently with the aim of highlighting 'influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes, and lessons of a lifetime.' (Atkinson, 2002, p.125 in Brinkmann, 2014, p.286). Of course, the nature of these significant aspects of the

participants' lives cannot be known prior to the interview, and therefore the interviewer cannot prepare a list of questions to pose or probe (*ibid*). Moreover, I already have research areas I want to explore, for example, the students' motivations, or lack thereof, in studying GCSE re-sits. Indeed, there is a body of knowledge with regards to motivation, and one of my primary aims is to see if it applies to my research setting. Unstructured interviews might not provide naturally occurring opportunities to bring in the discussion of such literature.

4.2.4 Interviews as *craft* carried out by skilled magicians

Continuing with the extended metaphor of interviews being magical- a true magician hides their craft well. We do not see the years of dedication and perseverance that goes into making magic seem seamless. The same, of course, applies to carrying out interviews. Luckily for the novice researcher, there is a plethora of material available to guide the uninitiated. Indeed, the ubiquity of interviews as the preferred data collection tool in qualitative research may give the impression that it is easy to carry out. After all, humans are conversational creatures, and our daily lives are played out in conversation. Yet, qualitative interviews are distinct from everyday conversation: their purpose is to elicit, illuminate and bring to the fore the often taken for granted order of things. Our job as researchers is to hone our skills so that the illusion of magic is maintained. This section explores the steps I have taken to ensure that my interviews are worthy of a researcher who appreciates his craft.

4.2.5 Crafting the right relationship for interviews

The aim of my interviews is to create an environment which allows the free flow of pertinent 'rich' data, and this can only be achieved by actively creating a conductive environment. Kinsey *et al* (1948, p.42, in Brinkmann, 2014, p.282) states that the ideal interview should:

> *become an opportunity for him [the participant] to develop his own thinking, to express to himself, his disappointment and hopes, to bring to the open things that he has previously been afraid to admit to himself, to work out solutions to his difficulties.*

The key to creating such opportunity is to foster the right relationship in interviews. I, as a researcher, aim to achieve this by ensuring I build a rapport with the participants. This will be achieved by 'showing respect, interest, attention and good manners' (Seidman, 2006. p.97). I will also take other concrete steps, such as asking the participants how they would like to be addressed, and, allowing them to choose their pseudonyms. I will also extend common courtesies such as 'holding a door, not sitting until the person is seated, and introducing yourself again so that you make sure the participant knows to whom he or she is talking'

(*ibid*). Furthermore, I will restate that the data from this interview will be treated with utmost confidentiality, and every step will be taken to minimise any potential harm, should they choose to participate. Furthermore, I will restate how this research will might possibly benefit them, for example, through changes in the provision of GCSE re-sits at my research site. I will, however, avoid doing what Guba and Lincoln (1981) recommend: doing 'homework' on the respondents, ascertaining their interests, careers, hobbies, *etc*. Prying too deeply into the respondents' lives might be both intrusive and unethical. Although these steps may seem insignificant in isolation, they announce to the participants that I have deep respect for their own lived experiences.

Regarding creating the ideal relationship with the participants, Cohen *et al* (2018, p. 313) identify that 'rapport is often overlaid with power relations.' Young adults, especially in my research site, may view me as a teacher with instrumental power and this entails a certain power relationship. They may, therefore, hesitate to respond to my questions for fear that this may have negative consequences for their education. I will counter this by stating that for the purpose of this research, I am not their teacher, but a researcher who is deeply concerned with understanding their lived experiences. I will also give them the space and time to gather their thoughts, and make sure that I am mindful of my body language, so as not to subconsciously impact the learners' responses.

4.2.6 Listen well, listen carefully and don't interrupt!

Being an active listener is not a trait I possess, as many of my long-suffering colleagues and family members will attest. In everyday conversations, this is considered rude but in qualitative interviews, this is a fundamental barrier. I sympathise with Seidman's (2006, p.78) statement that the 'hardest work for many interviewers is to keep quiet and listen actively.' Indeed, Bryman (2019, p.246) states, 'one of the main jobs of the interviewer is listening: being attentive to what the interviewee is saying or not saying. Magnusson and Marecek (2015) thankfully provide helpful tips for novice researchers on developing the key skill of active listening. They define active listening as:

> *Being prepared for participants to explore the topic. This includes providing clarification about the topic if necessary; asking the participants for clarification when an account they have given is unclear or unfinished; and providing prompts when a participant hesitates* (*ibid*, p.63).

One of the helpful suggestions they provide is that I should take uncertainty or hesitation in the participants' responses seriously as this could indicate that the question I posed does not

resonate with the respondent. In such a case, the interviewer should 'describe the topic again, taking special care to use words that are as close as possible to the participants' language style' (*ibid*, p.64). This is especially relevant for me as I will be interviewing young adults re-taking GCSE English, who might potentially not comprehend technical terms such as 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' motivation.

Seidman (2006) makes a helpful distinction between different types of listening. In particular, he asks that we attune ourselves to listen for the 'inner voice' instead of the public voice that so often characterises our conversations. To listen for the 'inner voice' means to search for the deeper meaning of what has been conveyed. For example, when participants speak of problems they are facing as a 'challenge,' there is a sense that this description has been curated for the public, and the inner struggle that is inherent in problems is absent. 'Challenge,' after all, often has positive connotations (*ibid*). Developing such a nuanced approach to listening requires 'concentration and focus beyond what we usually do in everyday life' (*ibid*, p.79).

The primary strategy I have employed in developing my active listening skill is by conducting practice interviews with colleagues, who are not involved in the research as participants. During those interviews, I have recorded in a journal my role in the interview process, such as the number of times I interrupted the flow of the response to the detriment of the data, or when my body language changed to signal something to the respondent. Being aware of one's unconscious habits is the key to modifying them. I have also asked the trial participants to provide feedback on what aspects of my interviewing skills I need to develop.

4.2.7 Critiques of interviews

Like magic, interviewing as a technique, even when employed with great skill, can mask a plethora of issues. The notion that interviews can provide access to the interviewees' true feelings is called into doubt by Hammersley (2008, p.98), who state that interviews cannot be treated 'as a source of direct information.' Or even assume 'what informants tell us about themselves is a direct representation of how they think and feel about things- even when we can assume that they are being honest' (*ibid*, p.99). This is because the respondents do not always 'know what they think they know, that interpreting what they say is not always straightforward' (*ibid*). Therefore, whilst in everyday conversations, we can be 'charitable' about the information they provide, the skilled interviewer must adopt 'epistemological doubt' in their research (*ibid*, p.99). This critique can be furthered even more, for interviews capture the respondent's response to the given question at the specific moment the question is

posed; yet we all know that our opinions of something often changes with the last interaction or experience of something.

A further critique is that, although interviews appear to be natural part of human existence, as we ask each other questions daily, there is something unnatural about the specific type of interview that is employed by a qualitative researcher. They pose questions, but they do not provide feedback, which is the essence of a conversation. As Brinkmann (2014, p.1016) states:

> *the role of the interviewer is to ask, and the role of the interviewee is to answer. It is considered bad taste if interview subjects break the ascribed role and by themselves start to question the interviewer.*

Indeed, in many of the interviews I have participated in, I felt anxious in not knowing if I had provided what the researcher wanted to know. That dread might, either subconsciously or consciously, gets picked up by the interviewer and that can make the whole process of data gathering difficult. This is especially true of those who are introspective and need time to formulate their answers. Indeed, Brinkmann (*ibid*, p.1018) states that interviewing is becoming the preferred choice of qualitative researchers not because it is the best method of data collection, but because 'it appears to be less time-consuming than ethnographic fieldwork, for example.'

Lastly, although it appears that interviewing can be a method of emancipation, after all, we are giving voice often to those who are disempowered in society, there is subtle power difference at play. It is the researcher who will interpret the transcription of the interview, and they will impose their understanding on the data. Even with the best of intentions and skills, to what extent we can go inside the respondents' mind and elicit the true meaning of what has been conveyed is an epistemological point of concern. Of course, the ethical solution to this might be that we share our interpretation with the respondents, but again, we are making demands on our respondents for what is our labour.

Despite the criticisms above, I have decided that interviewing is the 'best-fit' for my research aims, especially given that I am looking for the subjective experiences of the learners and lecturers. Many of the criticisms highlighted above are epistemological in nature; whatever methods we choose will have similar criticisms because they are inherent in the qualitative nature of the research. We simply do not have a perfect method to get into the heads of our research participants. This is a point reinforced by Schutz (1967, summarised in Seidman, 2006, p. 9) who states that:

> *It is never possible to understand another perfectly, because to do so would mean that we had entered into other other's stream of consciousness and experienced what he or she had. If we do that, we would be that person.*

4.3 Research method 2: Participant observation

Whilst most of us look, fewer of us observe. The difference between the two may seem to be no more than semantic, but it is essential: for observation is the fount of the ethnographic enterprise in anthropology, whilst looking remains wedded to the everyday mundane. This is emphasised by Cohen *et al* (2018, p.542) who state that 'observation is more than just looking.' Of course, looking naturally precedes observing, but what distinguishes former from latter is that the observation requires careful reflection and is an effortful process. Observation is 'looking (often systematically) and noting systematically people, events, behaviours, settings, artefacts, routines and so on' (*ibid*). Berger (1972, p.8) instinctively recognises the interplay between the two:

> *In the Middle Ages when men believed in the physical existence of Hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today. Nevertheless their idea of Hell owed a lot to the sight of fire consuming and the ashes remaining - as well as to their experience of the pain of burns.*

Observation is an inextricable part of my professional life; I observe lessons as part of my job as a Development Coach, and I also provide coaching support to others who have been observed by my colleagues and whose teaching practice has been deemed to require improvement. It may appear that this experience with observations may be an advantage for my research, but it is not necessarily so: observations as a research method may resemble everyday class observation, but they differ fundamentally in terms of their purpose and form. Classroom observation has at its heart the desire to judge the performance of the lecturer, often against a set pre-defined standard, whereas observation for qualitative research is concerned with gathering data to make sense of the subjective experiences of lecturers and learners. Therefore, I must leave aside most of my training as a classroom observer and carry out observations founded upon the strictures of qualitative research.

Cohen *et al* (2018, p.542) comment on the multitude of orientations that observations can take in an educational setting: firstly, the focus can be on *facts*. For example, we can count the number of students who arrived late to their lessons. Secondly, we can focus on *events*, for example, critical or non-critical incidents that occur in classes such as confrontation or simply how often the teacher talks. Lastly, we can focus on *behaviours* or qualities, such as whether

the teacher appears to be kind and friendly. Indeed, Cohen *et al* (*ibid*) argue that there 'is a continuum from the observation of incontestable facts to the researcher's interpretation and judgement of situations...' I think just focusing on one element would provide an incomplete picture of what is happening in a GCSE re-sit classroom, and therefore would seek to base my observations on a compendium of all three stated above. Indeed, in real life, these three interact in a way that separation becomes almost impossible. For example, if a learner arrives 30 minutes late, she might behave in a way that leads to confrontation, such as asking, 'What are we doing today, sir?' and that might consequently lead to a behavioural reaction on the teacher's part.

4.3.1 Different orientations to participant observations: structured vs un-structured vs semi-structured

Wragg (2012, p.8) argues that 'one result of the diversity of purposes, practices and location is that several different styles of classroom observation have been developed over the years.' Often, they reflect the underlying methodological, ontological and epistemological assumptions of the researchers. Thus, those who borrow from the positivist and quantitative tradition often settle on structured observations. Indeed, structured observations have a long history in education. Stevens (1912, in Wragg, *ibid*) observed 100 random lessons focusing on the questions teachers posed to the students in a variety of subjects. He discovered that teachers talked for about 64 percent of the time, and students for about 36 percent. Much of the impetus for early quantitative, structured observations derived from the belief 'that the effectiveness of teachers can be improved if a body of knowledge is established which shows that they should do more of some things and less of others' (*ibid*, p.9). This point is reinforced by Hardman and Hardman (2017, p.572), who state that structured approaches to observations 'emphasise the applied nature of their research.' Cohen *et al* (*ibid*, p.543) mention that a 'highly structured observation will know in advance what it is looking for (*i.e*. pre-ordinate observation) and will have its observation categories worked out in advance.'

This approach would not be suitable for my research as I am exploring the lived experiences of teachers and learners, and those experiences cannot be pre-ordained. I could, for example, count how many times the learners looked at their phones, but this will ignore the essence of the situation: a tally mark will not tell me what constellation of factors came together to prompt the learner to pick up his or her phone at that moment. Structured observations will not provide the thick descriptions needed for qualitative research such as mine. Crucially, structured observations already have a hypothesis pre-observation, and I do not have one.

I have decided that un-structured observation would not be suitable for my research as well since I have already read existing literature on my research questions, and there are areas on which I wish to focus on. Un-structured observation does not allow for pre-defined areas of focus, as its proponents argue that such focus could constrain, or even predetermine what I encounter in my naturalistic research setting.

Therefore, I have decided that semi-structured is the best fit in the continua. Semi-structured observations 'will have an agenda of issues but will gather data to illuminate these issues in a far less predetermined or systematic manner' (Cohen *et al*, *ibid*, p.543). Just because I have adopted semi-structured observation as my preferred method, it does not follow that I cannot borrow from the strictures of structured observations. For example, I can still note down how often the learners are talking to each other, or leaving the classroom to go to the toilets, but what it does mean is that I will be looking to situate these isolated facts into a meaningful whole. I align my observations with what Cohen *et al* (*ibid*, p.544) describe below. In describing qualitative observations, they state:

> *[it] draws the researcher into the phenomenological complexity of the participants' worlds; here situations unfold, and connections, causes and correlation can be observed as they occur over time.*

4.3.2 Why do participant observation?

Bernard (2006) offers five reasons for conducting participant observation, and these reasons form the basis of my justification for conducting participant observation. Firstly, this method of data collection 'opens things up and makes it possible to collect all kinds of data' (*ibid*, p.354). In terms of my research, this would mean that me being in the classroom would allow me to see what the lecturers and learners are doing, instead of what they tell me they are doing. For example, this is the only method where I can see how many times the learners used their phone or became disruptive in ways that only learners can conjure up. Secondly, Bernard (*ibid*) argues that 'participant observation reduces the problem of reactivity.' This issue is dealt with more thoroughly in Section 4.3.5 below. Thirdly, Bernard (*ibid*, p.355) argues that participant observation 'helps you to ask sensible questions.' I have, of course, done a literature review in Chapter 2, and from that I have extracted some questions I would like to ask my participants, but doing a participant observation would tell me if these questions are suitable. For example, if I see all the learners spend an inordinate amount of time on their phones, then asking the learners if they use mobile phones in their lessons is less suitable than asking them why they use their phones. Equally for lecturers, if I observe that the classes had less than 20 percent attendance, then subsequently asking them if the

attendance is good would be nonsensical. Rather the question should be directed towards understanding low attendance. Fourthly, Bernard (*ibid*, p.355) maintains that participant observation gives you 'an intuitive understanding of what's going on in a culture and allows you to speak with confidence about the meaning of data.' It is this 'intuitive understanding' that I find appealing: being in the classroom will help me to provide meaning to other data, for example, the analysis of documents since it is in the classroom that many of these documents are meant to be applied. Policy documents, for example, on their own cannot speak for themselves, and they can be either applied or ignored. Therefore, I agree with Bernard (*ibid*, p.356) that 'many research problems simply cannot be addressed adequately by anything except participant observation.'

Above all these justification for participant observation, my primary justification is this: since I am interested in the learners' and teachers' lived experiences of GCSE re-sit classes, I would be remiss in ignoring the opportunity to see where those experiences primarily play out, which is the classroom. Indeed, Cohen *et al* (2018, p.542) note that:

> *the distinctive feature of observation as a research process is that it offers an investigator the opportunity to gather first-hand, 'live' data in situ from naturally occurring social situations rather than, for example, reported data.*

They (*ibid*) further argue that observation's unique strength is that it can 'yield more valid or authentic data than would otherwise be the case mediated or inferential methods... [and] can offer opportunity for documenting those aspects of lifeworlds that are verbal, non-verbal and physical.'

4.3.3 The importance of field notes in participant observation

Accurate recording of observed data is essential, for these forms the basis of my analysis in the later chapters. Indeed, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, p.158) mention that 'observations are not data unless they are recorded in some fashion for further analysis.' They further argue that even though it seems like that:

> *common events and their variations will remain indelibly etched in the researcher's mind for all time, memory is unfortunately more fleeting and less trustworthy than that. We lose the detail of observations and conversation all too quickly* (*ibid*).

There is a plethora of approaches to capturing observed data, but some are more suitable than others for my research. Using a digital device, like a camcorder, to record the lessons might be the most comprehensive approach to recording lessons, however, it is not feasible for my

research. Many of the learners, and lecturers, are simply resistant to being recorded, and it would be unethical to do so covertly. Whilst using an audio capturing device might be more palatable for the participants, I am not inclined to do so. This is because audio recording will not capture the subtleties of the setting, such as when a learner decides to throw a scrunched-up paper at his friend across the room. Wragg (2012, p.17) notes the disadvantages of sound cassette as thus:

> *Loss of important visual cues such as facial expressions, gesture, body language, movement; sound quality can be poor without radio microphone, especially if acoustics are poor; difficult to identify individual children who speak; analysis time substantially increased.*

Moreover, Bryman and Bell (2019, p.228) note that 'recording may be more obtrusive than writing notes.'

I have decided that the best approach to recording data is through field notes in a journal. This is an established means of collating data from observations. In my research site, both learners and lecturers are used to other lecturers coming into their classroom and making notes- whether it is OFSTED inspectors or colleagues conducting class observations as part of the College's quality process. Mulhall (2002) notes that there are divergent views on the value of field notes. Whilst some consider field notes to be the essence of observations:

> *Thus they emphasize writing detailed field notes close to their field observations, mining these notes systematically through qualitative coding techniques, and producing "grounded" analyses tied closely and specifically to the original field note corpus (*Emerson *et al, 2001, p.355 in ibid).*

Others, however, are concerned that being preoccupied with note making will detract from being in the moment, and therefore, the 'deeper, intuitive experience of being within a culture will be lost' (*ibid*, p.311). I will adopt a middle point between these two ideal-types, and make detailed notes when something of significance occurs, and for most of the time, I will try to immerse myself in what is happening. However, I will follow Bryman and Bell's (2019, p.227) advice that 'notes must be vivid, clear and complete. If in doubt, write it down.'

In terms of the specificities of what I will record in my field notes, I will borrow selectively from the schemas created by Mulhall (2002) and Guest *et al* (2013) Although I write below as if I am recording the specific points sequentially, I will write whatever appears most arresting to me during the observation. Firstly, I will note down the layout of the physical environment of the classroom, such as the way the tables and chairs are arranged, and how the lecturer uses

any resources that they have, e.g., the whiteboard. This will be done through a simple diagram (*see* appendix 9 for an example). Secondly, I will note the characteristics of both the learners and the lecturer. This will include how they dress, age, gender, *etc*. Thirdly, I will note down their verbal behaviour and interactions. For example, who speaks to whom, the duration of the talk, who initiates the discussion, what the nature of the discussion is. Fourthly, I will detail physical behaviour and gesture. This would cover whether they have their phones in their hands, whether they are writing down anything, as well as their general body language. Lastly, I will note anything that happens that I think is significant, for example, any critical incident that can illuminate my research questions.

My field notes with contain photographs of anything that is evocative of my research concerns. These will include the physical layout of the classroom, pictures/ posters displayed at my research site; or, indeed, anything that I deem valuable for my research. These images are more *aide-memoire* than anything else, but if I find a compelling reason, such as they capture something that cannot be expressed as adequately in words, I will include them in my Findings chapter.

Bryman and Bell (*ibid*, p.227) provide some principles about when and where to write field notes. They argue that it is important to write notes, even if it is brief, as soon as possible after hearing or seeing something of significance. This is advice I follow very carefully given the frailty and unreliability of human memory; in fact, I make my field notes *in situ.* Whilst field notes are often incomprehensible to everyone apart from the researcher, I have tried my best to be as detailed as possible so that an audit trail is left, and any future researcher may access them to see if my conclusions are supported. Bryman and Bell (*ibid*) also suggest that analytical memos, which are distinct from field notes, be kept separately. These will ponder on initial thoughts on the data gathered in the field notes, and can be used to shape future observations, for example, in terms of what to focus on with reference to research questions and interests.

4.3.4 What skills are required to observe effectively?

Margaret Mead, (1970, p 249, quoted in DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, p.21) the esteemed anthropologist, argues that the following skills (or traits) are essential for doing participant observation successfully:

> *...ability to reproduce nonsense material from memory, ability to reproduce sensible material from memory, relative memory for things seen and things heard, ability to write and observe simultaneously, width of vision, ability to predict what will*

happen behind one by the expression on the faces of those in front, tolerance for continuous observation... ability to attend to an unpleasant situation…

Reflecting on myself as a participant observer, I recognise that I lack some of these essential skills. Regarding my memory, and my ability to reproduce data from memory, during a trial observation, I have found that this is wanting. I have diagnosed this as being a result of the fact that I have conflicting demands on my time, for example, I observed a lesson as a researcher, but I also taught a lesson immediately afterwards. It was difficult to make the switch from a lecturer to a researcher in terms of memory. Therefore, I have gained approval from my manager that I can have days set aside where I just focus on observing classes. With regards to the ability to write and observe simultaneously, I have found that my training as a lesson observer has provided me with good experience for me to achieve this with a high degree of precision and insight.

Therefore, having a day away from my other professional responsibilities and putting my researcher hat on is important. Another quality that is hinted at in the above quote is the ability to be naïve in familiar situations, being able to look at the usual proceedings of a classroom, and experience I am intimately familiar with, in a new light. I have had to consciously bracket my experiences, constantly reminding myself that I am not a lecturer or a Development Coach, but a researcher who is there to capture information. In sum, I will attempt to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Wolcott, 2008, quoted in Smit and Onwuegbuzie, 2018, p.1).

In order to hone my skills as an observer even further, I have read many classical texts of ethnography in the hopes that I would be able to distil some of their genius. I have, for example, read Malinowski's (1989) *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* closely, recognising that he has much to offer the careful reader in terms of how to go about doing participant observation. He is, after all, one of the originators of participant observation. I have also undertaken an online course from University of Amsterdam on qualitative research, which covers how to do participant observation. Although I recognise that I am still lacking in the skills required to be an exceptional observer, these steps have helped me develop my skills and grow in confidence as a researcher. With reference to the trial observations mentioned above, I have striven to train my eyes to see things that were previously imperceptible, such as glances between learners, or when they switched off from the lesson and started thinking of things other than the lesson. This is referred to as 'building explicit awareness' by Bernard (2006, p.364).

Bernard (*ibid*) argues that you can build this skill by consciously becoming aware of ordinary things. He recommends that one technique that I could use is to gather a group of my colleagues and ask everyone to write a detailed description of something mundane, such as making a bed. After that, comparing each other's note to see how many small points I, or they have missed.

4.3.5 Critiques of participant observation

Similar to other methods, participant observation is not without contestation. Those coming from the positivist tradition would argue that it is essentially subjective, and therefore, cannot stand the test of scientific rigour. This is a point that Mulhalla (2003, p.311) recognises, although not necessarily support, when she states:

> *...it is now recognized that any writing, both in the field and hereafter, is a representation or a construction of events by the author. Thus however, hard we try to be objective such descriptive accounts are theorized, and ethnographers choose to focus on certain activities, key events, and their reactions to them. In this way unconscious analysis of events is constantly occurring as field notes are written.*

Again, this element of human researcher with their own idiosyncrasies impinging on research is a perennial concern of positivism, yet it is exactly this humanness that allows us to make sense of reality. If we recorded everything we saw as observers, we would have a mass of data that would overwhelm all attempts at analysis. Rather, we should be glad that the human researcher can discern what is important.

Another potential critique to participant observation is that the presence of a researcher might distort the natural process of a classroom. This is the problem of reactivity. Paterson (1994, p.301) defines reactivity as 'the response of the researcher and the research participants to each other during the research process.' The lecturer being observed might become conscious of being observed, and they might associate that observation with the College's quality cycle observations of lessons. In such a case, they might behave in a way that seeks to impress the researcher or play up to how the researcher would expect a good lesson to progress. Likewise, the learners might take the opportunity of having an outsider in their classroom to either support their lecturers or vent their anger about the lecturer. In both cases, they are not acting as they would normally do. To mitigate against unnatural performance by the lecturers and learners, I made sure that I sat in the corner, where I would not be the focus of their attention, and I also made sure to visit the same class more than once. In this way, they would become accustomed to my presence. Furthermore, I explained to the lecturers that my focus in not on

their performance, but rather on what happens in GCSE English re-sit classes, and I assured them again that any data collected would be anonymised. Paterson (*ibid*, p.303) highlights the very important point that the 'trust of the participants may determine the nature of the data they share with the researcher.' Furthermore, Bernard (*ibid*, p.354) argues 'presence builds trust. Trust lowers reactivity.'

Another oft levied criticism against participant observation is that it is too subjective, and the quality of the data is dependent on the ability of the researcher. The argument goes that given such inherent limitations; it would not produce data that can be applicable to other research settings. Indeed, two researchers may observe the same thing, but come up with two very different interpretations. Whilst we can make allowances for such arguments, it needs to be stated that they are inherent in many qualitative research approaches, and not specific to participant observation. Indeed, at its heart is an epistemological issue, where our own life experiences shape what we can perceive. We cannot abolish our experiences, but we can try to reduce their negative impact on our research by making careful field notes and training our eyes to perceive things in new light. Indeed Bernard (2006, p.370) argues that 'objectivity is a skill, like language fluency, and you can build if you work at it.' He points to the examples of other professions such as priests, clinical psychologists who suspend their biases to provide suitable advice to their clients (*ibid*, p.371). One way of achieving objectivity, Bernard (2006) suggests, is finding someone to talk over issues carefully.

4.4 Research method 3: Document analysis

It may be argued that modern society has a pathological, often bordering on oppressive, need to write down both monumental and transient events as records. Officials, of course, record significant life events, such as births, marriages, and deaths. What is surprising is that we are also diligent in recording even the minute details of our daily lives, such as on social media. Educational institutions are notorious for the requirement for copious amount of record keeping: They assign and write individual targets for their learners, the teachers mark them present or absent, and write comments about their behaviours, *etc*. The educational institutions also regulate behaviours through a multitude of policies, some for staff, others for learners.

It may be suggested that the impetus for such incessant record keeping is the techno-rational nature of modern bureaucracy, where verbal agreements and trusts have given way to official and semi-official documents. Indeed, Max Weber (summarised in Waters and Water, 2015), the most perceptive critic of modern bureaucracy, states that 'modern administration is based

on ...documents that are preserved as original copies or as concepts.' It is because documents are such an inherent part of our daily lives, especially in educational setting, that I have decided to use document analysis as the last of my methods. The question is not, therefore, why we need to do document analysis, but rather why it is not a more popular method in educational research? McCulloch (2004, p.25) posits that the 'use of documents, increasingly neglected by social researchers... has become the preserve of historians.' Perhaps this is a result of social and educational researchers' desire to go to the field/setting and gather first-hand data as opposed to looking at documents, which is sometimes decidedly less exciting and perhaps less satisfying as well. Despite these reservations on qualitative researchers' part, Rapley (2007, p.123) underscores the importance of documents in our lives:

> *It is clear, given the vast number of texts that we engage with on a day-to-day basis- that seek to enrol us into specific way of knowing, acting, being in and understanding the world- that taking the work of texts seriously is central to all thinking about the contemporary institutions of social life.*

4.4.1 What is document analysis?

I find Bowen's (2009, p.27) definition of document analysis the most concise and encapsulates the essence of the method:

> *A systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents... like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.*

Even with document analysis, the bifurcation between qualitative or quantitative approaches matter. For the latter, the concern is with 'measurement that facilitate comparison and statistical aggregation of data' (Morgan, 2021, p.65). Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, are concerned with exploring the 'latent meaning in the data,' so the focus is on how 'people interpret their experiences and construct the world' (*ibid*). As has been stated above numerous times, my approach is qualitative and interpretive generally, and this also extends to document analysis.

Similarly, positivist approaches to documentary analysis would often eschew the provision of 'deeper analysis in terms of differential power, influence or ideologies of the various groups that these documents represent' (McCulloch, 2004, p.39). The concern here is in collecting the sum of all documents, which is taken to 'add up to an objective account' (*ibid*). Interpretivist venture into document analysis seeks to establish 'the correct interpretation of

the text' (*ibid*). In practice, this may mean that attempt is made to deconstruct the text as a discourse and linking it to the 'cultural and ideological artefacts to be interpreted in terms of implicit patterns of signification, underlying symbolic structures and contextual determinants of meaning' (Codd, 1988, p.243 in *ibid*, p.40). The focus is not just on the intended meaning of its authors, but also on the potential effect on the reader (*ibid*). Codd (1988, p.246 in *ibid*, p.40) helpfully summarises the purpose of an interpretive approach to document analysis below:

> *The aim…is not to prove which of these readings is correct but to consider them all as evidence of the text's inherent ideological ambiguities, distortions and absences. In this way, it is possible to penetrate the ideology of official policy documents and expose the real conflicts of interest within the social world which they claim to represent.*

4.4.2 Why do document analysis?

One of the key justifications for doing document analysis is to triangulate the data from other methods mentioned above. Morgan (2022, p.65) states that by 'using different methods to collect information, they can confirm their findings across datasets, thereby minimizing the possibilities for biases.' Triangulation, defined as 'the combination of methodologies in the study of same phenomenon' (Denzin, 1970, p.291 in Bown, *ibid*, p.38), is one of the methods for increasing trustworthiness discussed above (see section 3.4). The key is to seek 'convergence and corroboration through different data sources and methods' (Bowen, *ibid*, p.28). Apart from triangulation, documents can provide avenues for other research methods to peruse, especially in relation to what questions to ask the participants. For instance, if the attendance policy requires the lecturers to contact every learner absent from their class, this could lead the researcher to ask if the lecturers are indeed doing it, and if yes, how they feel about doing this onerous task.

Bowen (*ibid*, p.31) further lists several rationales for doing document analysis, and here I look at those justifications in relation to my work. Firstly, he mentions that it is an efficient method in comparison to other methods. Mostly because it requires data *selection* instead of data *collection*. Indeed, much of the document material I am using for my research was collected from College's website, and is, therefore, a public record. Moreover, document analysis is suitable for my research because of its 'lack of obstructiveness and reactivity.' Also, the 'stability' and 'exactness' inherent in documents make them ideally suited for repeated reviews (*ibid*).

4.4.3 How to do document analysis successfully

Rapley (2007, p.113) states that one of the key skills required to conduct document analysis successfully is acquiring the ability to transform 'implicit' points into 'explicit' understandings. Taking the example of the dating advertisement below, Rapley (*ibid*) argues that we should focus on both what is said, as well as what is not said:

> *ATTRACTIVE LADY, medium-build, 5ft 5" very caring, considerate, GSOH, seeks gentleman for friendship/ltr, must be potty about animals, eating out and going out socially for a quiet drink.*

Rapley (*ibid*) notes that one information that is typically in dating advertisements is missing here: her age. In situations where information that ought to be there is missing, this is meaningful. In the example above, we are required to read 'between the lines' to gauge the implicit but absent details. Rapley (*ibid*, p.112) notes that the mention of adjective 'lady' and 'seeks gentleman' leads to a conclusion that the 'attractive lady' is not someone who is in her twenties or thirties or is a teenager. Moreover, "'friendship', long-term relationship', 'gentleman' and 'lady' all fits together to produce some notion of 'being civilized'" (*ibid*, p.113). Therefore, it appears that her ideal match is perhaps in his fifties, and who is from a middle to upper class background. Fortunately, being an English teacher, where perceptive reading is one of the skills I teach my learners, the skill of making the 'implicit' into 'explicit' is something that I am quite adept at doing. Of course, we need to be careful that we do not read too much into a text and find deeper meaning that simply does not exist.

Moreover, undertaking document analysis well requires having the knowledge to select documents according to authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning (Morgan, 2022, p.70). Firstly, authenticity refers to whether the document in question is genuine. Since all my documents are from College's publicly available website, there is no question that they are fake or modified in any way. Secondly, credibility refers to what 'extent to which the source is free from error or distortion' (*ibid*, p.71). In relation to practice, we need to consider whether documents' authors 'may have included distorted perspectives resulting from inexperience or motives other than a desire to express honest explanations' (*ibid*). Of course, I cannot go into the authors' mind to determine whether the document is credible, but I can look for contradictory or supporting evidence to assess credibility. Thirdly, representativeness is to do with how typical a document is. This can be established by comparing the documents analysed with similar documents produced by the College and assessing if they present a similar message. Lastly, in reference to meaning, this pertains to whether the 'evidence is

clear and understandable' (*ibid*, p.72). The discussion above regarding explicit and implicit meanings cover this criterion.

4.4.4 What documents will be analysed?

A variety of documents is subjected to critical analysis. These range from informational posters displayed across the College, e.g., those that promises prizes for those who maintain high attendance, policies that have a bearing on the lecturers' and learners' experiences of GCSE re-sit, for example, the *Student Disciplinary Policy*, OFSTED report from last two visitations, worksheets produced by the lecturers, and students' work from their workbook. The aim in choosing such a wide variety of texts is that alone they provide an incomplete picture, whereas together they begin to build an image that is more fully formed, and more informative of learners' and lecturers' experiences. For instance, displayed posters regarding attendance is meaningless on their own unless we look at how it reinforces the College's *Attendance and Punctuality Policy*. The wide choice of documents is deliberate and reflects an attempt on my part to reduce bias and enhance reliability. McCulloch (2004, p. 37) mentions that it is 'necessary to make use of a wide range of different kinds of document which will present alterative viewpoints and interests.' Tosh (2002 quoted in *ibid*, p.38) cautions that using single sources can lead to conclusions that are in some way 'inaccurate, incomplete or otherwise tainted.' In selecting the documents for analysis, I have been guided by Merriam's (1988, p.118 in Bowen, *ibid*, p.29) dictum that 'Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem.'

4.4.5 What are the limitations of document analysis?

One potential drawback of drawing upon document analysis is that the organisations, especially the educational organisation I am investigating, is in control of what is disseminated. This means that what I have access to is what the organisation wants me to have access to. Much of the documentation serves their interests and values and is in effect sanitised. This is not to imply that the documents that I have access to is not worthy of analysis, but that there could be lacunas. Indeed, Merriam and Tisdell (2016 in Morgan, 2022, p.66) look at how police records documenting incidences and frequencies of crime 'can be a function of how a particular department defines and reports the crimes.' Moreover, deceptions can be hard to pinpoint. For example, a poster that has a picture of a smiling learner achieving 100 percent attendance but hide the fact that he or she is the exception, and that the average attendance is for the course is only 30 percent. Therefore, it may be suggested that there is a

need to recognise the caution that Atkinson and Coffey (1997, in Bowen, *ibid*, p.30) express regarding whether and how documents can serve our specific research aims:

> *We should not use documentary sources as surrogates for other kinds of data. We cannot, for instance, learn through records alone how an organisation operates day-by-day. Equally, we cannot treat records-however 'official'- as firm evidence of what they report.*

A similar argument against document analysis to the one above is the danger of over interpretation. We need to be aware that documents are not produced for the researchers' investigations but have a function of their own. When we harness the document to support our thesis, it is a decision of interpretation we are making. Whilst some documents can readily be used for our current research, others need to be more carefully interpreted. For example, suppose a self-review produced by the College identifies that our 'lessons lack energy'. Well, this phrase needs to be carefully scrutinised and interpreted to find its meanings. It could mean that the teachers are lacking energy, or that the learners are lacking energy, or that the lesson itself is slow paced. The authorial intent and its subsequent interpretation by the audience could be at divergence. In this regard, Sol Cohen (1999, p.65-66 in Mcculloch, 2004, p.39) states that:

> *Document should be understood in terms of 'the semiotics of text production, how meaning is made in text, how readers take meaning from text, the status of authorial intention versus the reader's interpretation, the role of the community of discourse in the reception of text, and so forth'.*

Bowen (summarised in Morgan, 2022, p.67) finds another limitation with document analysis: 'relying on pre-existing texts involves working with limited data. Data sources on a certain subject might not exist. Consequently, researchers might need to tweak their research interests or questions based on the available data.' Fortunately, this does not apply to my research interests as I have shown in the above section, the converse is true. I have access to more pertinent data than I can closely analyse.

4.5 Capturing data and transcription: technology and its discontent

During the trial interviews, I became aware of an issue that I took for granted: what is the most suitable method of recording the interviews? Initially, I used my mobile phone without much thought as it has the facility to record, and it is on my person at almost all times. However, when I produced the mobile phone during the interview and asked my participants for permission, I could see a physical, recoil-like reaction. It was the reaction of a person who

was terrified at the very thought of their voices being recorded. Despite agreeing to be recorded with obvious reservations, their responses became very circumspect, and the natural flow of conversation gave way to a stilted performance.

By chance I came across another research where the researcher used a smart pen produced by Livescribe- a company that produces assistive technology that has been used widely and effectively used by individuals with additional educational needs. The device, which looks a little like a whiteboard marker, can record both voices and any notes written on special paper. The date subsequently is backed up on an app. I found that when I asked permission to record and produced the pen as a recording instrument, the responses were much more forthcoming and natural. It felt to me that the participants were not playing a role as they did with mobile phone recordings. An added benefit of the Livescribe pen was that all my field notes were stored in one place, and they were dated and filed according to the date of production.

Indeed, such was the quality of the recording from the Livescribe pen that I was able to input the recordings into Microsoft Word, and its dictation function could transcribe the interviews for me, with some manual corrections on my part (*see* Appendix 5 and 6 for examples of my transcripts). The recording from my mobile phone did not fare as well, with frequent errors in recognising spoken words when inputted into Word.

The transcription was then loaded into NVivo, which is a program that facilitates computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS). Bazeley and Jackson (2013, quoted in Cohen *et al*, *ibid*, p.650) notes that programs such as NVivo is ideally suited for organising and managing, noting, searching and categorising data from diverse methods such as semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis. I found it useful to code data, which I later ordered into themes. The process I followed is discussed later in the data analysis section below. However, I am mindful of the perceptive comment that Cohen *et al* (*ibid*, p.659) make that 'software does not analyse materials, humans do.'

Indeed, Heidegger (1954) wrote in his *The Question Concerning Technology* that there is a very real danger that in using technology uncritically, we reduce the complexity of human interaction, interpretation and meaning making to the technological logic, which is to say that we just focus on inputs and outputs. In my case, this would mean that I become focused on just coding, classifying, and thematising, instead of really tackling the data on a deeper level, where the humanity embedded in the data emerges after I saturate myself with the dataset.

In order to avoid such outcomes, I have printed the transcription and spent some time dwelling on its meaning, and only when I have gained as much as I can from the data, did I use NVivo to code. That human act of printing, using a highlighter to select parts, asking myself questions about what it means for the participants, ensured that I did not become caught up in the soulless logic of technology. Below is what this looked like in practice:

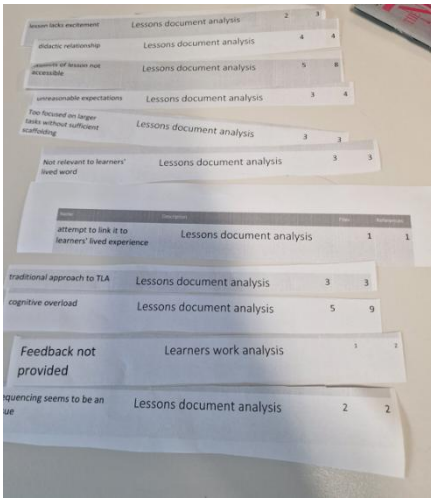


Figure 15 NVivo codes printed and cut into strips

Furthermore, I undertook advanced training online with a researcher on how to use NVivo software so that I avoid falling into the above pitfalls. Part of the training was ensuring that we do not get caught up in the logic of the software, but harshness it for our own ends.

4.6 Ethical considerations

The ethic of research may sometimes be positioned as an 'add-on' to the actual research project, something of a 'tick-box' exercise. I have, however, consciously put ethics at the heart of this research. In this section, I consider the ethical implications of my research with a view to showing how my specific method - especially that of semi-structured interviews, can raise unique concerns that need to be addressed. I achieve this with reference to BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). I particularly subscribe to BERA's (*ibid*, no page) assertation that 'ethical decision-making [should] become an actively deliberative, ongoing, and interactive process of assessing and reassessing the situation and issues as they arise.'

Prior to the research commencing, I gained consent from the University of Sunderland's Research Ethics Committee. This process involved creating a Participant Consent Form as

well as a Project Information Sheet (*see* Appendix 1, Appendix 2 and Appendix 3), which contains relevant information about the aims, methods and assessment of potential harm. The research participants read these two documents and signed the consent form prior to becoming research participants. The participants are also made aware in the 'Participant Consent Form that they 'may wish, for any reason and at any time, withdraw their consent.' (BERA, 2018). Of course, it was emphasised to the participants that this was time-sensitive and that once the research was either submitted or published, the right to withdraw was effectively null. Therefore, the participants were given two months' period after their interviews to withdraw their consent. The 'Project Information Sheet' also ensures that the participants are aware of what is involved in the research and why their participation is required, which is also recommended by BERA (2018). This ensures that the consent gained is informed consent. Since I am working with young learners, I also reiterated the content of the 'Project Information Sheet' verbally, as I know from experience that many of my learners are reluctant readers.

Another ethical concern is the potential for harm, both materially and emotionally, to the research participants. Following Kavanagh and Ayers' (1998 in Walker, 2007, p.40) advice, I was careful to assess the participants for signs of distress. My choice of using semi-structured interviews had the potential to cause emotional distress to both the learners and lecturers as the topics delved into their experiences of phenomena such as failure, stress, anxiety, revisiting trauma, *etc*. Cohen *et al* (2018, p.233) writes that issues in 'sensitive research' need extra foresight and wisdom:

> *In interviewing students, they may reveal sensitive matters about themselves, their family or their teacher, and the researcher will need to decide whether and how to act on this kind of information.*

Pring (2004) argues that merely having codes of conduct, such as the one detailed above from BERA, is not sufficient to provide a safeguard against unethical research. This is not because the researchers are amoral or unethical, but because educational contexts are often unique and because 'educational situations are too complex to fall easily under this principle or that, or to be anticipated in every detail' (*ibid*, p.258). This is especially applicable to me as a novice researcher because experience is required to manage conflicting ethical priorities. Therefore, any ethical issues that arose during the research were deliberated with my supervisor and PhD programme leaders at University of Sunderland.

Husband (2020, p.3) raises an interesting point about whether ethical considerations should cover tangible and professional changes that semi-structured questioning can lead to. Often,

researchers see the interview as a process of collecting data from the participants, but the process of asking questions can lead to deeper reflection on the part of the interviewee, as every teacher aims to do with the use of questioning in their classes. Husband (*ibid*, p.7) argues, researchers should acknowledge that they 'cannot simply extract information without acknowledging that they may elicit deeper responses from participants.' What if, because of such reflection, the participants decide to make life-altering changes, such as deciding that they no longer wish to teach in the FE sector? The participant surely did not consent to this at the onset of the research! I took this into consideration by mentioning to the participants that profound and career/life-changing insights can often result from interviews, and should they need to talk to someone, counselling support is available from the College.

At every stage of the research, I have sought to cultivate the following moral virtues that researchers ought to possess and enhance through reflection and consultation with other researchers who are more experienced:

> *[The] courage to proceed when the research is tough or unpopular; honesty when consequences of telling the truth are uncomfortable; concern for the weeping of those who are being researched and who, if treated insensitively, might suffer harm; modesty about the merits of the research and its conclusion; humility in the face if justified criticism and the readiness to take such criticism seriously* (Pring, 2004, p.258).

4.7 Conclusion

Like the clinical scientist encountered at the beginning of the previous chapter, who stripped the notion of romance to the cold, hard logic of scientism; positivist approaches to methods can also lead to a barren understanding of humanistic phenomena. Such an understanding is often rooted in the uncritical acceptance of evolutionary biology. It is worth pondering that human beings are capable of great aesthetic achievements, be it in poetry, or fine art or literature. Whilst millions of poems have been writing by furlong lovers, who express some of the most inner-most desires and passion; and indeed, speak to the human condition; very few, if any, poems or great literature reflect the sort of romance that she is advocating for. It is this concern for the humanistic experiences that propelled me to adapt the methods mentioned in this chapter. Furthermore, this chapter also provided a critical reflection on my chosen data collection methods, which were not only justified but also subjected to critiques. The next chapter explores how the data gathered from these methods are analysed.

Chapter 5

Approaching Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction to the messy world of qualitative data analysis

In contrast to a positivist epistemology that demands certainty and seeks to produce outcomes that are intended to predict and control educational outcomes, my findings follow the conventions and protocols of qualitative approaches that are grounded in human experiences. Indeed, the artificial certainty and putative clarity of quantitative data analysis, which often follows the empirical logic of quantifying all data, gives way to analysis that is a 'messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and a fascinating process' (Marshall and Rossman, 2011, p.207 in Denscombe, 2017, p.323). Check and Schutt (2012) envision qualitative data analysis as an art form instead of a rigid science. The idea that data analysis is a creative form of expression is further reinforced by Miller and Crabtree's (1999, p.138-139 quoted in *ibid*, p.323) explicit comparison between interpretation and dance:

> *Interpretation is a complex and dynamic craft, with as much creative artistry as technical exactitude, and it requires an abundance of patient plodding, fortitude, and discipline. There are many changing rhythms; multiple steps; moments of jubilation, revelation, and exasperation... Two dancers are the interpreters and the texts.*

Denscombe (*ibid*) notes that this complexity can be attributed to the very nature of the data we are gathering, which is not always amenable to being presented in a simplified fashion as is the case with quantitative data. After all, qualitative researchers are less concerned with how many times an event has occurred and are more interested in the meanings behind the event. Indeed, qualitative researchers often gather an extraordinary amount of data, and because this data cannot be shared in its raw form, the researcher must find a suitable means of extracting meaning. When deciding what data analysis approach to adopt, the qualitative researcher is faced with a plethora of options, with some being more suitable for their research questions than others. Reinforcing this point, Thorne (2000, quoted in Kiger and Varpio, 2020, p.1) notes that data analysis is 'the most complex and mysterious of all of the phases of a qualitative project, and the one that receives the least thoughtful discussion in the literature.'

This section outlines my deliberations in choosing Thematic Analysis (TA) over alternative approaches. At this stage, it is worth emphasising that a single, correct way to analyse data does not exist. As Patton (2002, p.432 quoted in Check and Schutt, 2012, p.550) states:

> *Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe. Direction can and will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when—and if—arrived at.*

5.2 Why not do Content Analysis or Grounded Theory?

Prior to drawing up Thematic Analysis, I considered Content Analysis and Grounded Theory, but both were eventually rejected after careful consideration.

Regarding Content Analysis, whilst its key appeal may be that it follows a 'logically and relatively straightforward procedure' (Denscombe, 2017), I find the approach's key concern with quantifying research data unsuitable. The quantifying logic reflects its intellectual heritage, founded upon a positivistic paradigm (Graneheim *et al*, 2017). I am, however, concerned with the lived experiences of participants and reducing the complexity of their experiences to the number of occurrences does much to conceal the richness and vitality of such experiences. Indeed, Bryman (2012, p.350) states that 'it is difficult to ascertain the answers to 'why' questions through content analysis.' Moreover, Content Analysis requires that the researcher has a 'clear idea of the kinds of categories, issues and ideas that he or she is concerned with and how these might appear in the text' (*ibid*, p.313). This seems to me an unwise thing to do for my research as it would mean that I already know what categories will be present in my data, and this is not the case.

My research is tethered to the inductive approach, where the researcher 'moves from the data to a theoretical understanding – from the concrete and specific to the abstract and general' (Graneheim *et al*, 2017, p. 30). The inductive approach allows for the data to speak for itself more than the deductive approach, where the researcher moves from a 'more abstract and general level to a more concrete and specific one' (*ibid*). This is because the researcher already has in mind ideas, concepts, and theories that they want to test or discover from their dataset. The dataset, therefore, becomes instrumentalised and it is not clear what should happen to the data that does not fit with our preconceived ideas.

Caution should be exercised in separating pure inductive or deductive approaches into two opposing camps. Since I have already read the literature on the research area, therefore it is

inevitable that some of the questions I ask, or indeed, what I focus on in my observations, will have their genesis in prior literature. Therefore, the division between inductive and deductive approach becomes very blurred in my research at times. This is something that is also acknowledged in by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.84), who argue that the 'researcher cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum.'

Despite its prominence in qualitative research, Grounded Theory is rejected for alternative reasons. Bryman (2012, p.567) notes its ubiquity in social sciences: 'Grounded theory has become by far the most widely used framework for analysing qualitative data.' However, despite its popularity, the approach has often been criticised. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021, p.311) claim that unfortunately many grounded theorists such as Glaser, Strauss and Corbin often treat the method 'as a mechanistic application of procedures to gather and analyse data.' This is not to imply that all proponents of Grounded Theory are unified in one camp: indeed, at research workshops and academic gatherings, internecine squabbling between rival interpretations have become proverbial legend. Moreover, Charmaz and Thornberg (*ibid*, p.311) further argue that the residue of positivistic epistemology continues to be evident in the works of many of the key theorists. Specifically, they hold that researchers can separate themselves from the research process, and assume the existence of an external world, which can be understood and discovered through careful observation (*ibid*, p.311). As I have argued previously, these are some of the positions with which I explicitly disagree (refer to section 3.2).

Another factor related to why I find Grounded Theory unsuitable is that many of their proponents argue for a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) view of the researcher, who should enter the research setting 'without any preconceived theory, that dictates prior to the research "relevancies" in concepts and hypothesis' (Coe, 2017, p.109). As already discussed above, multiple theories and theorists informed the data I collected; it is no longer possible to put myself in such a state of ignorance that some strain of Grounded Theory demand. Bryman (2012, p.617) reinforces my point:

> *Social researchers are typically sensitive to the conceptual armoury of their disciplines, and it seems unlikely that this awareness can be put aside. Indeed, nowadays it is rarely accepted that theory-neutral observation is feasible.*

5.3 Thematic Analysis - what is it and why do it?

Regarding Thematic Analysis, Bryman (2012, p.579) asserts that 'although qualitative researchers often claim to have employed thematic analysis, it is not an identifiable approach.' Thankfully, he offers us some suggestions to solve this conundrum: firstly, thematic analysis does not have an 'identifiable heritage' (*ibid*) which might account for its conceptual vagueness and non-description and secondly, other qualitative approaches such as grounded theory, content analysis, and narrative analysis also contain the search for themes (*ibid*), and therefore, undermining its uniqueness. However, with the publication of more recent literature on Thematic Analysis, especially by Clarke and Braun (2022) and Nowell *et al* (2017), we can no longer substantiate Bryman's (2012, p.581) critique that 'thematic analysis lacks a clearly specified series of procedures, in spite of its prominence as a means of conducting qualitative data analysis.'

Clarke and Braun (2012, p.57), the most seminal proponents of Thematic Analysis, argue that the method allows for 'systematically identifying, organising, and offering insights into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set.' Which in turn allows the researcher to 'see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences' (*ibid*). Therefore, Thematic Analysis allows the identification of what is commonly talked about or written about across a dataset and making sense of these commonalities (*ibid*). Of course, not all commonalities between the dataset are relevant or interesting, and caution needs to be exercised in pursuing only those commonalities that illuminate or explain aspects of our research questions.

Despite it being branded very poorly (Bruan and Clarke, 2006), and 'poorly demarcated and poorly understood' (Byrne, 2021, p. 1321), Thematic Analysis is my chosen data analysis approach for the following reasons. Firstly, not only is it methodologically agnostic, as it can 'be used widely across a range of epistemologies and research questions' (Nowell *et al*, 2017, p.2) but it can also be used with a range of methods. This is crucial for me as I am using semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. It is, therefore, an advantage to me that Thematic Analysis can accommodate all of these, as it will allow coherence in the analysis of the divergent dataset. Secondly, it is also considered by some (Braun and Clarke, 2006 and Nowell *et al*, *ibid*) to be the foundational method of data analysis for qualitative approaches. Therefore, as a novice researcher it is in my interest to master Thematic Analysis at the beginning of my research career, as it will be no doubt be used by myself in future research. Lastly, Thematic Analysis allows for the voice, and therefore, the lived experiences of the participants to surface. That is what my research seeks to elicit. It should be noted again

that this does not mean that the themes and meaning automatically emerge, rather it is an active process where the researcher plays an interpretive role (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Due to Thematic Analysis being intricately intwined with the idea of themes, it is helpful to define what we mean by themes. DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000, p.362 in Nowell *et al*, 2017, p.8) offer the following definition of a theme:

> *A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole.*

Themes can be further subdivided into semantic themes (also referred to as manifest) when addressing more explicit surface meanings within the data set, or latent themes, which are concerned with the underlying meaning that is hidden deeper than the former (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Although I find such bifurcation conceptually useful, I am concerned that researchers might fall into the trap that is often implied by such divisions: that either a latent or manifest search for meaning must be adopted. It is more fruitful to look at the dataset for meaning from both perspectives, so that the apparent may be illustrated by the hidden. As mentioned in the previous chapter, for example, Document Analysis is only very enlightening when we probe behind the surface in search of the deeper illuminative concerns, hopes, and longings of the text producers.

5.4 How to do Thematic Analysis

Since the seminal article published in 2006, Braun and Clarke have refined their understanding of Thematic Analysis many times over (see for example 2019 article published by the same authors). What has gained traction, however, is their six-step process to doing Thematic Analysis (Bryne, 2021 and Nowell *et al*, 2017). Here I outline the six-steps as it relates to my dataset. Whilst these steps are both logical and sequential, the researcher cannot go through these steps in linear fashion. Rather, 'the analysis is recursive and iterative, requiring the researcher to move back and forth through the phases as necessary' (Byrne, *ibid*, p. 1398).

5.4.1 Phase one: Familiarising myself with the data.

In this phase, the aim is to immerse myself with the entire breadth and depth of the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This will involve repeated and active reading of the data with the goal of searching for initial meanings and patterns. Braun and Clarke (2022, p.43) define

immersion as ‘deep engagement to identify the rich diversity of meaning, particularly interesting or intriguing elements...’ Braun and Clarke (*ibid*, p.43) further acknowledge that an important aspect of familiarisation involves ‘critical engagement and asking about the content of your dataset.’

It is at this stage that I start writing initial ideas for codes that will be refined in subsequent stages. This phase is a time-consuming task and requires immense focus. Before transcribing the interviews, I listen to them twice to heighten my overall familiarity with the dataset. Byrne (2021) states that actively listening to recordings unburdened by the task of notetaking can help to recall gestures and mannerism. All the data, including documents, observation records and interview transcripts, are uploaded to NVivo software. The consequence of the approach is that the data is collated in one convenient place, and I can easily add comments, as well as track the progress of my thoughts as they evolve.

5.4.2 Phase two: Generating initial codes

This step seeks to produce the initial codes from the data, an activity that requires continual revisits of the dataset. Generating initial codes allows the movement from ‘unstructured data to the development of ideas about what is going in the data’ (Nowell *et al*, 2017, p.6). Codes are the most ‘basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis, 1998, p.64 in Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.88). Codes help to identify any features of data that is of interest to the researcher (*ibid*). In this phase, I am organising the whole of the data into meaningful segments. I adhere to Braun and Clarke’s (*ibid*, p.89) advice to ‘work systematically through the entire data set, giving full and *equal* attention to each data item.’ This process is aided by NVivo’s tagging feature, which allows all similar codes to be easily collated. I also follow Nowell *et al*’s (*ibid*, p.6) advice that codes should have explicit boundaries and having too many codes would be counterproductive to clarity. Below is a snapshot of some of my codes in NVivo:

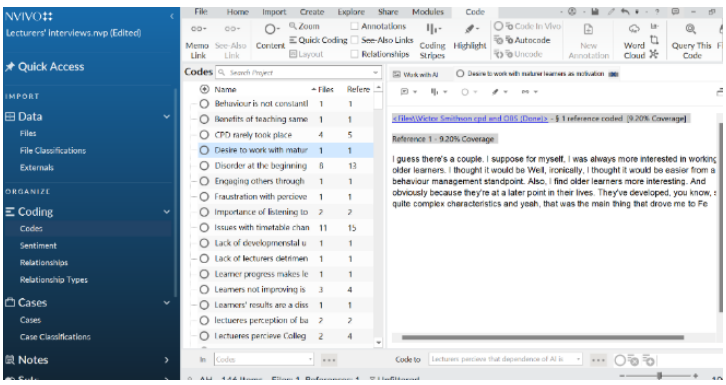


Figure 16 Examples of codes in NVivo

5.4.3 Phase three: Searching for themes

This phase begins with the coding of my entire dataset. The focus, however, changes from discrete units of data to the 'interpretation of aggregated meaning and meaningfulness across the dataset' (Byrne, *ibid*. p.1403). This means that the list of codes produced in the previous phase is considered carefully so that those that have shared meaning will be combined to create themes or sub-themes (*ibid*). Indeed, a specific code may be so significant that it gets promoted to a theme. I follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) advice that it is helpful to produce thematic maps, which connect both codes to themes, but also look at the relationships between themes. Codes that do not seem to belong to any themes will be placed under a 'miscellaneous' theme. At this stage, the themes and sub-themes are only candidates, and as the process unfolds, they will be modified, combined, refined as new insights and meanings are derived from the process.

5.4.4 Phase four: Reviewing potential themes

This phase develops from the candidate themes and sub-themes developed in the previous phase. The aim here is to pick up any inadequacies in the initial coding and themes. I ensure that some of the themes identified in the previous phase are themes that can be supported by my dataset. Indeed, some of the themes might need to be collapsed or combined. Furthermore, I employ Patton's (1990 in Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.91) dual criteria for judging the merits of themes- internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. What this means is that data 'within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes' (*ibid*). In reviewing potential themes, I ask these key questions (derived from Braun and Clarke, 2012, p.65 quoted in Byrne, 2021, p.1404):

- Is it a theme (could it be just a code)?
- If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)?
- What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?
- Is there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?
- Is the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?

At this stage, I thought it prudent to print the codes generated by NVivo and cut them into strips. Whilst CAQDAS software has the convenience of speed, especially regarding copying, pasting and cutting codes and generating themes, it does have the tendency to favour the

superficial over depth. The picture below is indicative of how I manually came up with my themes:

Figure 17 Printed NVivo codes, spread out all over my living room

5.4.5 Phase five: Defining and naming themes

This phase is about presenting a detailed analysis of the thematic framework, identifying the story that each theme tells (Nowell *et al*, 2017, p.10). Byrne (2021, p.1407) also expresses the idea that 'each theme should come together to create a lucid narrative that is consistent with the content of the dataset and informative in relation to the research question (s).' This stage also requires that I identify which data items to use as extracts when presenting the results of the analysis (*ibid*). Byrne (*ibid*) states that the 'chosen extract should provide a vivid and compelling account of the arguments being made by a respective theme.' Moreover, I subject each of the extracts to a thorough analysis, so that it is not just reporting what the participants have said. In presenting the data, I adhere to an analytical, interrogative approach, which is contextualised in relation to the available literature. Although such analysis will be in the chapter, titled 'Discussions.' Bruan and Clarke (2006, p.93) state that in naming the themes, they should be 'concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about.'

5.4.6 Phase six: Producing the report

The concern here is to 'tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit... of your analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.93). For this phase, I ensure that the themes produced are robust and supported by the data, with vivid examples to illustrate the central contentions. Byrne (*ibid*) notes that the separation between this phase and

the previous phase can be blurry. In sum, this phase is the completion and final inspection of the research output (*ibid*). It is at this stage that I also sequence the themes so that it builds on previous themes. It is essential that I re-read the texts to make sure that richness of the data is captured and avoid falling into the trap of just relating thin narratives.

5.5 Participants and sampling

Creswell (2015) reiterates that in qualitative research, the main purpose is not to generalise but rather to carry out an in-depth exploration of a recognised and central phenomenon. It, therefore, follows that we are not interested in selecting representative individuals using random sampling, nor are we interested in generalising from the sample to the population. Rather, we use purposeful sampling, where we select people, documents and observations that helps to illuminate the phenomenon in question. It is hoped that our samples will provide 'useful' information, so that we might 'learn' about the phenomenon, and give voice to the 'silenced' people (*ibid*, p.205). Cohen *et al* (2015, p. 218) define purposeful sampling as follows:

> *In purposive sampling... researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristic(s) being sought. They assemble the sample to meet their specific needs.*

Teddie and Yu (2007 in *ibid*) recognise that purposive sampling involves an inherent trade-off between greater depth compared to probability sampling, often favoured by quantitative researchers, which offers less breath to the study.

I have chosen purposive because I am concerned primarily with lived experiences of learners and lecturers engaged in GCSE re-sits, and therefore, I have specific participants in mind. Indeed, the whole research is predicated on selecting learners who are doing GCSE English re-sits and lecturers delivering that provision. I interviewed every member of our English department engaged in delivering GCSE re-sit program [N=8] twice, with the first round of interview conducted in December 2022 and second round of interviews conducted in July 2023. These sixteen interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 45 minutes. No other specific criteria were specified for lecturers and included three curriculum managers who were also lecturers. In terms of gender breakdown, there was one male lecturer and seven female lecturers. Their age-group ranged from mid-twenties to mid-sixties.

For each of the lecturers, I also observed their lessons two times over a time period between December 2022 to July 2023. The duration of each observation was 45 to 60 minutes long. Below is a table of the lecturers participating in this research:

Name of Participants (anonymised)	Background information: Number of year teaching, type of contract, position
Amelia	Amelia qualified as a teacher in Africa. She has over 30 overs of teaching experience, including as a head teacher. After many years as an hourly paid lecturer in FE, she was given a full-time permanent contract six years ago at London Metropolitan College. Amelia also works as an examiner during the summer holidays to make ends meet. She is teaching 28 hours per week.
Eman	Eman started her professional career in law but found her calling in education. She qualified as a lecturer after doing an in-service teaching qualification at London Metropolitan College. Until recently, her contract was hourly paid lecturer. She works four days per week. She has been teaching for less than four years.
Lucy	After a varied career in media, Lucy moved in to teaching to spend more time with her young sons. She is the curriculum manager for English, with 8 hours of teaching responsibilities. She has been teaching for over 15 years and worked as an examiner with AQA. Her contract is permanent and full-time.
David	David achieved a PhD in Philosophy before qualifying as a lecturer at London Metropolitan College. He started out as an hourly paid lecturer and is now a curriculum manager. He teachers for 8 hours per week. His contract is permanent and full-time.
Hoa	Hoa is a curriculum manager with substantial experience in industry. She teaches for 8 hours per week. Her contract is full-time and permanent. She has joined the College in 2022.
Gabriella	Gabriella has recently qualified as a lecturer from university. She is hourly paid lecturer, working over 24 hours per week. She does not get paid during the College holidays. Before teaching, she had a long career in local government. She has two years' experience of teaching.
Shireen	Shireen has 6 years of lecturing experience. She works for four days per week, although she would like to work full time. She teaches 16

	hours per week. She had to take on other employment to make ends meet as four days of work is not enough. She aspires to do a MA in Education and Social Justice. Her contract is part-time and permanent.
Victor	Prior to teaching, Victor had a varied working life. He worked as a music journalist, in call centres and Christmas card factories. He teaches 23 hours per week and has a full-time permanent contract with the College. He has also done a MA in Education recently. He has over 8 years of teaching experience.

Figure 18 Lecturers who participated in my research

Regarding the learners, thirteen participants were selected according to whether they were re-sitting GCSE English for the third time, and if they were aged eighteen or over. Although they are doing different vocational courses, they are all studying a Level 3 course. The table below summarises the information for learners taking part in my research:

Name of Participants (anonymised)	Participants' background information
James	White, English background. Studying Level 3 Public Services. Has additional learning needs. Doing the GCSE re-sit for the third time. Aged 19. Also doing GCSE maths. Not eligible for FSM. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.
Habeeb	African background. Speaks English as a first language. Studying ICT Level 3. Doing GCSE English for the third time. Passed GCSE maths. 19 years old. Eligible for FSM. Has no additional learning needs. Applied for University. All prior schooling in the UK. Lives outside the Borough where College is located.
Dave	Filipino background. Studying Level 3 Applied Science. Has no additional learning needs. Doing GCSE for the third time. Eligible for FSM. Aged 18. Also doing GCSE maths. Did substantial part of his secondary education in Philippines. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.
Amina	African background. Doing GCSE English re-sit for the third time. Studying Level 3 Applied Science. Aged 18. Also doing GCSE maths re-sit. Eligible for FSM. Did most of her secondary and primary education in Kenya. Has no additional support needs. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.

MJ	African background. Studying Level 3 Sports. Aged 19. Has attempted GCSE English three times previously. Also doing Functional Skills Maths. Eligible for FSM. Has some additional learning support needs. Did his prior schooling in the UK. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.
Olga	Ukrainian background. Studying Level 3 Business. Aged 19. Passed maths GCSE. Did GCSE English three times previously. Has no additional learning needs. Most of prior schooling in Ukraine. Eligible for FSM. No additional learning needs. Also did Functional Schools English previously. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.
Abdullah	Kuwaiti background. Has refugee status. Aged 19. Studying Level 3 Applied Science. Has done GCSE three times previously. Also has passed Level 1 Functional Skills English. Has no additional learning needs. Considers himself to have ESOL needs. Eligible for FSM. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.
Adriana	Brazilian background. Lives alone. Aged 19. Speaks English as a second language. Studying Level 3 Business Studies. Attempted GCSE English three times. Has already passed Level 1 Functional Skills English. Has additional learning needs. Not eligible for FSM. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.
Dina	Iraqi background. Has refugee status. Did much of her secondary schooling in Iraq. Aged 18. Has resat GCSE English three times. Studying Level 3 in Travel and Tourism. No additional educational needs. Considers herself to have ESOL needs. Eligible for FSM. Lives in the same Borough as the College.
Jade	Caribbean background. Studying Travel and Tourism at Level 3. Resat GCSE English three times previously. Aged 19. Passed GCSE maths. No additional learning needs. Not eligible for FSM. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.
Marianna	Romanian background. Studying Creative Media at Level 3. Has resat GCSE English three times previously. Passed GCSE English Literature and GCSE maths. Has no additional learning needs. Aged 18. Eligible for FSM. Lives outside the Borough where College is located.
Chandani	Mixed (Sri Lankan and Brazilian) background. Has additional learning needs. Also doing GCSE maths. Has done GCSE English four times

	previously. Eligible for FSM. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located.
Kofi	Ethiopian background. Has refugee status. Considers himself to have ESOL needs. Has done the GCSE three times previously. Eligible for FSM. Has done some previous schooling in Ethiopia. Lives outside the Borough where the College is located. Has no additional learning needs.

Figure 19 Learners who took part in this research

For documents, I have already spoken about the range of data I used in the section 4.4.4. above and provided a justification for such expansive sampling as well. Below is an outline of the specific documents I consulted for this research:

Nature of document (s)	More detail on the document (s)
Policies	I analysed publicly available policy documents from London Metropolitan College. These included: *Attendance Policy, Student Engagement Policy, Student Learning and Behaviour Policy.*
OFSTED Reports	Two publicly available, full OFSTED inspection reports, as well as two follow-up reports were analysed for this research.
Learners' Work	I asked lecturers to provide ten books from their learners, chosen at random from learners who had done their GCSE at least twice before. The lecturers gained consent from the learners for me to analyse their books. A total of 80 books were analysed for this research.
Scheme of Work	The scheme of work for GCSE English, which sequences areas of learning for the year, was analysed for this research. This document is produced by the curriculum manager with input from lecturers.
Lesson Resources	I asked every member of my department to kindly provide ten examples of lesson resources that they have produced. They were free to choose the resource without any qualifications. Most of the lecturers gave PowerPoints, as well handouts that they produced for their learners. In total, I had access to approximately 80 lesson resources that I analysed for this research.

Figure 20 Documents analysed for this research

Data saturation played an important role in selecting thirteen learner participants for this research. After interviewing all the participants, I felt that no new insights were forthcoming that illustrated or illuminated my research questions. In limiting my participants to only thirteen, I followed the advice provided by Braun and Clark (2013, p. 56):

> *What you want to make sure is that you have enough data to tell a rich story, but not too much that it precludes deep, complex engagement with the data in the time available.*

5.6 Conclusion

The search for meaning in a data set is never simple, often difficult, but if done correctly, hugely rewarding. This chapter justified my use of Thematic Analysis, as well as exploring the intricacies of doing it successfully. The chapter also considered the particularities of my participants, as well as what documents were analysed in the subsequent chapters. In the next chapter, the methods and methodologies are put in practice to produce my findings. It is hoped that richness of the findings will justify the use of Thematic Analysis as my preferred data analysis method.

Chapter 6

Key Themes and Research Findings

6.1 Introduction

It may be argued that referring to 'Findings' in the above heading is ironic, given the ontological and epistemological positions outlined in Chapter 3, which firmly situate this research within the interpretivist paradigm. As such, we should be cautious in speaking of *finding* things. Findings, of course, implies that there is something ready formed that can be found in the sense that one finds lost wallets or keys. However, within the interpretivist research tradition, the researcher is active in the process of constructing knowledge. The idea of findings is somewhat wedded to the positivistic paradigm, where universal rules are there waiting to be discovered. Likewise, to speak of emerging themes is also misleading. Kiger and Varpio (2020, p.5) recognise that the process of theme identification is fundamentally 'an active and interpretive process.' Themes do not magically emerge; the researcher plays an active role in constructing them. Indeed, themes are constructed by the researcher through, 'analysing, combining, comparing... how codes relate to one another' (*ibid*, p.5). Therefore, I have avoided using emergent themes in the heading, instead opting for 'Key Themes.' Despite these reservations, and out of respect for academic conventions, I will continue with using the above title for this chapter.

At this point, it is also worth restating the key questions this research is endeavouring to answer:

- What are the learners' lived experiences of re-sitting GCSE English?
- What are the lecturers' lived experiences of teaching GCSE English re-sit course?

6.1.1 Aim of this chapter

The overarching task of this chapter is to present the research data in a systematic fashion. As such, the chapter presents the findings from research data (interviews, observations and document analysis) collected over a two-year period at my research setting. The dataset includes the following: 14 semi-structured interviews with different learners lasting an average of 40 mins; 18 semi-structured interviews with lecturers and curriculum managers, with each lasting for an average of 45 minutes; 16 lesson observations, each lasting on

average for 60 minutes, and approximately 100 documents, including work produced by learners, College policies, and class resources produced by lecturers.

My concern here is to repay the participants for sharing their insights (and time) by representing their views with sincerity and authenticity. The findings are categorised as themes; the sub-headings used below denote the specific themes extracted from the dataset. Structurally, the first half of this chapter explores the learners' lived experiences of GCSE re-sit English, whilst the second half of the chapter explores lecturers' experiences. The final section explores their shared experiences.

6.1.2 Some remarks on the themes

The cluster of themes below revolves around the notion that the learners and lecturers are somehow receiving a sub-optimal experience within the GCSE re-sit course. Whilst individually, they may illustrate some problems which might seem inconsequential, taken together, however, they indicate the presence of more debilitating issues.

For each of the themes, I indicate the sources of my findings (e.g. observations, learners' work analysis, lecturers' resources, learner interviews, or lecturer interviews). Where possible, data from multiple sources are used to provide more detailed evidence of the phenomena under discussion. Premium is placed on creating 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973), as well as allowing the participants' voices to be heard; hence, extensive, verbatim quotation is used throughout the findings. The idiosyncratic grammar of learners, many who speak English as a second language, is left uncorrected. This is to provide an authentic narrative from their perspective, as well to increase the research's trustworthiness. Lecturers' grammar is similarly left uncorrected for this reason. Quotes are used selectively, with criteria for inclusion being that they capture the complexity and richness of said phenomena. A broad range of experiences are documented, and the readers are invited to share the lived experiences of the lecturers and learners.

6.2 Learners' lived experiences of GCSE English re-sits

This section relates to the research question on learners' lived experiences of GCSE English re-sit, although it sometimes also touches upon lecturers' experiences as well, since they necessarily overlap. The findings are mapped in the diagram below (Figure 21).

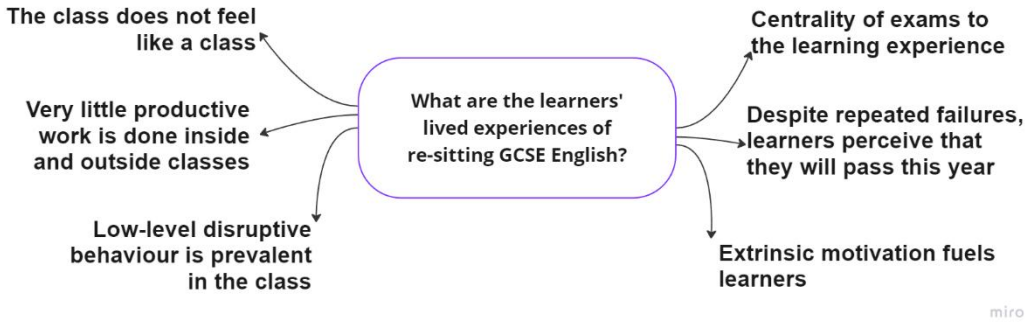


Figure 21 Thematic map of learners' experiences of re-sitting GCSE English

6.2.1 The class does not feel like "a class"

Although the concept of a class is a nebulous one, for the teacher it may be suggested that they have an intuitive understanding of what it should look like. For instance, a class normally consists of learners who have some of sort of relationship with each other, whether it is shown in the bonds of friendship or in the enmity of bullies. Most classes even have their unique dynamic, and many a lecturer will comment on how they feel a connection or antipathy towards a particular class. Yet, this research finds the traditional understanding of a class almost absent in this setting. This finding is confirmed by observations and interviews with lecturers and learners.

Drawing on my experience, the most obvious manifestation of this absence of "a class" is in the seating plan of all the classes observed. Below are few representative sketches of some of the classrooms observed, where 'X' represents where learners are seated relative to each other:

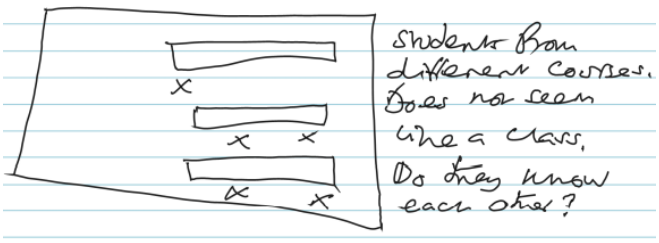


Figure 22 Where the learners are sitting next to each other.

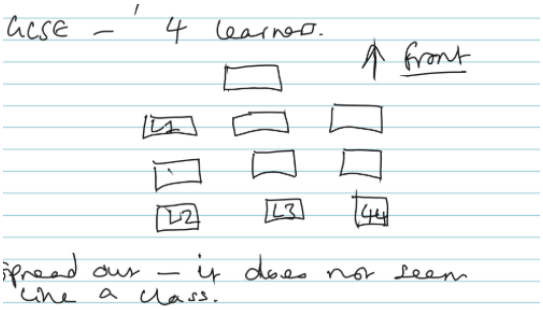


Figure 23 Drawing of where learners sit in relation each other

As evidenced from the diagrams above, the learners are seated at some distance from each other; indeed, there are no attempts made by lecturers to group them together. In fact, there is no evidence during the observations that the learners even know each other's names. Furthermore, in all the observations, there is a total absence of pair work or group work. This is especially conspicuous as the College continuously emphasises (through CPD sessions and a variety of shared resources and policies) the use of pair and group work. During the observations, I felt it is almost as if the lecturers are talking to individuals located in silos. As noted during observations, 'They are not engaging with each other – it is as if they are strangers' and after another, 'Learners do not acknowledge each other at all.'

It appears that the linear, traditional row-by-row layout of the classrooms contributes to this feeling of isolated learners. There are many possible layouts for a classroom: horseshoe shape; small clusters of islands; roundtable; paired tables, *etc*. Yet, only the traditional seating layout is observed in 100% of the classes. Below is an example of this:

Figure 24 Typical traditional layout of classroom

When enquired about this layout, the lecturers state that since they are not permanently based in one classroom, they do not feel comfortable altering the seating arrangement. More tellingly, some lecturers mention that they *prefer* this seating arrangement because they find group work too 'difficult to implement,' as it often leads to behaviour challenges: 'Once they start talking to each other, it is very difficult to regain their attention.'

The lack of 'class feeling' is something that learners repeatedly mention as well. Jade, when asked if she perceives that her English class feels "like a class," states:

> *Kind of, but not really like? Not everyone's really sociable that like, we don't have discussion discussions as a class that we're just putting our hands up speaking to the teacher. And she'll speak back to us, but it's not a group.*

This idea of "classes not feeling likes classes" is also reinforced by James:

> *It does not feel it is a class... just in terms of knowing each other and what we like and socialising. There's none of that. In fact, everyone would rather do everything in their power not to talk to people for just in case, not just in case, but what I mean to say is that that everyone has a level of, of anti-socialness where they just don't, they just don't want to socialise unless they have to.*

When prompted to think about why "classes do not feel like classes," the learners feel it is because their classmates are from different vocational backgrounds, and English is often the only time they encounter each other. Olga mentions, 'We just meet only two times a week and we just came from different departments, and we don't know each other.' In fact, because the attendance is often so low, they hardly see each other. This problem is compounded by an often-unsuitable combination of vocational feeder courses to English: frequently Level 3 Science learners find themselves in a re-sit class with Level 1 Sports learners. They rarely have much to talk about. Olga, commenting on her experience of this phenomenon, says:

> *I'm just only one person from my class who goes into GCSE and I'm just sitting alone because as the boys who came they came from for example from science department and they came like a group and so they don't want to speak with me because they've got their group right and I'm just sitting alone and doing my work.*

6.2.2 Very little productive work is done inside and outside of classes

What constitutes 'productive' and what is 'little' is, of course, subjective; however, from the lesson observations and analyses of learners' books, it is striking how little of anything is done in the classes. It appears that often it is the lecturers doing much more work than the learners. An illustrative point from one observation is in Amelia's class. After writing a full

paragraph on the board, and noticing that learners are not copying or even paying attention to what she is writing, says: 'What's the matter with you guys? My hand is hurting here!' implying a sense of concern that her work is going to waste. There are multiple other references to lecturers explaining, or demonstrating, or live marking work, whilst the learners assume a passive role.

In many instances, the lecturer takes on the role of a learner by reading to the whole class because the learners refuse to read out aloud when prompted. The meagreness of the learners' work produced in class is best demonstrated when their notebooks are examined. Of all the exercise books analysed, none is filled in to the end; indeed, few go beyond 50% completion. This has been observed as a source of concern/and humour for the lecturers, who opine that they could just take one new book and share it with everyone, and that would be sufficient for the whole year. Often the books contain many examples of non-classwork related output, such as doodling and graffiti (*see* figure 25 below):

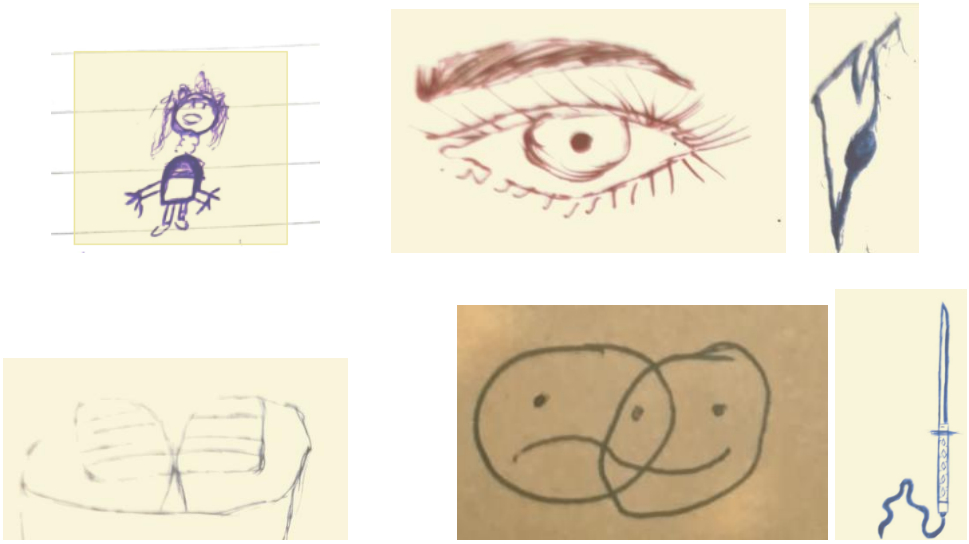
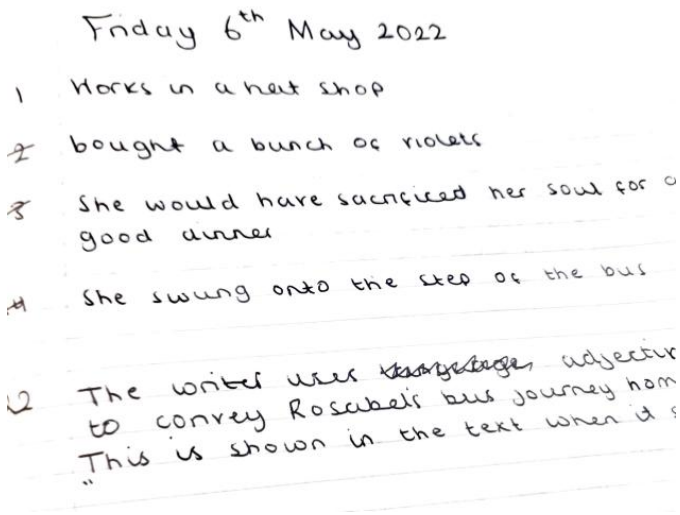


Figure 25 Series of doodles from learners' exercise books

It may be suggested that this is indicative of boredom, or even mind wandering, which is common when we are not focused on the work at hand. Of course, many people doodle when they are trying to focus on the task at hand, however, these doodles often constitute the entirety of the learners' output for some lessons.

In other places, I only find that the learner has copied the objectives of the lesson and the date and perhaps write a few sentences. In relation to the expectations of a 90 minute class, it may be suggested that the quantity and quality of the work produced is below what we would typically expect. Below are some examples of work produced in one 90- minute lesson:


Friday 6th May 2022

1 Works in a hat shop

2 bought a bunch of violets

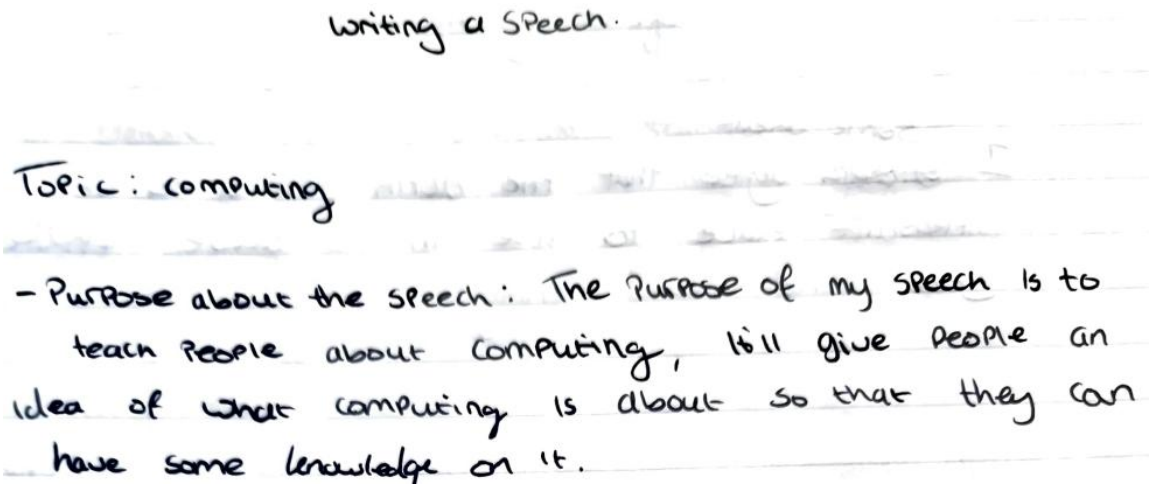
3 She would have sacrificed her soul for a good dinner

4 She swung onto the step of the bus

12 The writer uses ~~language~~ adjectiv to convey Rosabel's bus journey hom This is shown in the text when it

Figure 26 Example of the little work produced in the entire lesson

Another example of the total work produced in a class is below, taken from another learner's notebook:


Writing a Speech.

Topic: computing

- Purpose about the speech: The purpose of my speech is to teach people about computing, it'll give people an idea of what computing is about so that they can have some knowledge on it.

Figure 27 Another example of limited work completion in class

Looking more closely at the notebooks, it is apparent that there are many instances where learners' work has been limited to copying definitions or producing work that does not require challenge. Below is an example of where a 90-minute lesson consists entirely of copying definitions from the PowerPoint on display:

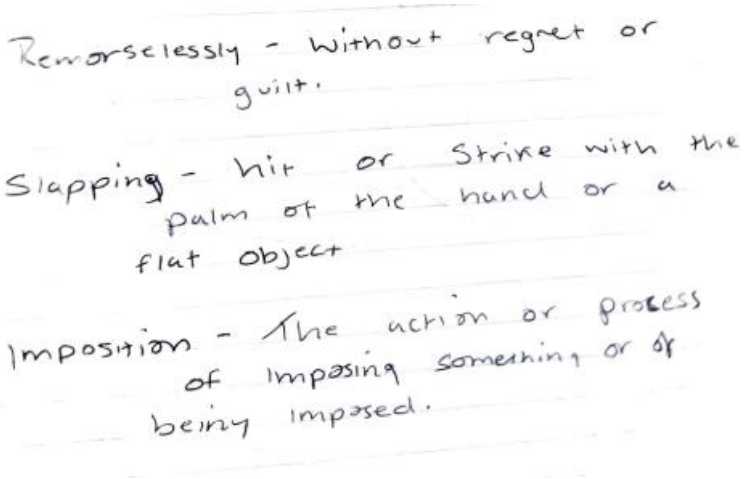


Figure 28 Example of where learner just copied from the whiteboard

This process of copying from PowerPoint often takes the form of writing examples of language techniques such as metaphors, similes, personification, *etc*. Evidence from notebooks supports the finding that no other work has been written down in such sessions apart from this task. In other cases, the learners spend the entirety of a lesson doing wordsearch. Whilst the pedagogical value of such tasks is limited, taken together, they confirm the finding that very little work of value is being done in some of the classes.

Gabriella, reflecting on the lack of work undertaken by them, seems to blame a learners' lack of work ethic for such low-level of outputs:

> *They don't want to make the effort; some of them don't want to understand, even though we go step-by-step. I would stand and model [the required steps]. 'This is what you need to do. Point. Evidence. Explain.'*

Victor confirms Gabriella's viewpoint, but is even more emphatic in arguing that the learners do not produce much work in the classes:

> *So every week I go in, it's the same thing. There is no work being produced. I am standing at the front of the classroom, essentially just it's like this ongoing monologue and they sit there and scowl at me. The energy is pretty much non-existent, and I feel like walking out.*

The impact of this low level of output is particularly acute on some lecturers, who feel like their time, abilities and energy are being wasted on learners who do not reciprocate by producing work of any quality.

On exploring the amount of work done by learners outside of the classroom, the picture is similar. The findings suggest that there is a general lack of engagement with homework and also a lack of wider reading outside of timetabled hours. From the lecturers' perspective, reading outside of the classroom is essential to success in the classroom. After all, ten out of the twelve questions on the GCSE English exam papers are based on comprehension of texts. Here, Gabriella reflects on how difficult it is to get learners to do any work outside of the classroom:

> *...it's not to say that we're not trying by telling them that they need to do these things- they need to read every day, at least an hour a day. They also need to do some additional work, you know, we keep reinforcing that in the classroom, telling them that, you know, this lesson of an hour and a half in GCSE... It's not enough, so you need to do the extra work. Very few - I can count on one hand - would actually...you know [do] additional work to get them to that level.*

Gabriella's frustration may be deemed as being palpable here, and she becomes quite agitated. She can't help but compare this with the fact that she personally enjoyed reading when growing up:

> *We take a lot of things granted. I was raised with books: lots, lots of books. I remember waking up in my room, there was a bookshelf. Yes, there was a bookshelf, and there were lots of books on that bookshelf.*

Shireen agrees that her learners simply do not do much reading outside of the classroom:

> *I think potentially because they're not exposed to lots of reading materials outside of the classroom... but outside of that, they don't do any substantial reading of their own, so they don't build up, for example, their vocabulary...*

Interviews with the learners confirm that they do not enjoy or are motivated to read outside of the classroom. Instead, they state that they enjoy browsing social media or watching videos online more than reading. When they do read books, it is often from the romantic genre or comic books. Most learners further confirm that they do not do much homework. Tareq, for example, states, 'I kind of find it a redundant thing to have to do.' Although some others do concede that doing homework is important. Olga, for example, asks: 'How are you going to learn something for 1 hour and 30 minutes without homework?' Implying that contact hours alone are not enough to progress in English. When reflecting on their limited engagement with extracurricular academic activities, learners frequently attribute this behaviour to the absence of immediate and tangible consequences. Abdul sums this up here where he contrasts his experience of school with college:

I don't think there are consequences. It is quite different from how it was in secondary. Yeah, if you were in secondary, and you hadn't done homework, you'd stay behind during your break or you do it after the lesson, but in college it is more like freedom to students. Even if you don't do it, nothing will happen.

6.2.3 Low-level disruptive behaviour is prevalent in the lessons

While high-level disruptive behaviour often garners attention, particularly in the media, low-level disruptive behaviour is both more pervasive and more detrimental. This is because managers are more likely intervene if a learner were, for example, to throw a chair at a lecturer than they are if a learner refuses to remove their Airpods. What is striking in the observations is how widespread low-level disruptive behaviour is in the GCSE classrooms. These disruptive behaviours include engaging in off-task activities such as talking while the lecturer is explaining a topic, accessing social media on mobile phones, and failing to come prepared with basic materials, such as pens. Fortunately, no instances of high-level disruption occurred during the observations. In addition to observations, this analysis also draws on evidence from interviews with lecturers and analysis of learners' work.

Classroom observations reveal three predominant types of disruptive behaviour. There are many instances of learners not being prepared to learn, with fieldnotes including comments such as: 'Two learners do not have pens with them' or 'Only one learner has brought their book.' Primarily, learners often remain idle and only mention their lack of required stationery when asked why they are not engaging in the task. All lecturers maintain a stock of pens to 'lend' to the learners, although these pens are rarely returned.

In a number of examples, the use of technology proves a hindrance to learning for many of the learners. In all the observed lessons, many learners are seen ignoring the lesson content and focusing on their phones. Upon closer inspection, many are engaged in social media, some are playing games, and others are watching videos while wearing headphones. Although the use of mobile phones is challenged at the start of each session, as the lesson progresses, lecturers appear to accept it as an inevitable occurrence. One memorable challenge of phone use by a lecturer sticks out:

Amelia: *What are you doing on your phone?*
Learner: *I am writing a letter to dump my boyfriend.*
Amelia: *No one writes letters to dump anyone these days.*

The discussion then shifts to the etiquettes of 'dumping' someone in the age of technology. The lesson never regains focus after that as learners find this topic more interesting than reading an extract about mountain climbing. Attempts at challenging the use of mobiles phones often leads to hostile behaviour from the learners. In one observation, Eman asks a learner to put her phone away. The learner reacts to this by shouting that it is 'discrimination' and walks out of the classroom. While some learners use their phones covertly, such as keeping them on their laps, others are much bolder, even showing lecturers the latest memes they are enjoying. Many of the lecturers find this exasperating. Gabriella is particularly incensed with the constant use of mobile phones in her lessons:

> *Their closeness to social media and social networking [is a problem]. They're so closely entwined with-it, the relationship between them and social media has become symbiotic, so that even once they're in the classroom in the middle of the class, they're still messaging and receiving messages.*

Learners are not restricting the use of mobile phones to social media, however. After Christmas 2023, many of the learners can be observed using AI to do their work for them. This has become so common that every lecturer raises this issue as an example of disruptive behaviour. Shireen is concerned about the rise of AI in her classroom, and has this to say about it:

> *One part of me feels that with the progression of AI...they [learners] are just adapting [and they] don't really know how to use it. And ultimately, that thought processes is then lost that, that, that learning where you actually go through the struggle of thinking: how do I answer this question? That's just gone. And ultimately, for beyond the GCSE, they lose that ability to become critical thinkers as well.*

The concern for Shireen and other lecturers is not just that learners are using AI as a substitute for thinking. They also express apprehension about marking any work from learners, as they are unsure whether the learners have produced it themselves. In many observations, learners are witnessed copying work from AI sources and asking for feedback from lecturers on that work. The image below is an example of a response that a learner copied from AI source (Figure 29). The lecturer was able to establish this because the learner did not know the meaning of much of the more complex language used, such as: 'vivid' or 'tranquillity', 'convey' or 'exhilaration.' When confronted with the evidence, the learner finally admits to using AI to produce this work.

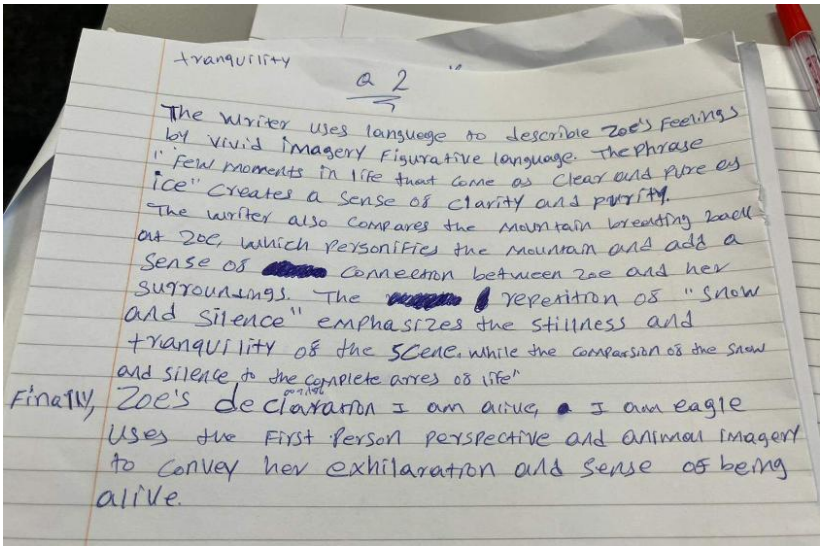


Figure 29 Example of AI used to produce classwork

Indeed, it appears that many lecturers' egos are more offended by the deception than by the actual use of AI. They think learners are taking them for fools.

The most prevalent form of disruption, however, is learners not following legitimate instructions from lecturers. Repeatedly, field notes indicate these instances, such as 'Learners ignoring what the lecturer is asking them to do,' Learners continuing to talk despite being asked to quieten down,' or also, 'Learners refusing to sit where they have been instructed.' Many typical exchanges go as follows:

> **Eman:** *Can you suggest a better title for this article?* [Question aimed at a specific learner]
>
> **Learner 1:** *No!*
>
> **Eman:** *OK, anyone else can help?*
>
> [No reaction from other learners; they are either talking to someone or on their phones].

Furthermore, there are a number of examples recorded where learners' body language appears to be hostile following instructions from lecturers. Instances abound where learners roll their eyes, face away from the lecturers, or simply get up unannounced and leave the classroom.

The notion of 'emotional toil' as a result of constant challenging behaviour is something that many lecturers mention, with some referring to the anxiety and stress they feel before particular classes. Lucy, who is also a curriculum manager, speaks below of how she finds one specific class very difficult to manage:

> *Level one Construction - they were pretty frisky. I remember sometimes you couldn't really teach them. I remember one lesson they were just being so annoying. Okay…right. I had to show them their favourite music just to calm down... Sometimes you have to completely throw your lesson plan away and just do something totally different. Sometimes you'd show them a documentary and then they'd calm down.*

A number of other lecturers also speak of how they have had to lower their expectations of what is possible to cover in a lesson because of expected disruptive behaviour. In many cases, lecturers seek emotional support from their colleagues before particularly difficult classes. Often, metaphorical language of going to the front line, or warfare, is used. Gabriella summarises her daily "battle" with low-level behaviour that is echoed by many of other lecturers in the study:

> *But it's just, you know, it was, it was quite difficult, because I was just managing a lot of the time, I was doing behaviour management, instead of being able to get on with the actual task at hand [which is teaching].*

Victor also reflects on similar experiences to those of Gabriella. He is visibly anxious when describing one of his dreaded classes:

> *So, one of my classes- for a number of weeks, I've been having a lot of problems getting them focused, keep them on task. And there's often quite a lot of low-level disruption. And, at the worst moments, a lot of hostility and angry confrontation, at the slightest hint of me, you know, just giving them basic reminders about conduct, like for example, not charging their phone in my classroom.*

6.2.4 Centrality of exams to the learning experience

Since the pivotal role of the two terminal, externally assessed summative exams in determining whether learners achieve the essential GCSE pass, it is unsurprising that these exams feature prominently in lecturers' planning considerations. What is surprising, however, is that exam concerns are the central organising principle for most learners' experience of GCSE English, even from the start of the academic year in September. This theme is strongly evidenced in all observations, the majority of learners' work, and a substantial portion of the lesson resource materials produced by lecturers. Additionally, this idea is prominently featured in interviews with both learners and lecturers.

Indeed, in a PowerPoint presentation for learners' very first lesson, titled 'Welcome to GCSE English,' the following slide is presented:

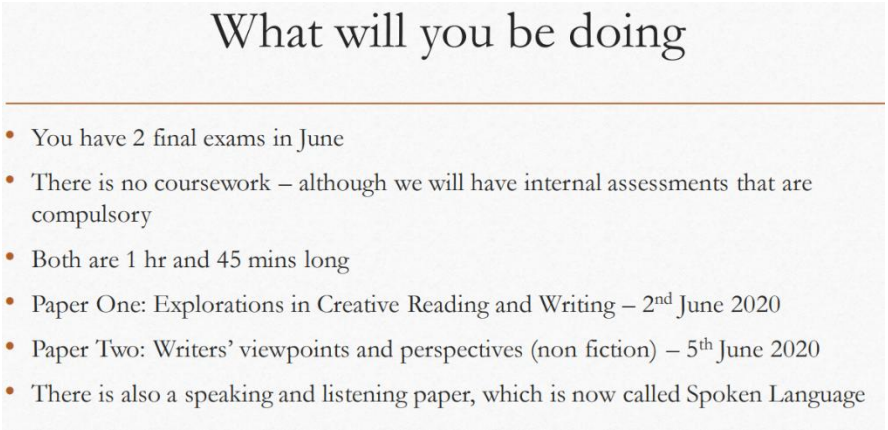


Figure 30 PowerPoint slide from GCSE induction lesson

The figure above is a departmentally produced resource, which is drawn upon by all the lecturers as part of their induction to GCSE English. The entire orientation of the course appears to be geared towards the exams which, given that the learners have failed the exam just months previously, perhaps requires rethinking. The message may be positioned to mean: This course is designed to help you pass the exams, not necessarily to acquire new skills or knowledge, let alone to study English as a subject for its own sake. This slide is followed by a series of other slides on how to pass the exams, including references to grade boundaries.

What is notable in the second slide is the question, 'How many of you missed out questions in the exam?' Whilst the aim of this question is apparently to underscore the need to answer all questions, especially ensuring that 'you don't miss out the high mark questions – 4 and 5' - the unintended impact of this focus might be that the learners become preoccupied with preparing for the exam, which could be at the expense of truly engaging with the process of learning.

Such focus on exams is evident in almost every lecturer's resource analysed. For most of resources, the link between exam questions and the content of the lesson is very prominent:

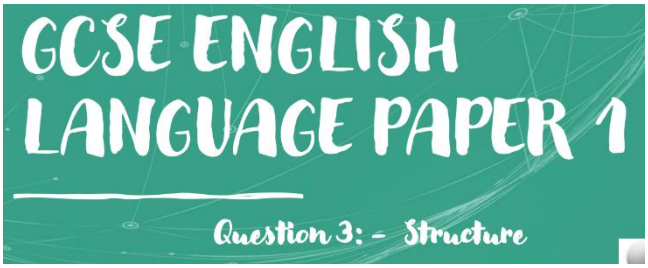


Figure 31 Title of a GCSE lesson where it is planned around an exam question

In fact, this entire lesson resource (Figure 31) is devoted to explaining how to approach the question on structure in the exam, without exploring how learners could, for example, structure their own story to entice the reader. This utilitarian approach to breaking down the English curriculum into a series of discrete questions is also reflected in the slide below, where a series of disjointed words and concepts linked to the notion of structure is presented:

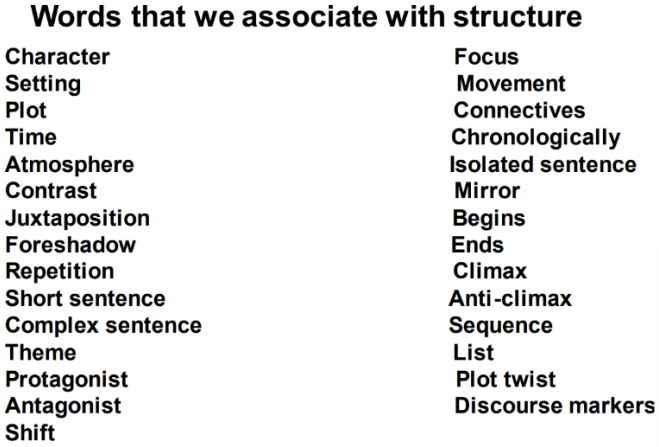


Figure 32 List of words linked to one exam question

It is not immediately clear what the learners would be able to do with such dense list of information. It may be argued that providing such a mass of information is often counterproductive since the learners will simply become overwhelmed. In many observations, learners exclaim that they would never be able to remember these techniques, let alone apply them.

Preoccupation with exam questions is also evident in the tasks that the learners complete in lessons. The slide below is asking the learners to answer an exam style question in the lesson. Not only is there explicit mention of which exam paper this question belongs to, but also how many marks this question attracts. Again, it is worth mentioning that this resource is used during the first term of the academic year and not towards the end, when we would normally expect the focus to be more on exams.

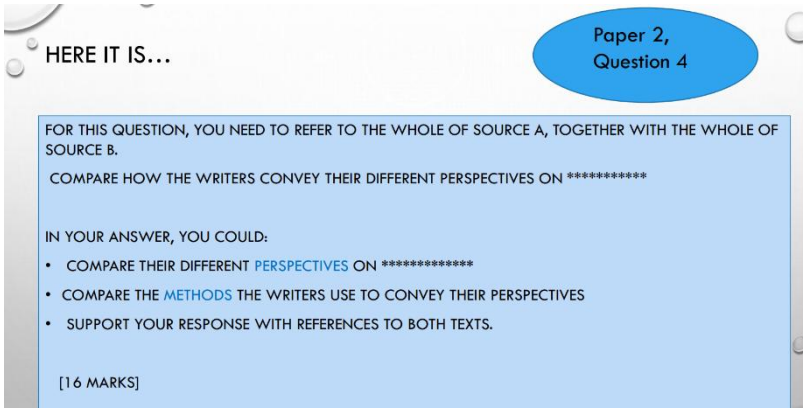


Figure 33 Another example of a lesson planned around GCSE exam question

Excessive focus on exams is also evidenced in learners' work. Often page after page contains half-attempted questions from previous exam papers. In the example below, the learner is attempting to answer question 2 (on language techniques) without much success:

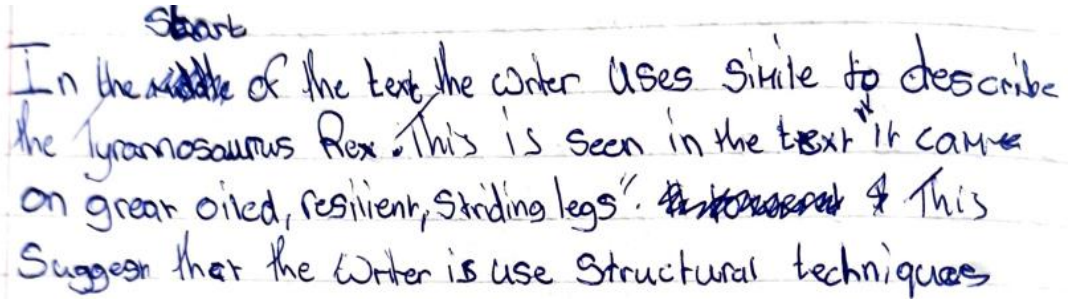


Figure 34 Example of limited work done in a lesson

Indeed, it may be seen as surprising that almost all attempts at past exam questions leads to very little work of low quality. Below is another learner attempting a past exam question but only being able to respond in a manner that would not earn him many marks.

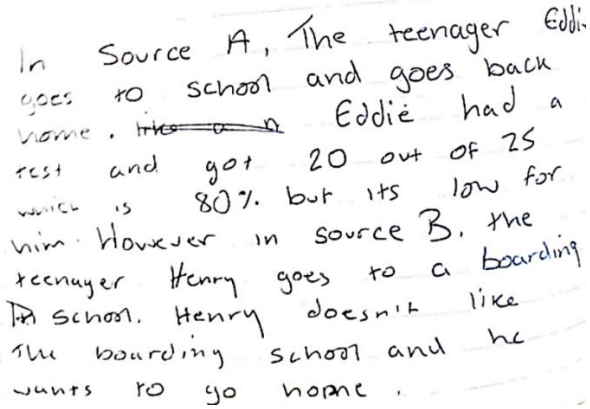


Figure 35 Another example of limited work done in class

During all lesson observations, excessive focus on exams is very prominent. For example, during a visit to Eman's lesson the following exchange takes place:

> **Eman:** *Remember we were doing question 5 last week. What do we need for question 5?*
>
> **Learner 1:** *We need to use language and structure features. Makes your stories sophisticated.*
>
> **Eman:** *Why?*
>
> **Learner 1:** (No response).
>
> **Eman:** (Answers her own question) *It makes it more sophisticated. What is the examiner looking for? What else is on the mark scheme?*

In other observations, frequent remarks from the lecturers, such as 'I won't be there in the exam to help you' can be heard. Other lecturers back up each instruction to learners with statements like, 'This will be a big chunk of your exams' or 'This session is about getting you ready for the exams.'

In interviews with the learners, exams are frequently a point of contention. Many learners feel that excessive stress on exams has the effect of making them anxious. Jade is visibly annoyed when she states:

> *I feel like it's really stressful. Because when you have, when you have the mocks and assessments going on also having to do coursework for other subjects. And it's just like a lot.*

Jade here sees frequent mocks and in-class assessments as compounding her workload issues with her vocational area, which is entirely assignment-based. Mariana echoes Jade in feeling stressed about exams:

> *...like assessments and mocks, they put pressure on me. And I feel like if I don't do good and pass, and I feel like they just put you down.*

Other learners find justifications for not taking the exam elements of the course more seriously, such as mock exams. When asked if he prepares for his mocks and other in-class assessments, James states:

> *Not really, because when I know it's a mock, or if I know that it's a facsimile of the original of the actual test, it kind of just makes me feel like even if I do fail, there's not gonna be much repercussion, because it's not the real test. So it kind of loses that sense of urgency or danger, I guess. Because you know, that even if you do fail, you'll still be alright. But if you do, if it was actual exam, you know that you have to*

get this correct. Because it will, it will help you in the future. Your job application, you CVs...

This is often the real danger of focusing too much on exams in classes: the learners realise that there will be no consequences if they do not perform well. In fact, other learners ironically complain that the focus is so much on exams that they rarely have the time to learn! Adriana sums up what she feels is wrong with focusing too much on exams:

> *It makes me feel to them I am just a number to be honest... For just for the exam, I agree that the exam is really good, that you need to worry about it. But it's not everything and grades are not everything for you.*

It is noteworthy that she does not assert that exams are unimportant; rather, she emphasises that they have an appropriate time and place. What she objects to is the constant use of exams throughout the academic year.

Given the evidence that learners do not produce high-quality work when it is linked to exams, and that most learners do not find this approach particularly helpful, why do lecturers persist in planning lessons with a singular focus on exams? Lecturer, Amelia's response can throw some light on this. When asked about the focus on exams, she states:

> *...like I always say to them in the class, you see this question? Look at this question. That's exactly how you're going to see it in the exam. The only thing that is different is the extracts.*

There is an assumption here that familiarity with exam questions will mean that when the learners finally go into their exam in June, they will be prepared for it. What is missing from this line of thinking is that many of the learners have already sat the exams three or four times, so they are already familiar with the layout and content of the exams. Yet they have not passed.

6.2.5 Despite repeated failures, the learners believe that they will pass this year

A sense of optimism prevails when learners are asked to reflect on their chances of achieving a high grade this academic year. This is surprising, given that they have all failed repeatedly in the past. This theme is based on interviews with the learners. The learners are prompted to reflect on whether they feel they will pass this year. If yes, why is this year different from previous years? If they believe they will not pass, why do they think so?

Abdullah says, 'I think I'll pass this year.' When asked to elaborate, he continues:

Reason being is because I'm motivated enough to pass. I am actively learning and revising my topics that I've been given. And I know if I ask, where I need help, I'll get it.

He is also reflective about what he needs to do to pass:

Paper one is easy for me. Paper two is the one that I mostly struggle with. I think I just don't write enough details on that. Paper one, I can write as creatively as possible. But paper two, I just need to work.

This sense of ownership and positivity about their learning is evident in all the other learners as well. Mariana, for example, states 'I feel it myself. And the teacher said that you're making progress. And I can see as well.'

Many learners express the believe that they are now more prepared for the exams, whereas in the past they found them either too challenging or were too focused on other aspects of their learning. Tareq, for example, mentions that his vocational course, which he refers to as his 'main course,' interfered with GCSE exams last year.

James feels he is going to pass this year because the organisational issues he experienced last year, especially with teachers being absent or leaving for other opportunities, have been minimised:

There were very good teachers, and it's just some of them had to, some of them were transferring to other colleges or leaving. And then we ended up with six weeks without English lessons last year. Which is, which is summed up to why I failed. But then again, because I got so close, I felt like if I had just studied a bit more, or if I just have better time management.

James also speaks of how, following guidance from his lecturers, he has taken active steps to improve his time management skills, and he is now confident that he will pass this year. He has a new strategy to maximise his time in the exams:

I'm going to try and try a different way by doing first questions first. And then doing the large questions a bit later, or somewhere in between. So that I will have better time management for the questions that I constantly am not able to achieve.

Many learners can point out their academic progress in concrete terms, thus justifying why they think they will pass. Olga says that last year she could hardly tell the difference between organisational and language features, a core component of the exams, but this year she is able

to not only confidently identify these features in reading texts but can also use them in her writing.

When comparing the interviewed participants with the observed participants, there was a dichotomy in terms of the notion of optimism. Whilst majority of the interviewed learners were convinced that they would pass this year, many of the observed participants were less confident. Some learners during the observations made explicit comments such as, 'There's no point in trying; I know I will fail.'

Despite existing research suggesting that the chances of our learners passing diminishes progressively with each attempt, it is worth noting that many do pass after repeated failures as shown in Figure 3 (for example, almost 23 percent passed with high grades at London Metropolitan College in 2021). Some learners, especially those with additional learning support needs, have been observed to pass on the fourth or fifth attempt. Below [Figure 35] is an example of one such learner. His success story was shared with the whole College, and he is rightly pleased with his achievement. The frame below hangs in an English and Maths Hub, where learners can attend for one-to-one/small group support from English lecturers.

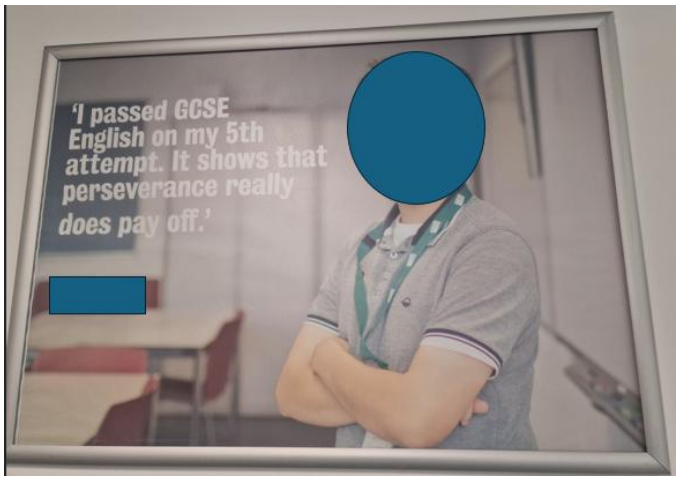


Figure 36 Poster displayed prominently urging learners to persevere with GCSE despite failures

6.2.6 Extrinsic motivation fuels learners

Despite repeated failures in achieving a high passing grade, it is surprising that the learners remain motivated. They are driven to pass their GCSE English to either progress to university or improve their communication skills for their chosen careers. This is expected since the learners are in their final year at college, and many are planning for a life beyond. None of the learners express any intrinsic motivation for studying GCSE English. The data for this theme

is primarily derived from learners' interviews, with some additional insights from lecturers' interviews. This data is also supplemented by references to large displays located throughout the College.

As briefly discussed in the previous theme, there is a discernible sense of learners taking English more seriously now compared to their previous years of study. A number of learners rationalise that previously they were too focused on getting higher grades for their vocational qualifications, which is required for their UCAS applications. This tension between vocational studies and GCSE English in terms of competing motivation is a prominent idea. Many learners speak of how many assignments and coursework they had do to pass their vocational studies, and that they hardly had any time to devote to English. In their final year, however, all participants now realise that they must take English more seriously. Abdullah, for instance, speaks of how he has matured in his final year of college, and as a result, pays more attention to his studies. When asked why he is more motivated to study and pass English this academic year, he states:

> *I would say partly because it was an age thing. I felt like I didn't need English in the past. But then, I also felt like I was more focused on other things that were outside of education, like football.*

Two learners, however, speak of the continual need for external sanctions to motivate them to study for English. These sanctions take the form of disciplinary actions or calls from their tutors to their parents/guardian. Jade, for example, mentions how she must continuously be motivated by her tutor to study English because:

> *It's just not something I'm passionate about. Like it's not something I want to come and do. It's not the teachers, or the class. It's just not often that I genuinely want to sit and be like, 'Oh yeah, English great'.*

James relates an anecdote of a fire alarm going off during an English class, and how many of the learners used that as an excuse not to return to the class afterwards. He implies that since the register had already been taken, and the learners felt comfortable enough not to return. The suggestion here is that the learners need external motivation coupled with sanctions to study English and will use any excuse to 'run away.'

Most of the learners speak of being motivated to study and achieve GCSE English with reference to two main motivators: progressing to university and achieving their career goals. The latter is often linked with improving the learners' communication skills. Of course, for some learners, one leads to the other. Amina says that what motivates her in English is her

'future goal of getting above a grade 6, which will help me get to university.' She needs that grade to study either forensic science or paediatric nursing. Joshua similarly explains that he wants to 'get the qualification for my university.' He explains, 'If I pass GCSE English, it will help me greatly because it is easy to apply to university with GCSE English.' This focus on being accepted to university is also used by Mariana to explain why she is only focused on getting a grade 4, the minimal grade required for her chosen university course in Travel and Tourism: 'I don't need advanced knowledge, I just want to pass so I can get to university. I don't really need advanced grades.' Indeed, Olga mentions how she has already achieved all distinctions for her BTEC Business, but she cannot attend her dream university because she has yet to achieve a grade 4 for her English. This reference to accessing university is something all the learners mention repeatedly.

The college explicitly uses passing GCSE English as a motivator for educational and career progression. In many of the lesson observations, lecturers mention how a pass in GCSE is essential for going to university. This reminder is particularly used when a learner is misbehaving or is otherwise unfocused. Also, there are many large displays throughout the college linking GCSE English as a passport to higher education or apprenticeship. Below is an example of one:

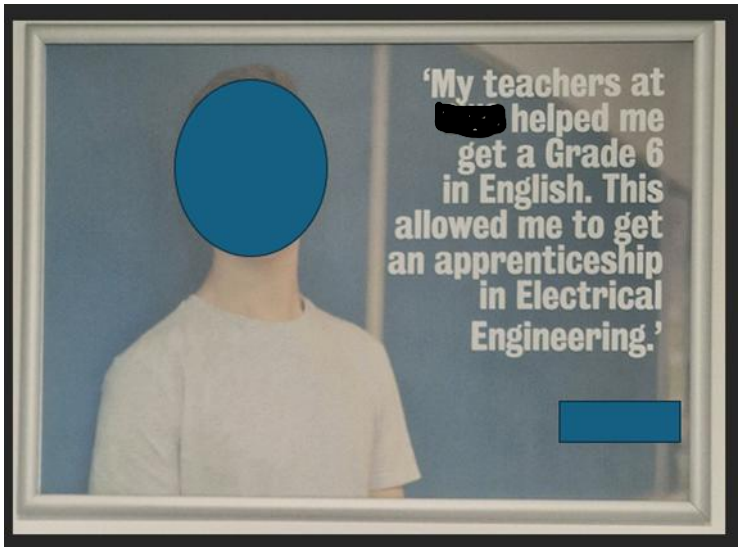


Figure 37 Publicly displayed poster illustrating that GCSE English is needed for future goals

The second great motivator links pass at GCSE English to improving learners' career prospects. Kofi makes this link between English and future career explicitly when he states:

> *You need English and maths for your future. So, when you go and apply for a job in the future, they can ask you: what qualification do you have for English and maths? if you don't have those two, it will be hard to get a job in the future.*

Others are also focused on how GCSE English will help their communication skills. Chandani mentions that when she becomes a physiotherapist, she will need excellent English because: 'You have to write reports for every single person that you see. And if you don't use good grammar and good English, it will reflect very badly.' Abdullah also mentions that effective communication skills are required, 'for networking with people.' To do so, he must 'refrain from using slangs and... use proper English words.'

For Dina, who speaks English as a second language, English is a global language. Her career aspiration is to become an airport manager, and that means working with people from all over the world. Improving her English communication skills will make her employable globally. She also mentions that improving her communication skills will enable her to support travellers, as so 'many people speak English.'

This message that GCSE English is required to succeed in the workplace is something that the College explicitly promotes. Every year, the college produces many posters and other displays to convey this message. Below is an example of one such display:

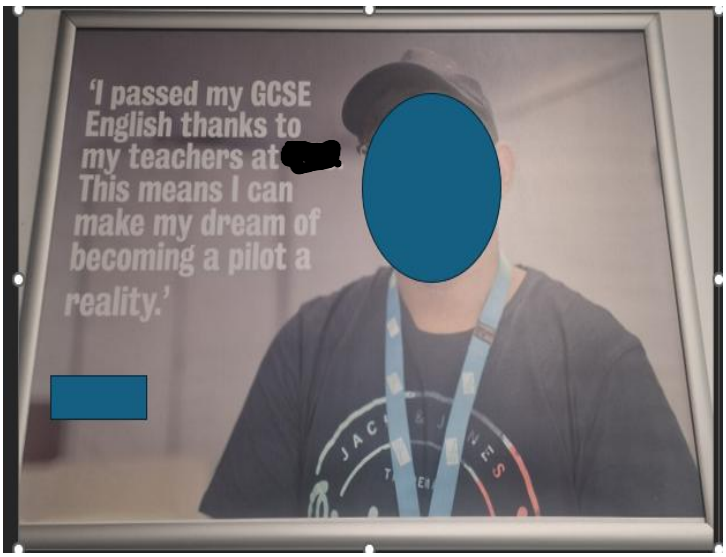


Figure 38 Another poster linking pass at GCSE with future job prospect

6.3 Lecturers' lived experiences of teaching GCSE re-sit English course

This section shifts its focus from learners' experiences to lecturers' experiences of the GCSE re-sit English course. It seeks to encapsulate the essence of their experiences through detailed semi-structured interviews, observations, and analysis of the lesson resources they produce. It needs to be reiterated that the demarcation between lecturers' and learners' lived experiences are often blurry, and they often come together to illuminate the phenomenon under research. The thematic link map below (Figure 39) is an outline of lecturers' lived experiences of teaching GCSE re-sit English courses, as identified in this research.

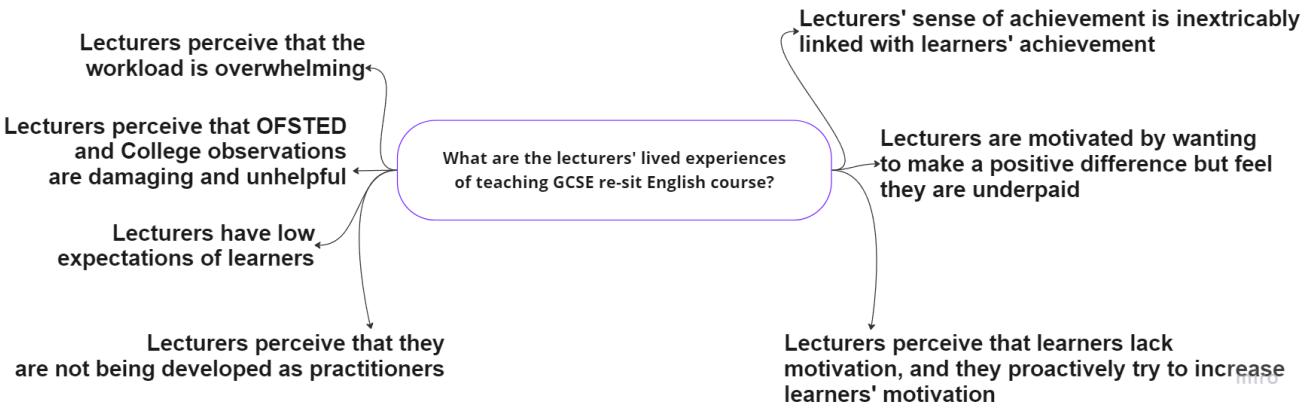


Figure 39 Thematic map of lecturers' experiences of teaching on GCSE re-sit course

6.3.1 Lecturers perceive that the workload is overwhelming

Interviews with the lecturers reveal a palpable sense that their workload is unmanageable. The heavy workload can generally be divided into two categories: administrative responsibilities, such as contacting absentee learners, and tasks directly related to classroom activities, such as planning and marking. The data used to support this theme is derived from interviews with lecturers and curriculum managers.

Gabriella, an hourly paid lecturer, is incensed that she is only compensated for 17 hours of teaching per week, yet is expected to complete all additional administrative tasks within these paid hours:

> *I do over and above. When I work at home, I constantly I feel like I'm constantly working. I'm doing a lot of tasks, sometimes outside of my remit. Most times, I'm here after five, but I don't get paid for that time.*

Gabriella mournfully reflects that she hardly has time to spend with her young children because she is always taking work home with her. Many times, she has had to sacrifice supporting her children with their schooling because of some urgent work deadline.

In fact, all the lecturers mention having to take work home because the workload is too extensive to complete within contracted hours. Eman recollects that December is particularly hard in terms of work pressure as 'there is a lot of marking and tracking.' She further mentions that 'the workload comes in waves. So, when it comes, it can come like a lot. All at one go. And you don't really know when it's coming.' Shireen echoes Eman when she states that the workload can be 'overwhelming at times.' Victor also agrees with these statements as well. He says he would 'describe [the workload] as unmanageable.'

Referring to deadlines, Amelia argues that once they come close to meeting a deadline, 'another deadline comes on top of it, but it's due for the same time period.' As a summative statement, Shireen's sentiment encapsulates the core idea that 'within the sector, there's no consideration potentially, about how many things we're actually doing.'

This lack of recognition by either the senior leadership at the College, or indeed the Government, is also a point of frustration for the lecturers. David, who is a curriculum manager, mentions that things have worsened in the last five years in terms of workload, and senior leadership have not acknowledged this fact:

> *There's no appreciation from, to be honest, from my level and upwards. There's no appreciation for how much work a class generates. So, when I came here, we used to have classes of 18 or 24 learners. That was quite normal. And now you've got classes of up to 30.*

David further suggests that senior leaders fail to recognise that lecturing at FE has become much 'more tedious. There's a lot more admin involved in it' and that it is 'much harder work than it needs to be.' Victor is so unhappy with senior leaders' lack of understanding of his heavy workload that he is considering seeking employment elsewhere:

> *In fact, that is one of the factors that motivated me to seek employment elsewhere. I think, given our workloads as they are, and given the people who are in charge of us, they are not coming from a specialist background...*

Victor contends that our managers, many of whom come from backgrounds in accounting and business, are unable to understand the impact of the heavy workload because they are primarily concerned with numbers and 'bums on seats.'

Many lecturers also speak of how the workload is having a detrimental effect on their psychological well-being. Victor, for example, describes the current heavy workload as 'incredibly anxiety inducing.' Others speak of having insomnia because of pressure to meet tight deadlines. One lecturer describes experiencing debilitating stress from work pressure, which has led her to seek medical support and take time off.

The interviews with lecturers reveal that they feel the excessive workload negatively impacts their ability to teach effective lessons. Victor, referring to his heavy workload, states, 'It has come to the point where it has impacted on the quality of my actual teaching practice, which I feel like should never be the case.' Emphasising the point of how burdensome workload can impact on teaching, Victor continues:

> *It's sometimes at the detriment of the students because we don't have so much, so much time to plan lessons that our students need, but rather we need because the bureaucracy and the red tape, we are constantly answering and giving data and filling up unnecessary data I suppose.*

This issue is particularly aggravating for the lecturers as they see teaching great lessons as their primary responsibility. Not being able to plan for effective lessons is compounded by the fact that many lecturers are teaching up to 24 hours per week, and often have back-to-back lessons. Consequently, they resent having any planning time taken over by administrative tasks which they perceive to be of low value, or 'Competing with my focus, which should be on teaching' as Gabriella puts it. Even David, who is a curriculum manager, agrees: 'What the teacher should be doing is they should really just be thinking about their lessons.'

Indeed, when asked why the workload is so heavy, many lecturers point out that they have to cover numerous lessons due to a lack of staff. This often becomes a compounding problem, as many lecturers leave when they are required to cover excessive lessons, further exacerbating the issue. The time between teaching hours is often the time lecturers sets aside for administrative and planning responsibilities, and lecturers became visibly annoyed when they were asked to give up these precious hours to teach someone else's class. These cover classes, of course, often generate their own administrative workload, such as completing registers, marking assessments and chasing attendance.

To conclude on this theme, Amelia shares a picture of her current marking workload. This image represents just one term's work and does not include the additional administrative tasks

she must also complete. The image (Figure 40) shows 180 mock assessments that she must mark within one month, clearly causing her significant anxiety.

Figure 40 Marking for Amelia from just one mock exam

6.3.2 Lecturers perceive that they are not being developed as practitioners

When prompted to reflect on their development as professionals within the College, many lecturers are quick to point out that they are not being developed. The focus of this discussion revolves around access to suitable Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities. This theme is supported by evidence from interviews with lecturers and curriculum managers.

Many lecturers argue that since completing their teaching qualifications, the College has made no serious effort to invest in what they perceive as meaningful professional development. For instance, Eman notes, 'Since my teacher training days, there hasn't been much, to be honest, just maybe some CPD days here and there.' Amelia agrees with Eman's sentiment, reflecting on her professional development over the past year, she states:

> *There hasn't been much development. It's not what you used to do. We used to do. We used to liaise with other schools or colleges, go to conferences regarding the exam board new changes. But that that hasn't happened this year.*

Shireen echoes this point:

> *The only training I've been on or the only kind of CPD day that I've been on was the Society for Education and Training Conference. And that's my only conference or training day for CPD that I've been on in five years.*

This notion of a decline in lecturers' professional development is referenced by other lecturers as well. In fact, many lecturers are so dissatisfied with their development that they have undertaken CPD sessions in their own time, drawing on their own finances. More generally,

the lecturers feel like they must take the initiative in organising or attending CPD training as the managers were only marginally interested in their development as practitioners.

Other lecturers' comment on the generic nature of the CPD offered to them, for example based around general effective pedagogy instead of subject specialism. Whilst they appreciate these the pedagogic training sessions, many lecturers feel that it is not their most pressing development need. Instead, they want CPD sessions on areas such as marking standardisation and more effective approaches to preparing learners for exams. Eman, when focusing on her ideal CPD, comments: 'What would've been far more effective for us, is if the focus was on what strategies, we as teachers, could use to get our GCSE students from a Grade 3 to a Grade 4.'

Many of the lecturers also feel that if they were teaching professionals in other sectors, such as secondary schools, they would have had access to superior training sessions. Shireen argues that 'they're not presented to us in the same way that they would be in the secondary sector, primary sector where I suppose people are asked to go on training days and then come back to school and feedback.' Not surprisingly, many lecturers report that because of this lack of meaningful professional development, they feel bored and are stagnating: 'I don't really feel like I'm being mentally stimulated and challenged,' (Victor) and Amelia reiterates this point: 'I really need a challenge as I don't feel like I am moving forward in my role as a lecturer.'

6.3.3 Lecturers perceive that the OFSTED and College observations are damaging and unhelpful

All lecturers agree that the system of observations, whether conducted internally by the TLA Team or by the external regulatory body, OFSTED, is counterproductive to its purported goal of improving lecturers' practice. At the time of the research, the College observation process is based on an evaluative grade system (Meets, Below, or Exceeds expectations). Although OFSTED offers no formal grade for individual lecturers, informal judgements they have made about lecturers have been relayed to them via the curriculum managers. This theme arises from lecturers' and curriculum managers' interviews.

A comment made by one OFSTED inspector regarding the quality of our teaching has reverberated throughout the English department. The comment that, 'the classes seemed to lack energy' is deemed offensive by all lecturers. In fact, during an OFSTED inspection,

Amelia speaks about how profoundly she is impacted by the process. Her body language reflects someone who is physically and psychologically pained by the experience.

> *I was going to wee in the toilet frequently because the anxiety was too much. At one point, my brain was frozen. I said to myself that I should resign because my head was being impacted so much; I couldn't go on. I wanted to sleep and could not sleep,*

Furthermore, many other lecturers are utterly dejected when they indirectly receive negative feedback from the inspectors. Victor is particularly dismissive of the OFSTED regime and comments on how they unfairly apply the same standards for schools to colleges, despite colleges facing their own unique challenges. Indeed, Gabriella states that we enrol some of the most socio-economically deprived and often the most challenging learners in the country—many of whom have emotional issues or are refugees. She feels that OFSTED fails to take this into account when judging us. Amela echoes Gabriella's point below:

> *I pointed out to the OFSTED official that we have society's 'rejects' and we turn them into good members of society... our learners are completely different from mainstream group of students. These are students who have been failed several times [by society].*

Others reiterate the unfairness of the inspectors' judgements, questioning how the inspectors would themselves tackle systematic issues like attendance and underachievement in GCSE English re-sit when it is a national issue, and not just specific to our context. Shireen has had an OFSTED inspector come into her class, and she has found the experience unsatisfactory: 'How can they even possibly judge, because the inspector only stayed there for what 10-15 minutes and when she was there, she wasn't even watching... she was just typing away.'

Similar sentiments are expressed by lecturers about observations carried out as part of the College's TLA quality process. Many of the lecturers object to being graded based on a single 45-minute observation, often by someone from senior level who has not been a classroom practitioner for more than a decade. Gabriella speaks emotionally of the impact her observation has had on her:

> *I felt so deflated. I am very passionate about teaching, and I love to teach. But why do I feel like that is something that's not going to matter now? There's nothing that I do that's going to be appreciated. Why do I feel worthless?*

In fact, Victor describes such graded observations as, simply 'Barbarism.' He continues, 'I can't honestly see that that's helping anyone become a better teacher.' Eman too, finds these

observations difficult: ‘They’ve put a lot of pressure on me, and I don’t think I’ve gained much from them. Because feedback hasn’t been very beneficial for me if I’m very honest.’ Eman is visibly emotional as she recollects her ‘horrendous’ experience of an observer who was neither ‘fair’ nor ‘very qualified.’ Here, Eman recollects her experience:

> *Her feedback was unfair and unproductive as she was not [too] familiar with the students in our college and commented on things specific to English without having knowledge in this area. Her focus was meticulously on paperwork as opposed to anything else.*

6.3.4 Lecturers are motivated by wanting to make a positive difference, but feel that they are underpaid

There is a consensus amongst all the lecturers that their primary motivation is rooted in a sense of altruism; of their wanting to make a positive difference in the world. The overarching message appears to be that lecturers are deeply committed to their learners’ progress, which compels them to make numerous sacrifices, both professional and personal, to remain in the teaching profession. However, all lecturers and managers concur that they are not fairly compensated financially for their effort, time, and talent. The data for this theme is derived from interviews with lecturers and curriculum managers.

Victor relates a story from the first year of his teaching career, where it was insinuated that he only entered the teaching profession for money. Victor found this accusation baseless and laughed it off:

> *The kid said to me, ‘oh well, what do you care? You’re only doing it for money.’ I said, ‘well, if, let’s face it, if it was only for the monetary reward of working here, I wouldn’t be in this industry’.*

When prompted to think about their motivations for entering the lecturing profession at an FE College, all the lecturers agree that financial reward is not their primary motivation. They speak of their desire to help others, especially those from deprived backgrounds. Shireen is typical when she speaks of this deep-seated desire:

> *Well, my motivation for doing my job is, is well, yeah, I’ve always wanted to help people, and especially people who education should be accessible to all. And as someone who’s been privileged enough to grow up in an environment where education has always been the forefront of my upbringing, I think I wanted to try and it’s cliche, give back to society. And also, the students that we work with, they come from maybe disadvantaged backgrounds.*

Victor makes a similar point:

> *Knowing that there is a possibility of improving that young person's life for the better, as trite as it sounds, is a valuable thing. And it's something that I'm quite, I suppose I'm quite jaded as a teaching professional, but when I think about that, and I think back on students that have come to me with grade five, I've passed it the third time, that really is a valuable thing. So, I do, I do take pride in those things.*

Furthermore, the lecturers speak of wanting to get learners ready to be productive members of society. Here, David reflects on this:

> *Because I really think that the students need to be better at reading or writing. What we can see that the students can't see is that actually all societies in the world still revolve around literacy and numeracy. Everything is reading and writing. So I just think that the motivation for me is just to make them competitive in the marketplace, and I just think if you don't have these skills, you're going to be worse off. So if I can do something to help you to be a bit better off and a bit more competitive, then that's really all we can give you. Because what I don't think I've never motivated by the idea that I can change their lives or make them love reading or make them love writing. That's crazy. But you can polish their skills, because basically a grade three. Honestly, it's not a very good grade, and it's not very difficult to get it. And if you can get a three, you can get a four. And I truly believe that for all our students, I want them to believe it too. Because the difference between a three and a four, it's not actually a very big difference. So you have to be motivated by the belief that it's possible and the belief that is necessary for them.*

The quotation above is reflective of what other lecturers also say on this topic. The lecturers see it as their *mission* to prepare the learners for life after GCSE, and they are convinced that achieving a grade 4 is necessary to being competitive in the labour market. Hoa reiterates this point, 'What motivates me is seeing their confidence build and grow... When you teach them to evaluate, they take that further.' 'Further' here refers to workplace and career progression.

It may be suggested that the converse is also true. If lecturers are motivated by wanting to make a difference to learners' lives, then when they do not achieve this, they must necessarily feel de-motivated. Eman is explicit in making this link: 'I think I was more motivated when I first started. But because of maybe the results that we're getting and just how kind of like outcomes we are getting, I'm feeling less motivated, and I need to bring it back home.'

What's interesting here is that no lecturer mentioned love of teaching English as a motivating factor for them. Why this might be the case is explored in the Discussion chapter.

Despite being motivated by the desire to help their learners, all lecturers agree that 'there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of reward for what we do' (Victor). Although learners saying, "Thank you" is itself a reward in some sense, Victor argues that 'I don't feel appreciated.' Low pay is a symptom of this lack of appreciation, according to the lecturers. The lecturers are especially unhappy that they are not paid as well as schoolteachers, and all agree that this is fundamentally unfair. Many believe that perhaps they should even get paid more than schoolteachers as they often deal with very difficult learners. For example, a lot of learners we have come from Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). Shireen argues that the FE sector is the:

> *Cinderella sector, we are often paid less than our than our colleagues in primary secondary. But also, with I think, in the government's eyes, potentially we are valued less, which is very disheartening to think because we're, we're always the sector that lacks funding or lack of support, and lack of structure. So yeah, in terms of being adequately rewarded, no, but not necessarily.*

The hourly-paid lecturers are most concerned about the low pay, as they are not paid for holidays, nor for work done outside of teaching hours. Gabriella, an hourly paid lecturer, expresses the typical frustration here:

> *I don't feel adequately rewarded. Because ultimately, I'm timetabled for 17 hours. And yes, I do over and above. I work at home constantly; I feel like I'm constantly working. I'm doing a lot of tasks; sometimes, I do [tasks] outside of my remit. Most times. I'm here after five, but I don't get paid for that time.*

David, who is a curriculum manager, agrees that low pay is demoralising for many lecturers. Indeed, he argues that this is one of the causes of FE's recruitment and retention crisis. Here, he outlines the issues he has had with recruiting staff for the English Department. When prompted to think about why we are short staffed in our department, he responds:

> *I don't think that's really a mystery, though. This is quite straightforward. Because we're only offering hourly paid positions... We're only offering hourly paid positions at the moment, or even part time, but the issue is... everybody's energy bills, right, are enough to cause most people concern. If you think the average salary is 25,000. On that salary, you're really struggling to live right now. And there's not much help available and there's not much sense of that's going to get better.*

6.3.5 Lecturers' sense of achievement is inextricably linked with learners' achievement

This theme naturally follows on from the above theme: lecturers' altruism is their primary reason for entering this profession. When prompted to think about what achievement means to them, all lecturers refer to their learners' achievements as their own. Surprisingly, no lecturer mentions job promotion or even achieving post-graduate qualifications as their own achievements

Eman speaks with great pride and joy when she states that her learners passing their exams or comprehending something they previously struggled with makes her feel like 'her work is worth value.' She continues, 'I feel quite rewarded when I can see progression from my students, and when it comes to results time, I think if they've achieved and they have passed, I also passed.' Shireen is even more explicit in linking her sense of achievement with her learners' achievements':

> *I feel like my student success is like is my success. Because when I see former students, and they, and I bump into them in places, or they come and see me after they've left, that is so rewarding that they remember. Of course, it is their hard work. But remember, like they mentioned about the support I've given them, and that's really, I mean, that's worth its weight in gold. To be honest, and it makes me, it makes me want to continue waking up to go to work, and it continues to give me a purpose.*

Victor makes a similar point:

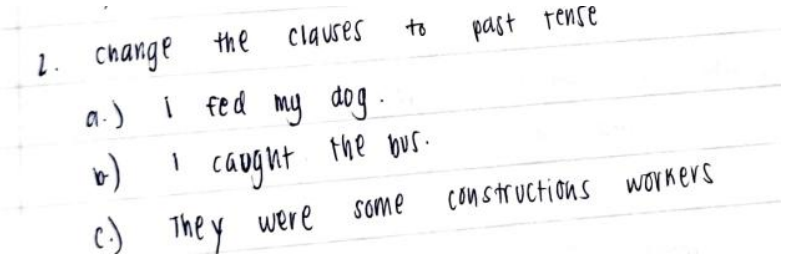
> *I suppose achievement for me, as a teacher, looks like when I've gone in and taught a session, and the students leave being capable of doing something that they couldn't do before. You can see often visibly, they look, you know, kind of elevated they've clearly made some progress.*

If learners' achievement is linked to learners' achievement, then the reverse is also true. When learners fail, the lecturers also feel like that they have also failed. What is striking is the display of emotion from lecturers when they speak about how they feel when learners fail. Eman maintains the repeated failures of the learners is a source of upset for her: 'I feel bit gutted for them, you know? And then I feel just like, hopefully this year they will get it.' Other lecturers mention that when learners fail, they feel 'demoralised' and describe it as being 'heart-wrenching.'

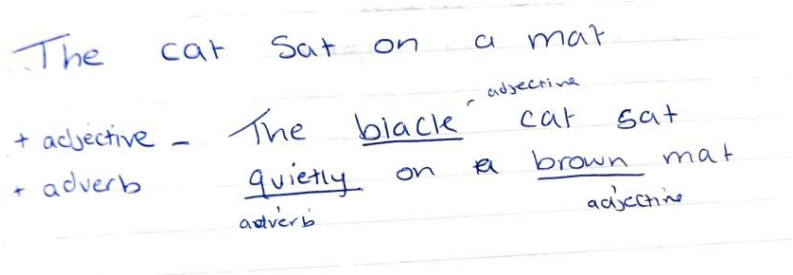
6.3.6 Lecturers have low expectations of learners

As explored above, learners often produce work of low-quality in their English classes. Sometimes they write two or three lines in an entire lesson. This theme situates the above finding by suggesting that the low output is linked to lecturers' low expectations of the learners. This issue has also been repeatedly highlighted by OFSTED inspectors in relation to the English department during previous inspections. The data used for this section is derived from lesson observations, analysis of lecturers' teaching resources, and interviews with lecturers and curriculum mangers.

Many lecturers maintain that our learners have low ability, often comparing them unfavourably to students from mainstream secondary schools. As Amelia explicitly points out, 'the class of students differ.' Implying that school students were of higher calibre than FE learners. She further continues that secondary school students have, 'higher vocabulary. The sentence structure [that they use] is different.' In contrast, our learners' 'vocabulary is quite low.' In fact, she states that our learners' ability is so low that 'I have to dumb down a little bit from the level.' The 'level' refers to GCSE standards. She also laments that our learners must take the same exam as secondary school students, whose superior abilities make it inevitable that our learners' efforts will appear unsatisfactory by comparison. This idea of needing to 'dumb down' the curriculum is also reinforced by Gabriella, who states that she has to 'go back to basics. I would even sometimes use Key Stage Two resources to try and build up a unit of foundation.' As demonstrated below, many lecturers indeed provide work that appears more suitable for primary school students than for GCSE learners.



And.



And.

The above heading design may be deemed to be aimed at very young children. Below, we have another extract from the same worksheet which further supports this assertion:

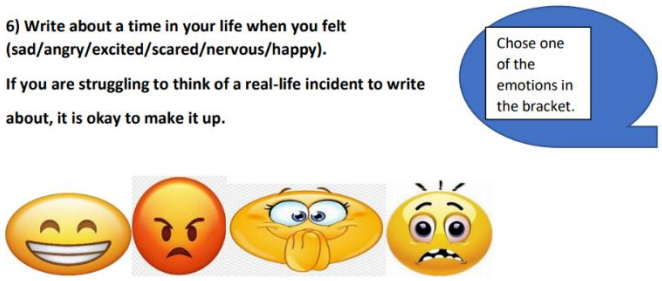


Figure 41 Evidence of Low-expectation of learners

The emojis seem to indicate that the learners might not understand the emotions this exercise is referring to, which is surprising, as many of the learners are over the age of 18 and speak English as their first language. Moreover, parenthetical lists of emotions again serve to reinforce the view that the lecturer does not expect the learners to understand the range of human emotions.

Such expectations fall far short of the stretch and challenge that the GCSE English curriculum envisages. For example, the AQA GCSE English specification (2014) states that learners are required to gain 'critical reading and comprehension skills' (*ibid*, p.11). This includes:

> *Identifying and interpreting themes, ideas and information in a range of literature and other high-quality writing; reading in different ways for different purposes, and comparing and evaluating the usefulness, relevance and presentation of content for these purposes...*

Indeed, the exam presents 'high-quality, challenging texts from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries' (*ibid*). In the past, exam extracts contained challenging materials from Charles

Dickens, George Orwell and Yann Martel. The above examples of lecturers' resources and class worksheets do not appear to meet the high standards envisaged by the curriculum.

David, who as a CM, undertakes many lesson observations as part of the College's TLA quality cycle. He also comments on the low expectations that he has witnessed in the classrooms: 'I've observed lessons where I'm thinking: Is this enough for Grade 4? Is what you've just done going to help a student achieve the grade 4?' This assessment echoes my findings. In fact, in most of the observations undertaken, work set for learners did not seem to demonstrate an adequate level of stretch and challenge. After all, a majority of the learners have already achieved a grade 3 in their GCSE, and it makes no sense now for them to be copying out definitions of language techniques.

6.3.7 Lecturers perceive that learners lack motivation, and they proactively try to increase learners' motivation

All lecturers concur that the learners are amotivated in their orientation to GCSE English. The data from the learners, however, show that this assumption is incorrect. Many of the learners are not so much unmotivated; rather, they are extrinsically motivated in doing GCSE English. As illustrated in Section 6.2.6, they either want to progress to universities or be able to secure a professional career by passing English. Consequently, the lecturers both see it as their job to motivate their learners, and they use multiple strategies to achieve this end. The data for this theme is primarily derived from interviews with lecturers and lesson observations.

Speaking of learners' lack of motivation, Amelia speaks of how failing more than once can be demoralising for the learners:

> *Generally, I find that students, most students who have done it more than once, about two or three times, just naturally begin to lose their drive. They begin to think that it's not achievable. They lose interest and focus.*

Shireen also expresses that learners are lacking motivation: 'Their motivation is very low.' However, she is more circumspect than Amelia, noting that there are also a few learners who are actually motivated in doing English. Most learners are demotivated, she argues, unless they have a specific purpose in mind for passing English:

> *There are, maybe, some who have in their mind a future plan in place, so they know that they need a grade five or six to be able to go into whatever it they want to get into.*

However, Shireen is at pains to point that these learners are in the minority. This is because the learners: 'Don't know what they want to do and don't really know the purpose of why they're sat in our classrooms.'

The lecturers offer a variety of reasons for this lack of motivation on the learners' part, aside from the fact that they have to repeat it as a mandatory component of their study programme. For Hao, their lack of motivation can be attributed to their hormones: 'When you're 16 to 18, you've got your hormones. You're tired, you know, some days, you're more tired than others, and that's natural.' For Eman, the fact that learners often sign up for vocational subjects, such as music, which they enjoy, and then are told they also need to do English, is a de-motivating factor She points out that often these learners had a poor experience of English in their previous schooling. Here, Shireen expands on this:

> *I think psychologically, if they haven't had a great experience of learning the subject before, or they struggle with the subject, they are automatically going to put those barriers up and therefore, it makes it difficult- their behaviour is impacted as well because they do see English as a hindrance in their current lives. They are not looking forward to seeing how many doors or opportunities that might open in their adult working lives.*

The lecturers also perceive that Covid lockdown has had a particularly negative impact on learners' motivation. For David, we as a sector have not thought carefully enough about how the lockdown has impacted on our learners' motivation. He mentions that not only are there 'massive gaps in their knowledge' as a result of the lockdown, but also that the learners just 'don't think coming to college is mandatory.' Gabriella mentions that post-Covid lockdown, the learners do not 'seem as energised or motivated as before. That's because they lost that contact.' When asked to elaborate on what 'lost contact' meant, she stated that it meant losing contact with expectations and norms of traditional schooling.

Due to lecturers feeling that the learners lack motivation, they see it as their duty to provide that motivation. And they do so almost daily. In all observations, the lecturers use praise as a motivating strategy. In fact, they praise learners even when the work produced seems insufficient. At times, there is an impression that the lecturers treat the learners like they are primary school children. For instance, many lecturers praise learners for not talking to their classmates.

At other times, lecturers are observed encouraging the learners not to give up on a task when the latter finds it difficult. Eman, for instance, after marking a poor piece of work, said, 'I

know you can do better; I have seen better work from you.' At institutional level, monetary prizes are offered to learners who attended all their English classes. It is interesting to note that whilst some learners refer to the prize in their interviews, no lecturer made any reference to it in the classes. The learners did not think the prizes are effective because they said they are not motivated by reward money. When asked to elaborate, they stated that it was too insignificant and that they find it impossible to attend all their classes.

The interviews with the lecturers reveal that all of them try to motivate their learners by promoting the idea that 'English is a vocational subject' (Lucy). What Lucy means by this is that English is inextricably linked with whatever profession that the learners will eventually enter. This positioning of English as a 'vocational' subject is also explicitly referred to by Hoa and Gabriella. When thinking about learners who argue that they don't need English because they plan to start their own business, Hoa had this to say:

> *I think that is short sighted, isn't it? Because as a country, as a nation, actually, we have the most number of small businesses. And it's short sighted for them to say that because, we're giving you the basic skills. You need still need to analyse and evaluate in your job. We're giving to you what you think is an academic skill, but to evaluate and analyse is actually a practical skill.*

Hoa goes onto explain in more concrete terms how she also motivates her learners by linking English to employability. She provides an example of what she shares with her learners:

> *You need to be able to respond to a complaint as a business owner. You need to respond in writing. And those are the fundamental skills we're giving you. Whether you need it now or not. But without having it, you're closing the doors to yourself for your own opportunity.*

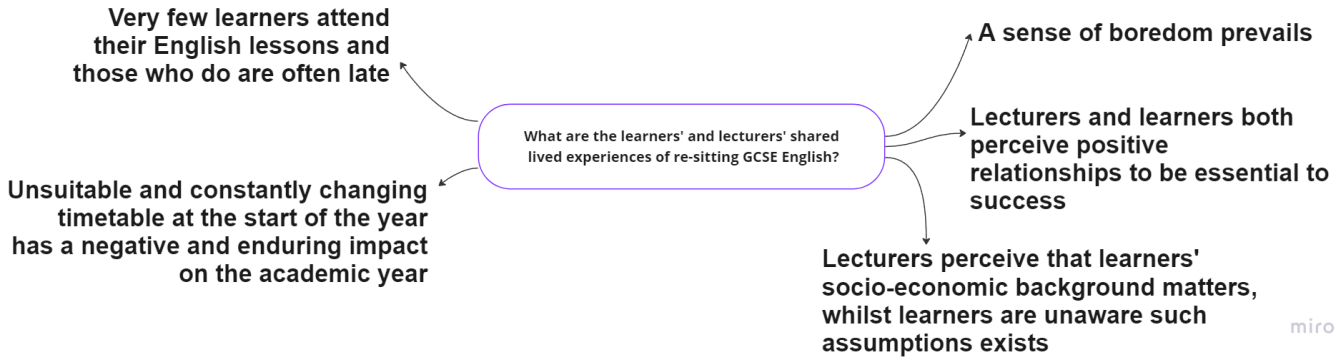
Gabriella uses the metaphor of a global village to motivate our learners. She explains to the learners:

> *When you're dealing with businesspeople from the Far East, who have great English, how do you expect them to take you seriously when you, you know, going with 'umm um'? I am sorry, but they expect you to communicate with them with a high-level English.*

This focus on the employability aspect of English may explain why so many of our learners also refer to future career and employment opportunities as their primary motivation for doing GCSE English, as we saw in Section 6.2.6.

6.4 Learners' and lecturers' shared lived experiences of re-sitting GCSE English

Some themes were less amenable to being categorised solely under either learners' or lecturers' lived experiences, as they were applicable to both. Of course, it could be argued that most of the themes outlined in the previous sections can also be placed in this section since learners' and lecturers' experiences often played out in the field of classrooms. However, the ones below are better fit for the shared experiences category since it became too difficult to divorce one experience from the other.



6.4.1 Very few learners attend their English lessons and those who do are often late

In all the observations, it becomes immediately apparent that many learners are absent from the classes. Fieldnotes contain remarks such as '1 learner comes in. Apologises. 13 on the register. Where are the rest?' or '4 learners in attendance overall,' or 'Eman first in class (*see* Appendix 9 for a sample page of my fieldnotes). No sign of the learners. Are they on work experience or something?' Invariably, when the register is examined for the classes, the average number of learners is 30. Indeed, the attendance rate is well below 40 percent for each of the classes observed. Punctuality is another issue noticed during the observations. Many learners who do attend, do so well after the start of the lesson, with many even attending just towards the end of the lessons. Frequently, my fieldnotes contain mentions such as '15:45, learner comes in, 30 minutes late, headphones on,' or 'Is this learner late for this lesson or early for the next lesson?'

What may be deemed as surprising is that in almost every case, the lecturers are unaware of where the learners were when they were not in classes. A frequent question posed to those in attendance is, 'Do you know where the rest of them are?' or comments such as, 'I don't know

why they're not here; they should all be here.' Or if a learner arrives late, lecturers ask them to wait outside and explain why they are late.

The disruption caused by both non-attendance and late attendance is readily apparent during the observations and in the interviews with learners and lecturers. Many instances are to be noted where the lecturer has to stop the lesson and explain to a learner what they were doing because this learner had missed the previous lessons. Since the lessons are sequenced, learners missing previous lessons disrupts the flow of the present class. Likewise, arriving late to a lesson requires the lecturer to stop the lesson and explain the task to the latecomers. Since this happens so often in a class, it feels as though the lesson cannot start properly at all and subsequently, a state of *flow* is never observed.

When prompted to reflect on why the learners are absent from classes, the lecturers offer variety of explanations. Amelia starts her answer with the general observation that 'We are battling against the odds.' And goes on to suggest attendance is low because, 'Most of them work... they have to maintain themselves. Some [are] responsible for a percentage of the household income. Now it's getting worse with the cost of living.' Victor also agrees that 'Socio-economic issues impede their attendance.' However, he also adds that our learners often suffer from poor mental health, and some are young carers. David argues that the low attendance can partially be explained by the impact of COVID-19 restrictions: 'I don't know whether that's the cause of it. But to my mind, the students are demonstrably worse than they were before [the pandemic].'

The learners largely reinforce the lecturers' points. When prompted to reflect on the most common reason for missing their English lesson, many learners emphasise their work commitments. Joshua, whose income supports his family, states, 'I often work until 2 or 3 in the morning. Sometimes I feel so tired I don't feel like coming to college the next day.' Adriana also cites work commitments as the primary reason she misses her English, 'I have to pay for my rent, and I have to work long hours. Sometimes I feel too tired to come in.'

The second most common reason given for absenteeism is medical issues. For example, Dina mentioned that her ongoing medical condition is a significant reason for her absences:

> *I'm a diabetes person, so I never miss classes [unless] I have really, really important, important appointment with my diabetes doctor or my pharmacy to take my injections. Because I am Type One, I can't take the tablet, I need injections.*

The lecturers are unanimous that the attendance policy, where each lecturer must call all absent learners daily, is unworkable. David, who is a curriculum manager and so in charge of enforcing the attendance policy, states of the policy, 'I think... everything about that doesn't really work.' He further continues, 'It generates too much work. Teachers simply don't have the time to teach good lessons and to follow that policy.' Similarly, Shireen mentioned that the 'Attendance policy is not fit for purpose because it doesn't work.' She is visibly irate as she continues, 'I think the students also know it doesn't work. Even if their attendance is only 4%, they know they'll never get kicked out. And that's why it never worked because the students have clocked on.'

6.4.2 Unsuitable and constantly changing timetable at the beginning of the year has a negative and enduring effect on the academic year

Both lecturers and learners perceive that the chaos and disorder at the beginning of the year, particularly due to timetable changes, have negatively influenced how their academic year unfolds. These changes don't just refer to timetable amendments, but also to changes to rooming and registers. Some of these changes often include merging and splitting classes depending on class size, availability of lecturers, and other factors. For context, timetabling amendments is endemic at the beginning of the year at the research college. My own experience is typical: I have experienced starts to the academic year where timetables (and registers) change up to eight times in the first two weeks. Many of these changes are due the complexities of trying to align hundreds of vocational courses with English and maths provision. Often this can appear like a puzzle requiring multiple attempts to eventually solve. The data for this theme is derived from interviews with lecturers, managers, and learners, and is also supported by observational data.

All lecturers refer to the beginning of the academic year as 'chaotic.' At the start of the academic year, Victor claims that 'Yet again, we're starting on the backfoot as per usual and that's just how it goes in the FE sector.' Eman furthers this argument, 'How can we expect our learners to be organised when the whole system is disorganised and chaotic? We should be setting an example for them.'

The main source of irritation amongst the lecturers seems to be frequent changes in their timetables and registers. Eman finds it 'frustrating' when entire vocational feeder groups are added to or are removed from her class registers weeks into the academic year because she has by now, 'built a rapport with the students.' The learners, she argues, need 'stability, and... assurances' from a teacher they can trust. Indeed, many lecturers complain that they hardly

know the names of the learners in their classes because register changes occur so frequently. When prompted to think about timetable changes, Shireen is animated:

> *...students are taken off registers and put on other registers. And I think that's incredibly detrimental to their learning, because they get used to one teacher and then they're told to go to another teacher's class.*

Victor expresses his puzzlement that this continues to happen every academic year:

> *I don't understand why senior leadership have allowed so many of these fundamental issues and shortcomings with timetabling, class sizes, et cetera, just carry on and persist and continue without doing anything about it.*

The consequences of these frequent timetable changes are visible in all observations. These include learners knocking on the door and asking if they are in this class, often very loudly and disrupting the whole class. Often farcically, they are sent from one class to another, only to return to the first class because they have been refused entry to the other class. At other times, learners sit in a class, but their names are not called by the lecturer, prompting an often-heated exchange on why they are not in this class anymore. Many other learners come in to search for their class notebook to take along to their new classes. Some learners are obviously exasperated with these changes. During observation, one learner is close to tears:

> *Am I in your class or not? Cause they want to kick me off the vocational course cause my attendance is very low for English. But my timetable keeps on changing and I don't know where to go. It's so unfair.*

In an interview, Kofi summarises how he feels at the beginning of the year: 'At the beginning, there were a lot of changes. I was going to so many different classes, and it was so confusing.'

A further obstacle, especially for learners, is the positioning of English in their overall timetable. Many learners argue that having English as a first lesson at 8:45am, or as a last lesson at 4:15pm, is entirely unsuitable for their situation. Referring to having English as the last lesson of the day, Adriana insists, 'It's not right because my brain is not there. I am tired and I can't pay attention to the text, you know.' She further points out that 'The time you put the class is gonna affect how the students are gonna learn as well.' Dina, however, has issues with having classes so early in the morning, 'I live so far away from the College. If the lesson starts at 8:45am, then I have to leave home at 6am. So, it's difficult for me.' Tareq is blunt about his feelings of starting at 8:45am: 'I hate having to get up early for it.' Other learners mention feeling tired in the morning, and since English requires more focus than vocational courses, they feel they learn less than they would if their lessons were scheduled later. Two

learners speak of having to take siblings to school, and as a result are late for English. Many learners would appreciate having English sandwiched between their vocational courses. A minority of learners complain about not having enough breaks between the end of their vocational classes and the start of their English classes, which they argue negatively impacts their ability to focus. For example, James says: 'But really everyone in the class, they're tired, they're drained, and most of them want to leave.' Two other learners feel that the gap on their timetables between vocational class and English is unhelpful as they have 'nothing to do' during this time.

6.4.3 A sense of boredom prevails

The notion of boredom may be viewed as subjective, and what one person finds boring might positively thrill another. However, it is indisputable that many of the observed lessons exude an air of boredom. This is not to imply that the lecturers are not doing their best to entice and engage the learners, which they do; however, it seems like both lecturers and learners are bored.

This sense of boredom is apparent in every observation carried out. Notes include such comments as 'Learner has head on desk: Despair? Boredom?' or 'Time seems to go so slowly - when will this lesson end?' or 'Body language seems to indicate that they would rather be anywhere else than here- one learner reclining on his chair, three have their heads on the desk.' In fact, on more than one occasion, it is a challenge for the observer to maintain focus; so much so that the effort not to yawn must be stifled for fear of distracting the class.

During interviews, many learners express how bored they feel during lessons. Chandini is particularly vocal when she expresses that, 'I can't enjoy English for some reason...' This idea of not being able to enjoy English is echoed by Jade, who states that 'It's not horrible, horrible' but she does not find it 'fun.' One learner is scathing in her review of her class: 'The class seems like someone died in there' (Marianna).

The lecturers reinforce this point of lessons seeming to be boring. In fact, David is adamant that it is just not possible to get learners excited about English:

> *They don't enjoy it. Because the thing is, you can enjoy English, if you enjoy reading and writing. And if you don't enjoy those two things, you're not going to get much pleasure from it.*

Others, including Shireen, also maintain, 'Learners are very bored of it' and similarly, whilst Victor says there is a distinct 'air of fatigue in the classroom.' Recognising this prevailing sense of boredom, some lecturers are proactive in using a range of activities to 'liven' up the classroom.' Hoa states that if the learners are bored, it is the lecturer's responsibility to excite them. Her method of "exciting" the learners is through planning lessons that incorporate gamification with prizes.

6.4.4 Lecturers and learners both perceive positive relationships to be essential to success, but such relationships are sometimes absent in practice

The findings indicate that there is a sense that many lecturers actively try to foster relationships that go beyond a minimal professional requirement. Rather, the relationship between the lecturers and learners is often based on support, respect, and a genuine desire for reciprocal understanding. Of course, there are many exceptions to this. The importance of establishing positive relationships becomes apparent when learners are contacted by Progress Coaches to clarify why they are not attending their English classes. Often, the learners indignantly respond that they do not like the lecturer, find the lecturer rude, or feel that the lecturer does not understand their needs. The data for this theme is derived from lesson observations and interviews with lecturers and learners.

Kofi underscores the importance of a positive relationship for learners in shaping their attitude to GCSE English when he says:

> *I don't really learn anything in English because I don't like her. Like she doesn't understand us. She treats all of us the same. We're not like people from this country; we need someone who understands us.*

Subsequently, he voices that he hates going to English for this reason, and that is why he does not think he will pass this academic year. He negatively compares this current relationship with the one he had with his previous English teacher:

> *Last year, like I said, I had very good English teacher, who explained things in different way and understands the students a lot. Even if we don't understand things, he just, he can just read it from our face and come to us and explain things. But in this academic year, it is just different.*

A positive aspect is that such adversarial relationships are rarely expressed by the interview participants. Most of the learners speak of having positive, affectionate, and productive relationships with their lecturers. In fact, Abdullah links his own motivation with his relationship with his lecturers:

> *My motivation comes from, from, I'd say the journeys from where my teachers actually came from, because there'll be about five or ten minutes where teachers just talk about how life was like back in their day, and how they passed and stuff like that.*

Adriana also speaks of her relationship with her lecturer as being important in her attending GCSE English. She asserts that not only are they able to teach 'validly,' but that 'they are open to hearing you out, your questions. So, I am happy with that.' Chandani speaks of how she has a mature, non-hierarchical relationship with her lecturer, where she can even provide some teaching ideas to her lecturers, 'In the first lesson, I actually gave some ideas to my teachers about how to improve things. I did English in three other places, so I can give some ideas about improving things.' This adult-to-adult relationship seems to be important to many of the participants in this study.

Such non-hierarchical relationships also provide space for autonomy on the part of the learners, as demonstrated by an experience Chandani relates here. When she failed to understand a task, she asked her lecturer if she could answer the task in her own way. The lecturer was supportive of this. Chandani quotes the lecturer, 'Look, if you don't understand, it's okay. You can do it this way or that or the other way.*'* She continues,

> *Because, for an example, this week, or last week, I didn't get my work finished because I didn't really understand the beginning. And then I said to teacher, instead of actually finishing the work, because I just want to do it another way that I think would be much easier for me. But I will still do the work. When she said 'Yeah, it's no problem' and I was able to do it with a clear mind.*

Dina also speaks of her positive relationship with her lecturer as being as something that she cherishes:

> *They always help and support of the students. How do they help us, support the student? So, for example, when I have some problem, even if I am at home, and I send message, they answer me directly. They helped me always with my homework or something I couldn't understand.*

From the lecturers' perspective, they consciously try to establish such positive relationships with their learners. Amelia discusses how she achieves this:

> *I also observed that the very beginning of the course makes a lot of difference. They come in and we're laughing, we're making jokes, and this creates a positive relationship.*

For Hoa, actively listening to the learners is essential in creating a positive relationship: 'I listen. And I don't just listen-pretend-listen, I hear what they say to you. I have sympathy, I have empathy.' Lucy establishes positive relationships by eliciting learners' interests and incorporating them into her lesson plans. She might say, 'I would love for you to show me your favourite music.' After doing this a few times, she feels the learners become more receptive.

During the lesson observations, there are many instances where lecturers attempt to create a positive relationship with their learners. For instance, the lecturers would share the details movies that they had seen on Netflix, often exchanging recommendations. Or if a learner was previously absent, the lecturer might say, 'I haven't seen you in a while. Are you OK?' At other times, there is banter between the lecturers and learners on, for example, sporting events.

6.4.5 Lecturers perceive that learners' socio-economic and ethnic background matters, whilst learners are unaware such assumptions exists

While all the lecturers are convinced that aspects of learners' backgrounds hinder their achievement, the learners themselves do not share this belief. When speaking of learners' backgrounds, lecturers make frequent comments regarding their 'socio-economic status,' 'immigration status,' 'cultural backgrounds,' or 'family composition.' For lecturers, this is what constitutes learners' background. Both lecturers and learners specifically focus on family support as a source of learners' success or failure at GCSE English. This theme is derived from interviews with both lecturers and learners.

While lecturers hold many presumptions about learners' backgrounds, learners, on the other hand, perceive that lecturers make no assumptions about their backgrounds, whether positive or negative. When prompted to reflect on whether she felt treated differently based on her individual or cultural background, Adriana replies, 'No, definitely not. I never felt that!' Chandani echoes this sentiment, 'No, I don't think so.' Similarly, Mariana states, 'I think teachers have some favourites, but they treat us the same way.' Whilst lecturers may not make such assumptions about these specific learners, they certainly do make many assumptions about learners' backgrounds in general.

Many lecturers make references to race or ethnicity as either supporting or hindering learners' achievement in GCSE re-sit. Often, one ethnicity is used as the representative model of consistency and hard work. This, in turn, is contrasted unfavourably with another ethnicity.

One lecturer states that 'Cultural orientation impacts on education, mostly in a place like London where you have a multicultural society'. This lecturer further makes some comments to the effect that learners from Asian backgrounds are more motivated than other ethnic groups in pursuing educational success. Unfortunately, the comments are too offensive to be included here verbatim.

This notion that some ethnic backgrounds can be used to explain uneven achievement is also apparent in other lecturers' interviews. An illustration of this point is when one lecturer states, 'Lots communities in London have enormous families... [and] if you have 8 children, which is normal for Somalian parents, it's harder for you to make them sit down and make sure they do their revision.' Indeed, when Gabriella recounts her favourite learner, she makes constant reference to the learners' ethnicity. One lecturer summarises this strain of thought on ethnicity and achievement when she states: 'There are some cultures where education is more important than others.'

Gabriella, who is Black British, speaks emotionally about how her own children have faced discrimination in school. She mentions that the stereotype of aggressive Black boys has shaped her son's educational experience.:

> *Even my own children have experienced being a teen in the classroom with teachers ... the way how they would... speak and treat them... Many of the teachers who are indigenous to the United Kingdom do not have a connect...especially with black males...These boys... they leave in July tiny and by September, they are about six four stranger in the classroom... they come back and they're standing over you and their voices [deep] like that. And when they disagree with you, this deeper voice... [they] see it as a threat... and intimidating and... they just don't know how to respond to that.*

Gabriella partially links her motivation for entering the teaching profession with her desire to positively shape minority learners' experience of education. Indeed, she encourages others from minority backgrounds to also enter the profession:

> *To ethnic minority groups, and black, Afro-Caribbean, Caribbean groups of African I say to them: look, have you considered being a teacher? Because there's so few of us, you see, when you have somebody who models like, you know, in front of you, who models good English or whatever, then of course, that child does seem like a reflection of themselves. That young person is able to, you know, decide, 'oh, yes, I can do this, if miss can do this...'*

Many lecturers also make explicit references to learners lacking the cultural capital to succeed in GCSE English. Gabriella, for instance, suggests, 'Our learners need the cultural capital to pass GCSE English, and they don't have that.' Furthermore, Victor mentions that our learners have been excluded from some of the cultural activities of British life because they do not have financial resources, for example, visiting the theatre. Moreover, he continues that they would not feel a sense of belonging in such a place given their working-class, immigrant backgrounds. Many teachers mention that they make a concerted effort to instil cultural capital in our learners through a range of strategies. Victor mentions that he often provides learners with new vocabulary to help them access British high culture. Examples of such vocabulary include:

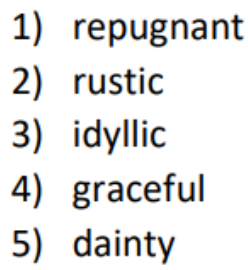


Figure 42 Vocabulary covered in one English lesson

He also mentions that he selects texts for reading based on his desire to enhance learners' British cultural capital. David is even more explicit in this goal: 'I've come to realise that what we need to be thinking about is trying to help the students to adapt to the world that they're actually going to into. This means giving them the right cultural capital.' One lecturer wants to take her learners to the Victoria and Albert Museum to expand their knowledge of British high culture, but she is worried that learners might misbehave.

Lecturers make various references to how single parent families are an obstacle to learners' progress. Many lecturers operate under the assumption that our learners come from single-parent families, despite the lack of confirmatory evidence for this belief. Eman mentions that 'in this particular college, I've noticed that parents are not really bothered if their children attend class or not.' She goes on to contrast this with schools, where parents are active in their children's educational lives.

Hoa argues that 'If you have single parents... they may not be able to access resources well. They don't have the ability to do that.' The parents might, Hoa maintains, want their children to do well for GCSEs, but not know how to go about that because 'in terms of access [to support], they have no idea.' Gabriella reiterates how single parent families are an issue for our learners, but also that her church has an initiative called 'Men's Fellowship.' This

initiative offers father figure role models for young people from single-parent backgrounds and includes school-based mentoring programs. Implicit in her point is that our college should run similar initiative. More generally, Lucy contrasts middle class parents with our learners' parents, asserting that 'With middle class parents, they could be out all the time for that job at the BBC, but they can pay someone to tutor their children.'

The learners offer an alternative perspective on family support for GCSE English. They depict a genuine desire among family members for the learners to succeed academically, despite some family members lacking the knowledge on how to provide effective support. The focus from the learners is not whether they are from a single family or not, as it is often for the lecturers. James speaks of how his parents hired a tutor for him when he needed support with his exams. Similarly, Abdullah mentions that his family give him, 'the best pieces of advice, whether it's sending me websites or actual past papers. They even provide laptops or computers.' Amina speaks proudly of her mum's support of her education, 'When I go home, she gives me the time to study without interruptions. She just tells me to study and not worry about any housework.' Dina reiterates this point, 'My mum cleans the house and cooks for me, so I don't have to worry about that, and I can only focus on my college work.' Chandani speaks lovingly of her late dad, who would read to her to help her with her GCSEs. Her passion for reading is linked to her dad's love for reading, and this is something that she desperately misses. Chandani and Dina report that their parents do not speak English, which they believe limits the extent of support their parents can provide.

Lecturers also perceive learners' socio-economic background to be a barrier to success. Many references are made to the fact that the parents are not available for the learners because they have to work more than one jobs. In fact, the lecturers are all able to provide examples of parents who strive to improve their lot. For instance, Lucy affectionately mentions a parent who was unable to attend any parents' evening meetings due to their dual roles as a nurse and a carer. Lack of space for learners to study at home is also a significant concern for lecturers. The lecturers also mention that these socio-economic struggles our learners face means their orientation to education is affected. Shireen argues that:

> *Because of the hardship or all the difficulties that they have in their outside lives, they don't see how English can be of value to them. This is because they are focused on the outside difficulties and hardships. These issues stop them from thinking about here and now, and they always focus on what they need to do. This can be doing housework because their parents are absent at work.*

Lucy supports the above argument. She argues that due to the socio-economic issues that many learners face, which have been exacerbated by the current "cost-of-living crisis," she is:

> *Coming into a room where people have a lot of issues, a lot of baggage, sometimes they'll lash out and it's nothing to do with me. I am just there. Sometimes they can be completely agitated.*

Learners report that they often have to work unsociable hours to support their families. Joshua speaks of how he finishes his night shift at Burger Kings at 3AM during a college night, and the impact of this on his ability to focus the following morning. When prompted to explain why he works so late, he states that he has no option because he must help his mother pay her rent. Even though she is supposed to be in college, Adriana works most days at a cafe, because she supports her mum in Brazil. Again, she speaks of how she must sacrifice class attendance in order to work.

6.5 Talking therapies: or how participating in research can be cathartic.

In the relaxed post-interview period, all the interview participants expressed a sense of joy and relief that they were able to express their inner thoughts to a willing listener. I was reminded of point made in Chapter 4 that interviews are magical - with a comfortable seat, and very minimal prompting, both learners and lecturers expressed emotions, ideas, hopes and concerns that would have otherwise remained concealed. This enthusiasm can perhaps be attributed to the fact that 'the people who work and learn in further education are seldom heard, and in many cases are not taken seriously' (Duckworth and Smith, 2019, p. 61). This chapter has comprehensively laid out the major themes and significant findings from the analysis of my dataset. The research discovered some unexpected outcomes that illuminate learners' and lecturers' experiences of GCSE English. The next chapter will link these themes and findings to both my theoretical concerns, and the wider literature.

Chapter 7

Discussion

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the aim is to faithfully reproduce the findings of the research without adding substantive interpretive commentary. The dataset has been coded, analysed and thematised according to the two research questions: Firstly, what are the learners' lived experiences of re-sitting GCSE English? Secondly, what are the lecturers' lived experiences of teaching on GCSE re-sit English? Insights and illuminations from the findings are presented without reference to wider pertinent literature, as considered in Chapter 2. Nor is there an attempt to relate the findings to the core theoretical and conceptual framework informing this research (revolving around motivation, achievement and engagement). Crucially, also, the researcher's professional judgements, insights and intuitions are mostly absent.

The aim of this Chapter, therefore, is to situate the findings within the scholarly discourses of Chapter 2. If these findings differ from, or are not represented by, the existing literature, this will be discussed here. In sum, whereas the previous Chapter split the findings into discrete themes, this Chapter seeks to re-unify the findings to tell the holistic 'story' of the research.

7.2 Theoretical perspective one: Understanding learners' and lecturers' motivations using SDT

This section discusses my findings in relation to my first theoretical perspective: Self-Determination Theory. This necessitates a return to the texts discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2) with the view of elucidating whether they have any explanatory purchase on findings in relation to learners' and lecturers' motivation.

7.2.1 Intrinsic motivation

The lack, for most, of intrinsic motivation displayed by the learners is readily apparent from the findings. Most of the learners did not seem value the tasks that they did for the GCSE course, nor did they seem to have an abiding interest in any of the topics covered in the lessons. For example, Section 6.4.3 illustrates that there is a general, prevailing sense of

boredom in the classroom, with some learners borrowing from the semantic field of morbidity and suffering to describe their classes as 'dead' and 'death within four walls.' Similar depressing comments are also reported by Bellamy (2017, p.2) in relation to maths re-sit class, with a minority of learners describing their class as 'suicide.' The idea of English re-sits being perceived as 'boring' is also something Wallace (2017) discovers. This pervasive lack of intrinsic motivation is also highlighted by the numerous low-level disruptions documented in lesson observations (*see* Section 6.2.3). Therefore, given this lack of intrinsic motivation, it is easy to agree with Wallace's (2017, p.100) contention that GCSE re-sits require the 'hard sell.' For the majority of the learners in this study, Robey and Jones' (2015) argument that learners become motivated to re-engage with English and Maths at FE does not hold true. The discrepancy is perhaps because Robey and Jones (2015) carried out their study just as compulsory maths and English were being introduced, and the learners in their research chose to study these subjects.

If, as Ryan and Deci (2000, p.68) argue, 'the fullest representation of humanity show people to be curious, vital and self-motivated,' what explains the lack of such attributes in a majority of our re-sit learners? Indeed, my research confirms their statement (*ibid*) that under certain circumstances, the human spirit can be crushed, and people can exert inordinate effort in unproductive avenues, such as doodling for the duration of a class (*see* Figure 25). The reason why there is a dearth of intrinsic motivation is perhaps because the social conditions where IM can flourish is absent in many of the classrooms. The following section demonstrates that the three fundamental social needs essential for IM: competence, relatedness and autonomy (*ibid;* Ryan and Deci, 1985) are either absent, or not present in sufficient depth at the research site.

The idea of competence revolves around the need to feel capable, effective or skilful (Evans, 2015). Findings here suggest that our learners do not experience a sense of competence in their work. Often during observations, learners make the disconcerting comment, 'I know I've already failed, what's the point of trying?' Surprisingly, these comments are often heard during the beginning weeks of the academic year. What accounts for these troubling comments? Ruddle (2024) and Wallace (2017) argue that re-sit learners' previous experiences of GCSE English can provoke extreme emotional reactions as it reminds them of their previous failures. These emotional reactions are often evidenced here in observations. Perhaps what exacerbates these feelings is lessons being pivoted around the GCSE exams (*see* Section 6.2.4), with many learners' spending entire lessons merely answering past exam papers. This causes anxiety and stress for many of them, with some simply refusing to participate in classes. Despite the prevalence of exam-based lessons, some lecturers nonetheless criticise

this excessive focus on exams, suggesting it might lead learners to feel like they are failures. Research has already established that this sense of doing the same thing for many years, yet not passing, has a negative impact on learners' psychological well-being. This aligns with Bandura's (1977) theory of *Self-Efficacy*, which posits that learners will not carry on with tasks if they believe that their efforts cannot produce desired outcomes. One specific anecdote from a lesson observation highlights this point. A lecturer is praising a learners' work, commenting, 'That's very good work.' The learner retorts that if her work was that 'good, why I am doing GCSE re-sit for the third time?' The lecturer is stunned into silence.

Indeed, one learner offers a critique of orientating lessons around exams that resonates with others. She asks rhetorically, 'What is the point of coming to the lessons when we can find the exam papers online and do it ourselves?' (Olga). The learners would certainly save on transport costs, and unless given a reason, many would prefer the comfort of their beds to traversing the often-harsh English winter to reach the College. It seems that Ledger (2024) is correct in her assessment that GCSE English lessons based on past papers and exams are doomed to fail because they do not teach learners new skills and knowledge, instead just focusing on assessing them. Wallace (2014, p.349) also foresaw the consequences of arranging a curriculum based purely on exams: the learners lose enthusiasm for 'deeper level of understanding or for learning *per se*.'

Moreover, competency requires that learners make a concerted effort to apply themselves to their work (Ryan and Deci, 1985; Evans, 2015). Research at this college, however, establishes that many learners produce low-quality and quantity of the work, both inside and outside the classroom (*e.g.* Section 6.2.2). Vetch (2022) introduces us to Michael, a motor-vehicle student doing GCSE English, who couldn't be 'arsed' to do any work. Unfortunately, it seems like Michael is not alone in his aversion to English, indeed perhaps he is part of a majority. Of course, the natural consequence of this lack of engagement is that the learners' do not receive constructive feedback from their lecturers. Effective feedback is essential to becoming competent, as Hattie (2003) recognises. Indeed, when the learners' workbooks are examined, it is surprising how little written feedback is evident. In fact, there are many books completely devoid of lecturers' comments.

We would expect the learners' sense of competency to vary according to which area of the syllabus they attempt in the class, given that some tasks on the GCSE paper are much more accessible and easier to answer than others. However, no evidence to support this notion is apparent during observations. It seems learners do not attempt easier questions with any more

vigour than they would the more difficult questions. Perhaps they realise that earning marks in some of the easier questions is not enough to achieve a passing grade overall.
However, there is a conflict between the findings from lesson observations and those from interviews with the learners. During the observations, many learners express concerns about their competence, yet during the interviews, the learners indicate that they feel they will pass this year (*see* Section 6.2.5). What explains this discrepancy? Perhaps it could be that those who volunteered for the interviews are more invested in their GCSEs than the wider range of learners seen in the observations. The participants in the interviews are also final year learners, who have had many prior attempts at the exam, whereas the observed lessons had learners from all years, including Level 1 vocational learners who had had fewer attempts at GCSE exams.

Relatedness is the second perquisite of IM. This is concerned with forming supportive and meaningful relationships with others. Findings here confirm Furrer and Skinner's (2003) hypothesis that a sense of relatedness trigger positive behaviour such as interest and enthusiasm and lessen feelings of boredom, frustration and disaffection. As mentioned previously, learners speak strongly, during interviews, of difficulty in relating to their classmates (*see* Section 6.2.1). It doesn't help that a typical GCSE class contains learners from different vocational backgrounds and levels. The findings show that learners are alienated from their classmates in these English classes. This is compounded by the fact that the classrooms have a traditional layout, where they are seated at a distance from each other (*see* Figure 24). Indeed, in such circumstances it is often impossible to do peer-work or group-work, which might have supported relatedness. The issue with such a traditional seating arrangement is identified by Collyer (2021), who finds it counterproductive as the GCSE learners in her class resent having to sit away from each other. When the seating plan is altered, Collyer (*ibid*) finds that the learners participate more in her class. Unfortunately, in the lessons observed, no lecturer changed the seating arrangements to foster relatedness between learners, and therefore Collyer's (*ibid*) findings are not applicable in this situation. Current literature seems to be silent on the impact of having learners from different vocational backgrounds taught together in one re-sit class.

Although both the learners and lecturers speak during the interviews of the importance of having strong relationships with each other, observations establish that such relationships do not really exist in practice. This contrasts with Anderson and Peart's (2016) findings, where learners express that they have a relationship with their lecturers based on professionalism and mutual respect, and where 'they treat you like a person, not just a kid' (*ibid*, p.203). In contrast, observations in this context find many instances of conflict between the learners and

lecturers, often centred around the forbidden use of mobile phones in the classes (*see* Section 6.2.3). Indeed, many of the learners hardly follow any instructions from the lecturers (*see also* Section 6.2.3). Some learners speak of how their lecturers do not understand their needs; often questioning the lecturers' ability to teach (*see* Section 6.4.4). Much of the observed interactions between the lecturers and learners certainly do not seem like 'adult-to-adult interactions,' as Higton *et al* (2017) find in FE colleges. Nor is there much evidence from observations that, 'Colleges make a point of changing the style of relationship between the teacher and student compared to that used in schools' (*ibid*, p.9). For example, many instances are seen where learners ask to go to the bathroom and lecturers admonish them, asking why they didn't go during their break-time. Of course, sometimes precarious relationships from previous years have been rolled over, since many lecturers and learners have encountered each other throughout successive years of doing re-takes.

What may be considered surprising is that the learners, during interviews, display admiration and speak mostly in positive terms of their lecturers. Many speak of having affectionate, and productive relationship with them. The conflict between the interviews and observation findings can perhaps, again, be explained by the fact that interview participants are from a slightly older profile than many of those observed in the classroom setting. In this context, Higton *et al*'s (2017) assertion that colleges intentionally alter the nature of the relationship between lecturers and learners, fostering more egalitarian interactions compared to those in schools, is perhaps more applicable to the interview participants than to the observed participants.

Autonomy is another antecedent of intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). As explored previously, autonomy shares similar conceptual territory with independence, self-governance, and freedom (Evans, 2015). The research in this context establishes that the lecturers are controlling both towards the learners and the curriculum. In all observations, the lecturers provide the same work for all the learners, without offering any opportunity to choose between tasks. Many of the learners resent that they are not permitted to focus on their perceived areas of weakness. This is expressed both in the interviews and seen in observations. In fact, during observations many learners are perceived indignantly shouting, '*Why* are we doing this again? We just did this!' This imposition of the English re-sit curriculum is something that Truby (2024) warns against. Rather, he argues that there should be a whole-class discussion on how the curriculum should be organised. He (*ibid*) maintains that a practical way of achieving this would be to facilitate a free-writing task regarding what learners want out of the year ahead in English. By doing this, he argues that lecturers can uncover any aspects of English that may intrinsically motivate learners. Ruddle (2024)

likewise argues that offering a choice of texts to study in class *via* voting is important as it increases learners' autonomy, which also, for him, seems fair since the learners are the ones doing the work in classes. Offering the learners a choice of what texts to read also avoids the common problem witnessed in many English classrooms, where the learners might have studied the same text multiple times. After all, the exam bodies only provide a limited number of texts. Draper (2020) would also find our lecturers' practice of 'imposing' English lessons on learners problematic, as she maintains that this could hinder 'dialogic pedagogy,' where learners' perspective is central. Such imposition, she concludes, leads to the weakening of learners' motivation. This limiting of autonomy can perhaps explain why many learners fail to produce much work of good quality or quantity. As Dickenson (1995) states, when learners set the agenda, learning is more purposeful and more effective.

Moreover, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) argue that learners' autonomy can be supported by reducing the salience of evaluative pressure. This research establishes, as has been noted, that lecturers do not follow this advice. In fact, the whole curriculum at times is based solely on preparing the learners for the externally assessed GCSE exams. The consequence of this is that learners also focus entirely on preparing for the exam, instead of seeing English as a humanistic subject worthy of study for its own sake, as envisaged by AQA (2014). When speaking to the learners and even to some lecturers, there is a tangible sense of English not being a whole subject, but rather a series of questions which have their own specific techniques, which must be mastered. Powell (2021) cautions us against adopting such an approach to curriculum delivery, especially warning against teaching *language feature spotting* in classes. This is because unless English is delivered as a diverse, thought provoking and worthwhile curriculum, we are in danger of moving to a 'restricted curriculum,' as described by Bowser-Angermann and Draper (2022).

Lewandowski (2022) asserts that some learners would not benefit from expectations of autonomous behaviour unless they developed the necessary psycho-cognitive skills. Findings here indicate that many learners in the sample can explain what areas of English they want to focus on and articulate why, especially in relation to exam questions. Therefore, it may be suggested that they have already developed the perquisite psycho-cognitive skills to benefit from making autonomous choices.

Furthermore, it may be argued the learners' autonomy is reduced by the *Condition of Funding Policy*. Bellamy's (2017) argument that many learners are not motivated by maths because it is an 'obligatory qualification' as opposed to their freely chosen vocational qualification has also been supported in this research. During observations, many learners freely admit that the

only reason they come in is because they are forced to by their vocational tutors. However, no learner mentions the imposition of English at school as a factor in their negative orientation towards the subject, as Ruddle (2024) and Anderson and Peart (2016) find. Perhaps the compulsory nature of English is not the core issue, but rather that many learners had expected to have already passed English by the time they would have arrived at FE. However, once in FE, they are now 'feeling stuck' doing a subject they do not have a realistic chance of passing (Wallace, 2017) and therefore feel like 'academic failures' (Fuller and MacFadyen, *ibid*, p.98).

To sum up this section, the learners are not intrinsically motivated because the conditions conducive for this type of motivation is absent in this research setting. In fact, this research has established that with regard to competence, relatedness, and autonomy, the lecturers are sometimes doing the exact opposite of what Self-Determination Theorists would recommend.

7.2.2 Amotivation

The findings in the above section confirm Legault, Pelletier and Green-Demer's (2006) argument that the thwarting of autonomy, competence and relatedness can lead to amotivation. In conformance with Ntoumanis *et al*'s (2004) discovery, many of the observed participants show amotivation by displaying avoidance behaviour (*see* Sections 6.2.2; 6.2.3; 6.4.1). Indeed, we see Barkoukis *et al*'s (2008, p.40) four dimensions of amotivated behaviour acted out in the observed classrooms. In concrete terms, these included enacting disruptive behaviour throughout a lesson, often talking over lecturers and generally not following legitimate instructions. They also express their concern that there's no point in coming as they don't care if they pass or fail this course. Many learners also express frustration that they feel like they tried their best in the past yet did not pass. These learners' pessimistic comments link to Maier and Seligman's (1976) idea of *learned helplessness*. It seems that they believe that even if they were to exert their full effort, they would still not pass. After all, many have tried more than once to pass. The idea of hopelessness in the re-sit classroom also features prominently in Wallace's (2017) research, which she argues is a source of amotivation for re-sit English learners.

Amotivation may be considered to manifest itself in unexpected ways. Bower-Angermann and Draper (2022, p.51) describe a learner who is 'furiously drawing' in order to 'disappear himself into the drawing, away from the class.' I also found many instances of learners drawing (*see* Figure 25), mostly in their exercise books but also occasionally on the table. Whereas the lecturer in Bower-Angermann and Draper's (*ibid*) study finds a way to reach out

to that learner by appealing to his interest in theatre and asking him to perform the texts, the lecturers in my study find no such solutions. Perhaps our lecturers could borrow from Sly Cunningham's approach to overcoming amotivation (Wallace, 2017). Instead of diving into lessons with exam style questions, the lecturers might do better to explore collectively the question, 'What's the point of doing GCSE English?' (*ibid*). Answering this question ensured that his learners felt their voice and concerns are listened to, perhaps for the first time, and they certainly took on a more positive view of English thereafter.

Another rationale for why the observed learners are amotivated is perhaps because they are not stretched and challenged in their classes. Analysis of books, lesson resources, and observations show that some of the work presented to our learners seem like they ought to be pitched at learners who are much younger, perhaps even to primary school students (*see* Section 6.3.6). Indeed, during observations many learners ask why they were doing 'childish' work and then refuse to engage with the tasks. As Gregson and Gregson (2024) show, such low expectations are not just limited to English, but that rather narrowly defined, shallow mechanical conception of knowledge, skill and competence also prevails in vocational areas.

It may be that if the lecturers were to take Kay's (2001, p.54) advice of 'basing English... around vocational course topics,' the learners might become less amotivated. However, this is not always practical given, as previously shown, many vocational feeder classes come together to form a single English class. It would be absurd to expect a lecturer to contextualise English to science, health and social care and sports learners, who are often grouped together. This perhaps explains why the observed lecturers are not contextualising English for different vocational learners.

7.2.3 External motivation

Such forms of amotivation discussed above are not expressed by the learners in interviews, however. Instead, they display a specific form of external motivation (EM): External regulation. As previously mentioned, perhaps this difference could be accounted for by the fact that many of the interviewees are older than other re-sit learners; and therefore, have a more mature outlook on education. It will be recalled in Chapter 2, EM is defined as performing any action to attain some separable outcome (Ryan and Deci, 2000). It is further argued that EM can be divided into four separate categories, based on perceived locus of causality. External regulation and introjected regulation have 'external' and 'somewhat external' loci of causality, whereas identified and integrated regulation are recognised as 'somewhat internal' and 'internal' loci of causality (Guay, 2021).

That they are motivated by External regulation is most readily apparent when we look at what factors learners tell us motivates them in English: the desire to progress to university or improve their communication skills for future professional career goals (*see* Section 6.2.6). More learners placed emphasis on the former than the later. This finding is in contradiction to Baird, Rose and McWhirter's (2012, p.304) argument that learners from FE colleges are 'less likely to foreground educational aspirations than students from sixth-from colleges and schools.' This is not to suggest that our learners are not career-minded, but rather to highlight that FE college learners can also aspire towards higher education at the same rate as other learners.

Therefore, the finding from the interviews supports Robey and Jones' (2015) position that many FE learners become more motivated than they were in school because they are concerned with progress into employment and higher education. Progress as conceptualised is something that London Metropolitan College also emphasises, with prominent posters reminding learners (*see* Figure 38) of the link between English and future success. Kay (2021, p.56) notes that such messages as 'If you get a grade 4 in your English and Maths, you'll get a better job and make more money' are displayed in FE colleges country-wide to motivate learners.

The College implements a series of assessment points, including two institution-wide mock examinations designed to simulate exam conditions by suspending regular college activities. This approach aims to enhance learners' motivation and is another example of External regulations because grades are used as a motivating factor. Findings here also support Ryan and Weinstein's (2009) assertion that using high-stakes testing (HST) as a controlling factor can lead to several negative outcomes. Many of the learners speak of how these internal assessments make them feel stressed and anxious. Furthermore, if they achieve a grade below what they expected in the mock, they became disheartened. There is a sense that the learners have become weary of excessive assessments.

Another negative consequence of using HST to motivate learners is that they become too concerned with what might come up in the exam, therefore focusing only on those elements instead of receiving a high quality, humanistic education, as noted previously. This is evident when learners ask me if I know what is going to come up in the exams, or if I recommend that they only practice past papers instead of going to classes. This is something that Wallace (2014) foresaw, arguing that a tick-box assessment-based curriculum can be detrimental to learners' desire for deeper levels of understanding. In relation to HSTs, London Metropolitan

College also rewards learners who are close to passing their exam during the previous year by allowing them to re-do their exams early in November instead of June. However, as Higton *et al* (2017) recognise, such an approach can also lead to problems with motivation as learners perceive that they will pass, and therefore, there is no need to attend lessons. This has been borne out here and unfortunately, very few students pass the November early re-sits.

In relation to other examples of external regulations, my findings indicate that no learner is motivated by financial incentives in the form of College's bursary payments, or the monetary award of £25 for outstanding attendance. Both these awards are contingent upon maintaining 85% attendance for a term. Although learners acknowledge its existence and are theoretically eligible for it, provided they meet the attendance criteria, they report that it does not serve as a motivational factor. This finding, therefore, does not support Burgess, Metcalfe and Sadoff's (2016) study where financial incentives make a difference to some learners. This could be accounted for by the fact that learners in their study receive substantially more money (£80 per half term) than is available to our learners. Indeed, many of the learners interviewed admit the incentives are too small. Many, after all, have part-time employment. Perhaps if the payment were to be substantially more, as it was for Education Maintenance Grant, it would have had more of an impact on our learners' motivation and educational outcomes, as Chowdry and Emmerson (2010) found.

In terms of the three other types of external motivation, there is no evidence to support these from our learners. Howard *et al*'s (2020) argument that Integrated regulation is often not present in learners because their identity is still developing is borne out for my learners, who do not articulate any sense of abiding values or interests in their education. Nor are there examples of Introjected regulation in our learners, despite questions being designed in an attempt to elicit internal pressures such as for example, guilt, or shame. When I question whether learners felt guilty for not doing their homework, the response is negative; nor do they express any shame in failing GCSEs. This is perhaps because they have already rationalised their failings - many spoke, for example, of the competing pressure on their time from vocational assignments, and therefore, they decide to focus on that instead of English. It can be argued that aiming to enhance the learners' communication skills for improving employment prospects constitutes an example of Identified regulation, as this is something that the learner has identified as being of personal importance. However, since many learners also speak of the financial reward of attaining these jobs, it seems to steer more towards External regulation territory.

7.3 Lecturers' motivation at London Metropolitan College

No lecturer participating in this study reports experiencing Intrinsic Motivation (IM), either in choosing to enter the teaching profession or in their ongoing engagement with it. There is a notable absence of the sentiments typically associated with IM, such as deriving joy from teaching or a desire to share their passion for English with their learners. Indeed, there is little indication that the lecturers find their work inherently satisfying or enjoyable (*see* Section 6.3.4). This contrasts with the usual antecedents of entering the profession identified by Reeve and Su (2014), where these elements are deemed significant.

This finding also contradicts the research by McKelvey and Andrew (2006), which indicates that trainee teachers are attracted to the FE sector from a desire to share their passion for their specialist subjects. Odejimi and Ekpenyong (2019, p.73) also find that love of the subject is an important motivating factor for established lecturers in FE. It is intriguing that none of my participants express similar sentiments regarding their prior motivation to enter the profession. This could potentially be explained by the fact that many participants are disillusioned by their current experiences, rendering them unable to recall a time when they were more optimistic. Alternatively, it may be due to the repetitive nature of delivering the same GCSE English curriculum over repeated years.

The current lack of IM among lecturers can be examined through the lens of Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory. Similar to learners, it also appears that the three fundamental elements of IM -relatedness, competency, and autonomy—are insufficiently present for lecturers as well.

Roth (2014) conceptualises relatedness in the context of education as feelings of belonging and connection with other teachers. Unfortunately, this sense of relatedness is often absent at London Metropolitan College. For instance, lecturers frequently express antagonistic sentiments towards their managers and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), reflecting a pronounced 'us versus them' mentality. This phenomenon aligns with the warnings of Greatbatch and Tate (2018), who note that such conflicts can arise when there is a misalignment between the expectations and priorities of lecturers and managers in FE. Additionally, lecturers in the research setting face challenges in forming lasting relationships with agency staff, who typically remain for no more than one academic term. Bathmaker and Avis (2005) note that such limited interaction between colleagues can work against creating a

community of practice, where good practice is shared. Also, the necessity of covering lessons due to staff shortages further limits opportunities for collegial interaction (at one stage of the research, only 5 full-time lecturers were responsible for almost 1000 learners). Several lecturers report not seeing certain colleagues for an entire week, despite sharing the same staff room because these colleagues are occupied with covering multiple lessons. The detrimental effect of excessive class coverage is underscored by Smith and Husband (2024, p.465), who observe that this practice can lead to 'diminishing morale' among the remaining staff. Additionally, the disparity in employment status, with some staff members being hourly paid and others holding permanent positions, often strains relationships. Hourly paid staff, since they are only compensated for their teaching hours, often opt to leave the College immediately after their classes finish, rather than engaging in social interactions with their colleagues. This finding is consistent with McKelvey and Andrew's (*ibid*) research, which establishes that insecurity in terms of permanent contracts can lead to disgruntled and disaffected lecturers in FE.

In relation to lecturers' autonomy, which includes being given the space to develop one's own curriculum and shaping one's individual pedagogic approaches (Roth, *ibid*), this research finds that there are several constraints. Lecturers often express concerns about the extent to which managerial staff dictate both the curriculum content and the selection of texts, often through centrally produced schemes of work. This top-down approach is a source of frustration for lecturers, as the prescribed resources frequently fail to align with the specific needs and interests of their learners. This is the same predicament that Collyer (2021) finds herself in. She, too, is forced to deliver lesson content that she disagrees with. Like Collyer (*ibid*), the lecturers at the research site also find ways on occasions to subvert this imposition, for example, by teaching a lesson that they perceive more reflects the learners' interests. The lecturers also speak of how having to prepare the learners for externally assessed exams restricts their ability to design a course according to their professional judgements and desires. Indeed, there is a sense here of Bowser-Angermann and Draper's (2022) 'restricted curriculum' with narrow focus reference points (*i.e.* exam focused) is at play in the classes observed.

The biggest manifestation of lack of autonomy, however, is the management-imposed deadlines, such as to do with marking and tracking. These deadlines are created with very little input from the lecturers. The result is great resentment from the lecturers. This seems to be a national issue as the ETF's (2022) report also uncovers that 23% of respondents find excessive paperwork and reporting frustrating. Indeed, there is evidence in my research to support Odejimi and Ekpenyong's (2019, p.73) argument that there is a general erosion of

autonomy in the FE sector because of the 'process of marketisation and managerial control.' In sum, Reeves and Su's (2014) point that coercive pressure from above, instead of constructive support, can lead towards emotional exhaustion and loss of motivation appears to be confirmed by my findings.

In relation to competency, most of the lecturers report feeling skilled and knowledgeable in carrying out their responsibilities. However, there is a sense that they are not always provided with relevant information required to be truly effective, nor are they always sure what is expected of them from management. One lecturer speaks of how she is not supported, as a newly qualified lecturer, with mentoring and guidance. She is asked to carry out duties that she feels are beyond her capabilities, and all her pleas for support go unheeded.

Having already established that the lecturers lack IM, the question now is how do we characterise their motivation? Findings here suggest that the lecturers are externally motivated, with evidence of three regulatory styles present: External, Introjected and Identified. In relation to External regulation, all lecturers are at pains to state that they are not primarily motivated by financial rewards. Indeed, they all point out how miserable the pay is. One lecturer captures this well when he states that if they were motivated by pay, they would not be in this profession. What they did want to see, however, is a pay rise, which given both the recent cost of living crisis, as well as the historical pay freeze in FE, seems reasonable. Many lecturers speak of struggling with paying rent and other necessities, and as a result, some are working a second job, often as a private tutor. This is in stark contrast with Addison and Brundrett's (2008) findings that for primary school teachers, pay is not a significant motivator, which can be accounted for by the fact that primary school teachers are paid more for their job than the average FE lecturer. Thus, Tully's (2024) concern regarding the lack of competitive pay as a barrier to recruitment and retention is corroborated by my findings. Consistent with Tully's (*ibid*) argument that inadequate compensation may drive lecturers to leave their positions, three interview participants have decided to pursue alternative professional careers since taking part in this research. Pay was a partial factor for all of them. Moreover, many lecturers reveal that they feel stagnant in their roles, as there does not seem to be a clear career advancement route within the College, as there would be in a primary or secondary school setting. This finding is consistent with Smith and Husband's (2024, p.467) argument that there is an 'unclear career progression pathway' in FE.

Lecturers also make statements that support Introjected regulations related to self-worth and ego-enhancement. Many speak of how they feel they are not recognised by the government in the same way as schoolteachers. Most statements relating to pay increases are accompanied

by comments on the perceived unfairness of getting paid less for essentially doing the same job as those working in schools. Existing literature seems to be mostly silent on this type of ego-based motivation for FE lecturers. However, Odejimi and Ekpenyong (2019) do mention that many FE lecturers are looking for avenues to become higher education lecturers, as they perceive this to be more prestigious. None of my participants echo this desire to go into higher education lecturing.

The majority of lecturers are motivated by a keen sense of wanting to make a difference to the lives of their learners (*see* Section 6.3.4). They are aware that many of the learners are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and they wish to provide them with the best start in life. This finding is consistent with the ETF's (2022) research that shows 82% of lecturers state that the most rewarding aspect of their job is '...changing lives and making a difference.' In this sense, the lecturers adopt an Identified regulation, where the job has a meaning and importance for them that they have accepted. This finding supports Bathmaker and Avis' (2005) finding that many lecturers enter the FE sector because they have a commitment to providing education for those who missed out on formal education for variety of reasons. Like Bathmaker and Avis' (*ibid*) participants, our lecturers also want to support those who are marginalised and disadvantaged, such as those from BAME backgrounds or those with additional learning needs.

7.4 Theoretical perspective two: Making sense of learners' and lecturers' achievement at London Metropolitan College

A majority of the learners re-sitting their GCSEs at FE have failed their exams previously, and some have failed multiple times. The literature review chapter looked at some of the possible reasons for this, with special reference to cultural capital, race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. This section returns to these studies to see how well they can inform my findings.

7.4.1 Race/ ethnicity and achievement

Since most of the learners at London Metropolitan College are from ethnic minority backgrounds, it is not surprising to find that ethnicity or race plays a salient role in their lived experiences. Unfortunately, without access to the College's MIS data, it has not been possible to undertake the kind of analysis that Maris (2024) did in plotting the differential GCSE re-sit outcomes by ethnicity. It is also unfortunate that my research agrees with much of the existing literature, which argues that the idea of race can explain unequal achievement for learners. My findings show that not much has changed since 1979 Rampton Committee (cited in West and Pennell, 2003), which found that unintentional racism is a cause of poor educational outcomes for West Indian learners compared to Asian and White learners. It seems like a minority of lecturers in my research hold somewhat prejudiced views about Afro-Caribbean learners (*see* Section 6.4.5). These views range from negative opinions about their academic abilities to expression of concerns about their behaviour as a group. More than one lecturer expresses a hierarchy of their *ideal learners* based on race, with Asians and Eastern European at the top, and Afro-Caribbean learners ranked at the bottom, and Arab learners occupying the middle ground.

The lecturers may be viewed as ascribing to the notion that some ethnic groups have higher educational aspirations than others, which Kirby and Cullinane (2016) also uses to explain differential ethnic achievement. Indeed, stereotyping did not remain within the classrooms, but also sometimes extended to learners' families. Few lecturers mention that some ethnic groups have too many children, and therefore, the children do not have the space to revise for their exams. One lecturer even mentions that parents from one specific race are less invested in their children's education than other races.

Indeed, whenever an incident of major disruption occurs, the perpetrator's race is sometimes mentioned. Although such views are not conclusive evidence that ethnicity is a factor in some learners' achievement, it does, however, point to the potential for being an explanation. As

Demie (2003) shows, stereotyping and low expectation from teacher can led to underachievement. The often-subtle lecturers' views about learners' racial or ethnic background are sometimes also noticed by the learners, who state that some white lecturers do not understand them and their needs, but without elaborating further.

Macpherson (1999) makes the argument that the National Curriculum fails to adequately reflect the interests or needs of minorities in the UK and this point has resonance with my findings (*see* appendix 7 for examples of this). Whilst many learners want their own ethnic background to be reflected in the texts that they use in classes, the lecturers seem intent on using literature that they find interesting or easily available, for example, from awarding bodies. In fact, most of the texts used in the class are from white, male writers, and in the sample analysed, only one text is from a minority writer. As of June 2024, things seem to be changing at London Metropolitan College as the SLT have initiated a "Decolonising the curriculum" strategy. Many of the English lecturers have been asked to rethink how their curriculum reflects the ethnic/ racial backgrounds of their learners and tasked with ensuring that the materials used is more inclusive than it currently is. The outcome of this initiative is still too early to judge.

7.4.2 Cultural capital and achievement

Whilst many lecturers ascribe low levels of achievement to learners' lack of cultural capital, it seems that the lecturers' understanding of the concept is at a superficial level. Many of the lecturers express the view that cultural capital is appreciation of 'highbrow' culture, in the same way that many Americans understand the concept (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Thus, the lecturers speak of wanting to expose our learners to museums, theatres, cultural events, *etc*. This is even though many studies (*e.g.* Stopforth and Gayle, 2022; Sullivan, 2001) show that engaging in 'highbrow' activities does not lead to educational success. The fact that all my lecturer participants do not take our learners to such cultural institutions might imply that they do not fully subscribe to the idea that access to highbrow culture translates to academic success.

Many of the lecturers also provide their learners with specialised vocabulary as means of granting them access to cultural capital, and this is something that is not explicitly covered in the existing literature. The lecturers seem to be operating from a deficit model of our learners' knowledge. Indeed, the learners' limited vocabulary is something that lecturers mention repeatedly. Other lecturers also mention that our learners do not speak Standard English (the learners often have a London multicultural dialect) as a source of their failure to achieve in

English. Indeed, many are very hostile to non-traditional speech patterns. In common with Verhoeven's (2001) argument, perceived Afro-Caribbean dialect such as "We was" is corrected by lecturers many times during the observations, and learners are reminded to speak 'properly.' This finding also lends support to Goldthorpe's (2007) assertion that whilst middle class learners' share common mode of speech with their teachers, the learners from working class background can experience a hostile culture at places of learning.

My findings can also be seen to confirm Duckworth and Smith's (2019) argument that many of the learners feel 'ignored' and 'invisible' because they did not possess aspects of the dominant culture. Indeed, some of the learners speak of being dismissed or devalued by their lecturers, with many explicitly stating that the lecturers did not understand them because they are from very different culture. Allan and Duckworth (2018) also supply ample evidence that such behaviour from often middle-class teachers is far more widespread than my research setting, as they similarly recount students' voices being belittled, especially in relation to their 'sociocultural capital.' Lecturers in my study often make comments that reinforce these differences between them and their learners. For instance, they make disparaging comments on the 'inappropriate' hairstyle or clothing of the learners. Indeed, even their choice of music is seen as a sign that they are troublemakers, and this is sometimes even used as an explanation of why learners do not achieve well. A lesson delivered on whether learners agree with the statement that Drill music causes knife violence, with shocking quotes from right-wing newspapers is a case in point. This reinforces the idea that Shah *et al* (2010) express that the *right* aesthetic preferences and other symbolic expressions is required to be considered insiders in society's educational institutions.

Bourdieu's (1977, p.494 in Sullivan, 2001, p.3) argument that to be successful in the educational system, there needs to be a 'relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture' is of relevance to my findings. When I analyse the texts that has been provided by AQA exam board, I find them to revolve around the following topics: ice-skiing in Alps mountains, climbing mount Everest, crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a small boat, and hunting elephants with George Orwell in Burma (*see* Appendix 7 for more examples of these topics). These all seem to be preoccupation of the privileged upper-middle classes. Even when the texts are not explicitly exclusionary, like the ones above, the texts presuppose familiarity with what seems like very specific forms of knowledge, such as *chrysanthemums* or the colour *mauve*. It appears that the middle-class learners will find such texts more accessible than the working class, as these topics and vocabulary is part of their lived experiences. Moreover, the preoccupation of the GCSE curriculum in terms of genres that a student is required to produce

in the exam, such as writing newspaper articles, speeches, or formal letters, seems removed from what many of our school and college leavers will do in their everyday life, apart from perhaps writing formal letters. These also seem very much like the preoccupation of the privileged few.

7.4.3 Family socio-economic background and achievement

Findings here are consistent with Standing's (1999) argument that educationalists often view educational success as being a product of a 'partnership' between teachers and parents; an implicit contract that requires the parents to, for example, read to their children and ensure homework is done. Many of the lecturers participating in my research speak of lack of support they receive from parents and often state that this is the cause of learners' underachievement at GCSE re-sit course (*see* Section 6.4.5). That many parents do not attend parents' evenings is often seen as evidence that they do not care about their children's education. In fact, some lecturers also make inferences about learners' homelives, often negative ones, without much evidence. Multiple lecturers state that our learners have 'chaotic' family lives, for example. Some lecturers are, however, more willing to accept that parents often work long hours and cannot support their children as much as they wish to. A minority of lecturers refer to how many of our learners are from single-parent family, and as such the parent is already overstretched and do not have the finance or energy to support their children educationally. This is a finding consistent with Standing's (*ibid*) argument that single parent families can face different challenges to traditional, nuclear families.

Learners' social class is also a point of reference for some of the lecturers in my study. Whereas Gillies (2005) states that middle-class parents use different terminology to describe their children than working-class parents, my research suggests that the same also applies to lecturers at my research setting. A minority of lecturers make derogatory comments about learners doing stereotypically working-class courses, such as multi-construction courses. Examples of these comments include: 'They're just chavs' and 'All they know is violence.' At other times, a few lecturers make the comment that sixth forms keep all the nice, middle-class learners, and give us all the troublesome working-class ones, thereby perpetuating the academic-vocational divide that Fuller and Macfadyen (2012) argue exists in the FE sector. Furthermore, Higton *et al* (2017) argues that some working-class learners did not apply themselves to English and maths because their family members have achieved success without them, my research finds that a minority of lecturers ascribe to this view as well. They argue that some working-class learners simply do not need these qualifications because they can work for their family's business or become independent traders. Two learners during the

observation also express the same view, arguing that English is a ‘waste of time’ because they will start working for their dad when they leave College.

Analysing the interview data, it becomes clear that Mortimore *et al*’s (1988, summarised in West and Pennell, 2003) argument is supported - that teachers are more likely to judge learners from non-manual backgrounds as possessing greater academic abilities than those from working-class backgrounds. Many lecturers comment that certain learners come from a ‘good’ or ‘educated’ background, or that a specific learners’ mum is a professional, and that is attributed to the learners’ success. A few lecturers also comment that middle-class parents are more likely to complain if things go wrong, and therefore, they sometimes get preferential treatments, such as accessing additional learning support. Generally, there is an unstated belief that some middle-class learners would attend university after passing GCSE English, and lecturers should ensure that they support such aspirations. Therefore, Dunn and Gazeley's (2008) argument that working-class underachievement can also be attributed to assumptions and low expectations of teachers is evident in my research.

In contrast to the view presented above, the learners convey a view where their parents are active in supporting their education and provide many opportunities for them to succeed. However, many of the parents also do not understand how the British education system works as many are recent immigrants, therefore, their involvement is not perhaps as extensive as middle-class white parents.

7.4.4 Lecturers’ role in learners’ achievement at London Metropolitan College

Ibn Khaldun (2015) states that teachers need to revisit a topic three times, each time delving into greater detail whilst encouraging learners’ independence. Unfortunately, this removal of ‘scaffolding’ is not observed with regularity in the lessons; instead, even weeks before the exams, the lecturers provide learners with too much support. For example, they are giving sentence starters for exam questions or providing exemplary answers for learners to copy. This is something that TLRP explicitly recommends against doing. A good ‘scaffold’ is only effective when it is slowly withdrawn as learners gain in confidence (summarised in Gregson *et al*, 2020).

Burgess, Rawal and Taylor (2022) find that using peer work between learners as a TLA strategy is very successful in attaining positive educational outcomes and is far superior to traditional lecture-based approaches. Yet, it is the latter approach that is adopted by a majority of our lecturers. This may reflect changes in educational philosophy at play at London

Metropolitan College. There is a shift away from learner-centric strategies, where the role of the lecturer is to set the scene for learners to discover answers, to a more direct instruction-based strategy. Indeed, direct instruction-based teaching has become popular across the education sector, especially since it is supported by esteemed educationalists, such as Hattie (2003). Husbands and Pearce (2012) argue that we need to use a range of techniques and strategies for effective pedagogy. The lecturers in my study do not seem to be doing that. This is surprising given that the College has invested much money in educational packages, such as TeachingHOW2s, an app that supports lecturers in diversifying their approach to TLA. As many of our lecturers are experienced, perhaps Hattie's (*ibid*) distinction between experienced and expert teachers may explain this lack of variety in TLA strategies. He (*ibid*) argues that often people conflate the two, but expertise in teaching is rare and requires deliberate practice.

However, what the existing literature fails to recognise is that lecturers make many personal sacrifices so that their learners have the best chance of succeeding. I witnessed many cases of lecturers foregoing their lunch because a learner has knocked on the door asking for a past paper. Indeed, one lecturer came into work on her day off so that she can help her learners prepare for the November re-sit exam. Almost all lecturers come into work during College holidays so that they can run revision sessions. Unfortunately, very few learners take advantage of this support and often it is those who least need the help turn up.

7.4.5 Lecturers' sense of their own achievement

Unfortunately, I could not locate any research on what achievement meant for lecturers in FE. I searched using phrases such as 'Lecturers' sense of achievement in FE' and 'What does achievement mean for teachers or lecturers in FE?' on Google Scholar. However, the results yielded are not relevant to this study. Most of these search prompts find research about how lecturers or teachers influence students' achievement.

My findings, therefore, makes a novel contribution to our knowledge of this topic. Lecturers' sense of achievement is inextricably linked with their learners' achievement (*see* Section 6.3.5). When prompted to reflect on what achievement meant for them, every lecturer state that they feel that they have achieved something when their learners pass their exams. Conversely, the lecturers are disappointed and feel like they have also failed when their learners did not achieve a passing grade. This is especially the case for learners who regularly attend their lessons and work hard.

7.5 Theoretical perspective three: Learners' academic engagement and lecturers' engagement with their work

Theories of engagement constitutes the third of my theoretical perspectives. Existing literature around academic engagement has been explored in Chapter 2. A return to these studies will seek to ascertain if they can illuminate my findings. This will apply to both learners and lecturers in the study.

7.5.1 Typology of learners' engagement

Fredrick *et al*'s (2004) tripartite conception of academic engagement has been previously discussed, and their three conceptually distinct types of engagement- behavioural, emotional and cognitive - possess explanatory power for my research.

Behavioural engagement assesses adherence to positive conducts of learning, as indicated by actions such as following the norms and expectations of classrooms (Fredrick *et al*, *ibid*). In practical terms, this includes contributing to discussions, asking questions and focusing on the work at hand. Indicators of behavioural disengagement would include disruptive behaviour. On balance, during all observations, more instances of behavioural disengagement are to be seen than of engagement (*see* Section 6.2.3). In most observations, there is an element of passivity on the learner's part. Many learners have to repeatedly instructed to do things, such as to remove their headphones (*see* Section 6.4.4). Passive hostility from the learners is perhaps even more evident than active acts of defiance. Many instances are seen where a lecturer would ask a question to the learners, only to be met with a stony silence. If the lecturer pushes a specific learner for a response, they are often met with either a shoulder shrug or a 'I don't know.' In some cases, the learner will take this as evidence of being picked on, and there is a confrontation. Even the basic norms of a class, where everyone reads parts of the reading extract, is sometimes met with, 'I don't want to do it.' These observations echo findings from Collyer (2021) and Veitch (2022), who likewise find disruptive behaviour abound in GCSE English classes. In Collyer's (*ibid*) case, the learners also refuse to read the texts or even follow basic instructions. Reflecting on these behavioural challenges, there is a distinct impression that learners resent the lack of power that they have in the classroom, and perhaps such disengaged behaviour is an attempt to redress the balance of power, as argued by Allan and Duckworth (2018).

In relation to doing homework, which Finn *et al* (1995) provides as an indicator of behavioural engagement, most of the learners do not do their homework (*see* Section 6.4.1).

Nor it seems are many lecturers setting homework; when I enquire about this, some lecturers state that there is no point as the learners did not engage with it.

Perhaps the biggest indicator that many learners are behaviourally disengaged is their failure to adhere to London Metropolitan College's *Behaviour for Learning Policy*. The College has strict behaviour expectations around wearing lanyards, not consuming hot drinks or wearing hoodies in the classroom. Yet, all observations reveal a majority of learners flouting at least one of these expectations. The lecturers often instruct the learners to adhere to the *Policy*, but they are often either actively rebuffed or simply ignored. The learners' response often focuses on different behavioural expectations between English and their vocational subjects, where they say that they are not challenged on such aspects. Kay (2021) and Choudhury (2023) also find that conflicting behavioural expectations between vocational areas and English and maths can lead to worsening behaviour. At a recent visit to the research College, Kay again restated this position. Many managers and SLT members present agreed that re-sit courses and vocational areas cannot continue to operate in silos, but what practical steps they would take to overcome this challenge is yet to be outlined.

In the Literature Review chapter, attention is drawn to a disagreement about what emotional engagement measures, with Davis *et al* (2012) taking an expansive view to mean a sense of belonging and Fredricks *et al* (2004) focusing more on learners' feelings such as anxiety, anger, happiness and boredom in the schools. Learners' sense of belonging has already been discussed in Section 7.2.1, so this section deals only with Fredricks *et al*'s (*ibid*) notion of emotional engagement. Observations reveal many instances of learners expressing strong feelings, predominantly anger and boredom. In regard to boredom, many learners are often vocal about how bored they feel, with some shouting out that, 'this is boring!' Others are less explicit, for example, resting their head on the table (*see* Section 6.4.3). Others ask lecturers if they can leave early, or how long is left until the lesson ends. Indeed, more than once, learners employ the notion of metaphorical death to describe the class: 'It feels like someone died.' As noted before, Bellamy (2017) similarly recounts learners making such remarks about their re-sit classes, describing them as feeling like 'suicide.' Furthermore, speaking to learners about how they felt doing the activities set by the lecturers, many express nihilistic thoughts: 'I don't know why we are doing this' is heard more than once. Observation notes typically describe their body language as looking 'dejected and lifeless.'

In addition, instances of emotional outbursts are observed in the classes; where at the slightest opportunity, some learners will shout at the lecturers or insist on arguing over moot points. Whilst such instances are not typical of every observed lesson, it does seem that the outburst

goes significantly deeper than the event leading up to it; perhaps some inner emotional frustration that had been pent up for weeks. Even during the interviews with the learners, there is a palpable sense of anxiety and anger over having failed in the past. Many learners express frustration that they keep on failing, and how much of an emotional toil it has taken on them. These feelings are also encountered by Wallace (2017) and Bowser-Angermann and Draper (2022), who document the raw and often negative emotions many learners display in their re-sit classes.

Although cognitive engagement is not observable like behavioural engagement (Fredricks *et al*, 2004), it has been possible to infer its absence from my findings. Cognitive engagement is concerned with the meta-cognitive aspects of learning and concerns itself with whether learners are strategic or self-directed in their studies. One aspect of cognitive engagement is having a positive mechanism in the face of failure, and this is something that seems to be absent with many of our learners. For example, learners have been observed expressing disbelief and hostility when they receive results of their mock exams. Draper (2020) and Ruddle (2024) also note the pernicious impact of repeated failing on learners' self-image, and it seems their findings echo those found at the research site. Some learners even question the ability of the lecturers to mark adequately. Many learners at other times have very little confidence in their work and totally rely on lecturers' feedback to evaluate the quality of their work. Even when the lecturer provides constructive feedback, some learners take that to mean that they are not intellectually capable of passing the course. Indeed, there seems to be an absence of a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2017) displayed in the classrooms, with mistakes often perceived as an evaluative judgement on the learners' overall ability in English.

Helme and Clarke (2001 in Fredricks *et al*, 2004) mention that one indicator of cognitive engagement is the sharing of ideas. Unfortunately, this is absent in many of the observations. For example, the lecturer would read a text and ask the learners for their own interpretations. Many do not engage with this task, often preferring to say 'I don't know' or just providing a surface level response. Veitch (2022) also encounters such attitude with his learners, and Collyer (2021) similarly finds learners reluctant to share their thoughts and ideas. This indicates that this reluctance to share ideas is more widespread than at my research setting. Finn and Zimmer (2012) also mention that 'think alouds' where a learner explains their thought process can indicate cognitive engagement. However, during the observations, lecturers ask learners to explain or justify their responses, where again, they are often met with silence. More generally, there is very little indication that learners are cognitively engaged with the lessons- indeed, even the questions learners ask lecturers are often merely procedural in nature - such as when and where the exams are taking place.

7.5.2 Timetable as a source of concern at London Metropolitan College

This research establishes that unsuitable timetabling practices negatively impact on learners' lived experiences of GCSE English (*see* Section 6.4.2). Findings by Kelley *et al* (2015) and Edwards (2012) are confirmed here that having early starts, which at London Metropolitan College is 8:45am, is particularly damaging for learners. The learners in this study speak of their decreased concentration, cognitive performance and general feelings of tiredness caused by early starts. What the existing literature also appears to fail to take in to account, is that many learners have other responsibilities that makes engaging with early morning classes very challenging. Some learners, for example, speak of having to work late night shifts to support their family, and therefore, are very tired when they have to attend an 8:45am class. Others travel long distances to attend the College, with some spending more than two hours on public transport. A majority of our learners, as noted in the introduction, come from outside the Borough where the College is located. Others speak of having to take their younger siblings to school, and therefore, are rushing to attend their lessons on time. Although the literature is also silent on the impact of having lessons at the end of the College day, which is from 4:15pm to 5:45pm at the research College, findings here indicate that this is also detrimental to learners' educational experience. They complain of experiencing the same set of negative emotional and cognitive problems as outlined for early morning starts.

Another aspect of learners' experience of GCSE English in relation to timetabling that is neglected in the existing literature is the impact of repeated changes, especially at the beginning of year. This research establishes that this process is very unsettling for both lecturers and learners. Many learners use this as an excuse to subsequently not attend any lessons; complaining that they did not know where they were supposed to be. The literature's absence on this point could be because of the paucity of research in FE generally, or it could be because this is a problem is specific to London Metropolitan College.

The learners also agree with Kay (2021) that having excessive gaps between lessons is detrimental to their college experience, as many feel that they do not have anything to cover that gap with. Conversely, the learners also state that not having a break between lessons can hamper their ability to focus on English, which many find more cognitively taxing than their vocational course.

7.5.3 Issues with attendance and punctuality at London Metropolitan College

The findings suggest that attendance is one of the biggest causes for concern in relation to engagement for London Metropolitan College. Indeed, towards the end of the academic year, many classes have learners in the single digits- which is both surprising and concerning since the summative exams are only weeks away at this stage. As noted in the Findings chapter, many lecturers are unaware of why their learners are absent (*see* Section 6.4.1) - this research can shine some light on this. What the existing reviewed literature fails to capture is how disruptive it is for lecturers to have learners absent or late for their classes. The lecturers often sequence lessons so that learners continue with the work of previous sessions, and unfortunately many lessons have to be stopped repeatedly so that the latecomers or previously absent learners can catch up with what was missed.

The findings also partially confirm Longhurst's (1999) findings on absenteeism in FE. Whilst for Longhurst (*ibid*), the most common reason for learners' absence is illness, for my participants it is work commitments. This could perhaps be explained by specific demographics of our learners, many of whom are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and need to work to support their families. It could also be that since many of the participants are 18 years old, there is more of an expectation that they have a job compared to Longhurst's (*ibid*) participants, whose age range is not shared. In common with Longhurst's (*ibid*) findings, learners in this study also cite being unwell or having medical appointments as a major cause for non-attendance. What is notable is that no participant mentions their perception of their lecturer (either liking or disliking them) as a reason for attendance or non-attendance. This is even though both learners and lecturers mention that having a positive relationship is important (*see* Section 6.4.4), and that the relationship is sometimes strained, as witnessed during observation. Moreover, given that many learners express that they dislike having to do English, it is also surprising that no learner cite this as a reason for non-attendance. In contrast, this is one of the factors Longhurst' (*ibid*) learners express as a cause for absence.

The literature reviewed seems to be silent on the causes of FE learners being unpunctual for their lessons. My learners express that they find travelling on public transport difficult because of its unpredictable nature- delays often happen without prior notice. They also mention that they have difficulty waking up early for the morning classes, which starts at 8:45am. This, however, does not explain why observations reveal that issues with punctuality continue with afternoon classes as well.

Choudhury's (2023) research on potential barriers to good attendance and punctuality resonates with my findings. As one lecturer at the research site states, there is inconsistency in applying the College's attendance policy, which Choudhury (*ibid*) also finds is a barrier. The lecturer argues that the learners can have very low attendance, but the organisational consequences are minimal. Moreover, Choudhury (*ibid*) also finds that there is insufficient recognition for having good attendance and punctuality at her research site. My learners also argue that they do not get recognition from the College when their attendance and punctuality is high. As mentioned before, financial reward of £25 for high attendance does not seem like an adequate reward for these participants.

7.5.4 What lecturers are doing (or not doing) at London Metropolitan College to engage learners

The National Education Union's (2019) survey establishes that 61% of their members believe that the GCSE reforms have led to a decrease in learner engagement. My research found evidence to generally support this. This contention is borne out by interviews with learners and lecturers, class observations and book scrutiny. Indeed, as pointed out previously, Veitch's (2022) interaction with the Motor Vehicle learner, Michael, resonates with my findings. Many 'Michaels' were to be observed, with their arms folded, staring vacantly at the door; or more often staring intensely at their phones (*see* Section 6.2.2 and Section 6.2.3), doing everything but engaging with their work. It seems to be that Veitch's (*ibid*) analysis of why this happens, based of Freire's (1974) concept of a 'banking model of education' is also applicable to my research setting. Both from observations and interviews with lecturers, there is evidence that there is a great emphasis on what the learners did not know or on the 'gaps in their knowledge.' The fact that these learners might have been learning English for decades is often ignored. This is evident from the topics chosen to teach (language and structural features, such as metaphors, foreshadowing). This is very much in-line with the description of a 'restricted curriculum' by Bowser-Angermann and Draper (2022) based on instilling new knowledge in learners. Very few lecturers take the time to establish what the learners already know, which TRLP recognises as essential to effective pedagogy (Gregson *et al*, 2020). Similar to Michael, perhaps many of the learners in my study engage in disruptive behaviour because they are rejecting the role of an empty vessel waiting to be filled with lecturers' wisdom and knowledge. This is one of the negative consequences of ignoring learners' starting points identified out by Powell (2021) and Ruddle (2024).

Given that the 'fill in the gap' approach to curriculum described above is not producing the desired results, it seems curious that an alternative approach based on 'dialogic pedagogy' (Draper, 2020) is not considered. After all, placing value on learners' perception, including

their strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, seems like it would support deeper engagement from the learners, as Bowser-Angermann and Draper (*ibid*) suggest. Indeed, Ruddle's (2024) suggestion of offering the learners a choice over the texts to be studied could be extended to offering them a choice over what areas of the curriculum they would like to focus on. It does seem unfair to the learners to cover materials that they already understand. Perhaps doing so, we can make strides towards what AQA (2014) envisages GCSE English to be for: 'genuine enquiry into different topics and themes.'

Veitch (*ibid*) and Ledger (2024) further argue that the pressure to 'teach to the exams' is an aspect of performativity culture that is well established amongst FE institutions. Whilst my research does establish that the lecturers are often 'teaching to the exams,' it does not appear that this is because of performativity culture. Indeed, speaking to the curriculum managers reveals that the College does not track the pass rates of individual lecturers, which would not even be possible in many cases since lecturers share classes. In fact, even the percentage of learners passing every year is often a closely guarded secret. Perhaps this could be due to the low pass rates we achieve. Nor does it seem that performativity pressure originates from learners, as no supportive evidence is discovered. However, if we conceive of performativity culture more expansively, as Gregson *et al* (2020, p.85) do, than we can see that 'a subtle ideology' of 'risk aversion' is apparent in centring the curriculum around exams, as it is seen as more likely to produce GCSE passes.

Collyer (2021) highlights the negative impact of having centrally planned resources on engagement in GCSE classes. These are lessons designed by the managers of a multi-academy trust; and often these lessons do not meet the need of specific classes. My research finds that the many lecturers are not using centrally produced resources, though these are often available. The scheme of work that the curriculum managers produced do not often inform the lessons, and often the resources used are acquired from the internet. It appears that the quality of the resources used impact on the learners' engagement with the classes as these resources sometimes seem unsuitable for the learners. They are either aimed at very young children (*see* Section 6.3.6) or are designed for very high achieving learners in schools, although the former is seen more often than the latter.

Halligan and Baines (2022) explore how teachers engage lower set learners in GCSE English in secondary schools through the use of encouragement and minimising negative reprimands. Robey and Jones (2015) also find that lecturers in FE use encouragement to engage learners. My research finds that lecturers do use encouragement and praise to engage learners; but crucially they are often directed at learners who are engaged in disruptive behaviour. Also,

the nature of the praise is often person-centric, and very generic. Repeatedly, praise such as 'well done, good work' or 'your behaviour is much better today' can be heard. Even when work is praised, it is done in a general form, such as 'This is good work.' However, praise for those who are well-behaved is often absent in observations. Similar findings apply to feedback on written work- praise is often very generalised, limited to comments such as 'Good work' or 'Well done.' In contrast to Robey and Jones (2015), many instances of negative reprimands are observed at the research setting. They range from being told off for talking loudly whilst the lecturer is talking to being sent out of the class. In fact, these events are witnessed to varying degrees in all the observations (*see* Section 6.2.2).

What is also interesting to note from these findings is that technology is rarely used. The College has state of the art interactive whiteboards (IWB), yet they are only used for the presentation of PowerPoint slides. There is no use of IWB for interactive quizzes such as Kahoot, or even showing videos. Although Alba and Fraumeni's (2019) suggest we should only use technology when it is expedient to do so, this the lack of use of technology to engage our learners is conspicuous. This, perhaps, is reflective of the traditional approach to teaching that many of the lecturers have adopted, based on *didactic* instead of a *dialogic* approach.

7.6 Lecturers' engagement with their work at London Metropolitan College

My research supports The College Staff Survey 2019's (DfE, 2020) findings that many of the lecturers are leaving the profession to take up alternative opportunities. In fact, since the beginning of my research, three lecturers and two curriculum managers have left the College. Thus, Smith and Husband's (2024) argument that retention is a problem across the FE sector is confirmed by my research. In fact, the English Department remains understaffed, and this is having a detrimental impact on remaining staff members. They speak of the difficulty of covering their missing colleagues' classes (*see* Section 6.3.1). Many lecturers reflect that this is particularly stressful because they are often only informed of the cover on the day and are expected to carry out the extra administrative and academic responsibilities associated with covering the lessons, such as chasing absences and marking work. Therefore, Smith and Husband's (*ibid*, p.465) point that excessive covering of classes can have a detrimental impact on learners' experience because of 'diminishing morale' amongst current staff members is also applicable to my research site.

The research also supports Duckworth and Smith's (2019) argument that having excessive teaching hours, often over 24 hours per week, can be an impediment to transformative

teaching and learning in FE. Many respondents speak of teaching classes back-to-back for almost the entire working day. This not only causes them stress and feelings of being 'drained,' but also means that they do not have the time to plan genuinely engaging lessons. This might account for the fact that many of the lessons observed seem to be generically planned, which do not seem to reflect the interests of the learners and are often downloaded from the internet. Transformative teaching necessitates time for reflection, planning, and learning from experience; however, this becomes unfeasible if lecturers are preoccupied with day-to-day 'firefighting,' as one lecturer describes it.

The College Staff Survey (2019) indicates that a significant proportion of lecturers (46% of respondents) find their workload unmanageable. The percentage of my respondents who found their workload unmanageable is 100%. Whereas Duckworth and Smith's (2019) show that 29% of the respondents spent over 12 hours per week on administrative tasks, all my respondents state that they spent well over 12 hours on administrative tasks. Some even say that they spend over 15 hours on administrative tasks. These tasks include tracking learners' progress on an Excel spreadsheet, writing SMART targets for each individual learner, reporting on behavioural issues on the College's MIS system, and ensuring that the ever-changing demands from their managers are met. Many of the lecturers think that their tasks often involve unnecessary duplication, and more generally that these tasks should be done by an administrator, not them. Many lecturers also speak of staying behind, often until late into the evenings, or taking work home, as their contractual hours are not enough to meet the excessive demands of the job.

At time of writing (November 2024), there is an impending sense of an imminent OFSTED visit. As Tully (2024) predicts, this is having a significant impact on upon the well-being of lecturers. They are having to create new schemes of work, lesson plans, group profiles, *etc* to satisfy the needs of the Inspectors. The lecturers not only speak of the artificiality of creating these documents, as they do not often inform their TLA, but many also spoke of stress and anxiety associated with the OFSTED inspection. In this sense, Munoz- Chereau *et al*'s (2024) finding that OFSTED visits can lead to performativity and disempowerment is applicable to my study, as much of the lecturers' workload is dictated by curriculum managers, who in turn are instructed by the SLT. The lecturers also mention having similar feelings about the College's internal observations (*see* Section 6.3.3). Thankfully, since the interviews, the College has moved on to a new observation system that is not based on OFSTED-style grading but instead is underpinned by lecturers' autonomy and ownership of their development. Consequently, feedback from the lecturers is that they find this new policy more supportive and progressive.

My findings also support The College Staff Survey's (Thornton *et al,* 2020) finding that poor management is a major cause of lecturers' overburdening. The lecturers perceive that the managers are unaware of how much work they are doing, as well as the toil it takes on them mentally and physically. Many lecturers speak of negative psychological consequences of overwork, such as depression and anxiety. This negative impact is not adequately reflected in the existing literature. Moreover, many lecturers also feel that managers need to be more proactive in making their workloads more manageable. This could be done, for example, by making sure that the deadlines are reasonable and do not clash with other deadlines. In fact, it seems that many of the lecturers are making the argument that the College has adopted a 'managerial orientation' (Gregson *et al*, 2020), based on measurement, efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, no lecturer expresses the view that suggests that managers are driven by 'professional orientation,' based on mutual respect, progress and development (*ibid*).

7.7 Lecturers' engagement with Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

This research did not find any lecturers reluctant to engage with CPD sessions, contrary to Crisp *et al*'s (2023) finding. Crisp *et al* (*ibid*) quote some senior managers as saying that lecturers are reluctant to engage with professional development as they are set in their ways. In fact, I find the opposite to be true: all participants are eager to develop their practice, so much so that they are willing to pay out of their own pocket (*see* Section 6.3.2). The lecturers, however, express difficulty in being able to participate in CPD sessions as they are overburdened with their work. This finding is consistent with Bartleton's (2018) argument that lecturers need time to be reflective in order to benefit fully from CPD sessions. There is also evidence of what Broad (2015) describes as 'impoverished networks,' where hourly paid lecturers find it more difficult to access training compared to permanent staff members. Indeed, some hourly paid lecturers refuse to participate in CPD sessions on principle, as they are not being paid for those hours, unlike their permanent colleagues. Many of the lecturers also speak of the lack of suitable CPD opportunities available to them; with some claiming that there is very limited support from the College for their development. Smith and Husband's (2024) contention that CPD that is often on offer for FE lecturers is 'insufficient and fragmented' is borne out here by findings. Participants also mention feeling stagnant and de-skilled, which is a consequence predicted by Smith and Husband (*ibid*) of offering unsuitable CPD.

This research also supports Husband's (2019) finding that lecturers prefer subject specialism CPD training over generic development based on pedagogy. In fact, many of the lecturers find it difficult to apply what they learn in generic, College-wide CPD sessions to their practice. Goldhawk and Waller (2023) also note that CPD that addresses individual lecturers' needs tend to be perceived as being effective, and this is something one participant in my research, who is a newly qualified lecturer, agrees with. She argues that the College- imposed CPD sessions do not address her needs as it prioritises the needs of the average college lecturer. Another lecturer, whose educational background is law, is desperate to enhance her subject specialism through the CPD sessions. This underscores Morris *et al'*s (2024) point that as more non-subject specialists teach subjects like English and maths, due to the current recruitment crisis, their development becomes even more pressing.

Fortunately, there is a sense that things are improving at London Metropolitan College in regard to CPD. Beginning in the 2022/23 academic year, a new approach to CPD was introduced. This was based on professional discussions, where the facilitators create the space for dialogue between professionals. Bartleton's (2018) conclusion that for training session to be successful, there needs to be an element of collaboration between professionals bodes well for this new approach that the College has adopted. Indeed, the participants in this research speak highly of these CPD sessions. Perhaps these sessions are successful because they avoid the pitfalls of CPD that Goldhawk and Waller (2023) recognise: they state that CPD that consist of 'didactic, one-size-fits-all' sessions delivered by senior managers or external 'experts' are often poorly received. This is because they assume that the lecturers are 'receptacles' waiting to be filled, when in reality they are experienced professionals (*ibid*).

7.8 Limitations of the study

There are a number of limitations to this study. This section considers their nature, as well as the potential implications that they might have on my study. My first research question seeks to explore the lived experiences of learners doing GCSE re-sit English at a specific research site. Whilst numerous classroom observations and interviews with learners were conducted, there is a missing group of potential participants. Of course, those who are the most disengaged, least motivated and who effectively do not achieve academically are those who either drop out of the course or simply refuse to attend any classes. Attempts at reaching these potential participants proved futile as they refused to engage with the research. I also did not receive any institutional support in reaching these individuals. However, having them participate in this research might have proved insightful as their experiences could perhaps provide a contrasting perspective.

Another limitation, already briefly discussed in Literature Review chapter, is that there is a dearth of literature on GCSE re-sit learners' experiences at FE colleges. Although the research terrain is still sparse, thankfully this is now changing gradually. For example, *GCSE Resit Hub* at the University of Warwick is coordinating some exciting research and seminars. Due to the scarcity of existing literature, it was necessary to incorporate findings from studies conducted in secondary schools and international contexts more extensively than initially intended. This occasionally complicates direct comparisons between my findings and the existing literature, as the studies involve different types of learners. Fortunately, I had access to several insightful PhD theses and some contextual research focused on FE settings.

My research is situated in Central London, which is reflected in the demographic composition of my participants. With the exception of one, all my learner participants are from ethnic minority backgrounds, and a significant number are working class. As such, it is difficult to make any generalisable comments about my findings. However, given the qualitative nature of this research, these concerns are not entirely justifiable. I have provided 'thick descriptions' of my setting, participants, and findings; and it is up to the reader to determine if some of the conclusions I have reached are applicable to their settings. Nevertheless, incorporating an additional research setting, potentially from outside of London, could have provided an opportunity to explore whether the findings differ significantly.

A further limitation is that I was not able to access the College's Management Information System (MIS) statistical data on attendance, punctuality and achievement. Such data could have revealed information about whether attendance changes according to days of the week,

terms, *etc*; or whether punctuality is impacted by the start and end times of the lessons. Although I have obtained qualitative insights on these questions from both learners and lecturers, the College did not provide the requested MIS data.

Chapter 8

Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications for Practice

8.1 Reflections on the insights gained from this study

Policymakers can sometimes operate in a realm disconnected from the operational practices and lived experiences affected by the policies they enact. This research highlights some of the unintended consequences of the well-meaning *Condition of Funding Policy* that mandates GCSE re-sits for many learners who have not achieved a Grade 4 in English and maths at secondary school. Here, the initial gestation of this policy is charted with reference to its justification by the Wolf Report (2011) to its implementation at a specific research site in London. In doing so, it has been possible to uncover many maladies, as well as reasons for optimism. Below, I reflect on some of the insights gained from this research journey.

What struck me the most is the almost 'tunnel vision'-like approach to this policy that the Government, managers and lecturers have adopted. For the Government, the argument for reforming this policy is indisputable: only about a quarter of learners are achieving the qualifications, despite attempting it multiple times. Yet, they have been lethargic, to say the least, in reforming the *Policy*. We can only speculate on why, but the rationale seems to be favouring the ideological over practical effectiveness. Nor, it seems, do the managers and SLT have in place a meaningful approach to make this *Policy* work in practice. Examples of such counterproductive strategies and approaches have been detailed in this research in abundance. Lastly, the lecturers also seem to be caught up in the logic of planning and delivering lessons based around the product of the exams instead of the process of learning. The recommendations in Section 8.5 should hopefully provide remedies for some of these issues.

Regarding the practicalities of the research, it seems that only an embedded insider-practitioner, intimately familiar with the field of practice, could uncover many of the findings presented in this study. It is only because I am a qualified English lecturer and a trained TLA Development Coach that I can make informed judgments on observations, such as the disconnect between official College discourses and the reality in the classrooms. An example

of this is that whilst College-wide CPD encourages using a range of assessment techniques, many lecturers are observed to only use exam-based assessments. Another example pertains to interpersonal relationships: Whilst the College has adopted a "trauma-informed" approach, many lecturers are sceptical of its efficacy for their learners. Even in terms of classroom layouts, it is only because I also use the same classrooms that I could really understand how difficult it is to, for example, change the table structure without upsetting other lecturers also sharing the same room, often immediately afterwards.

However, being an insider-practitioner researcher can also raise moral dilemmas. For instance, on more than one occasion, offensive comments on learners' race and class were voiced by lecturers. I have been rightly concerned by these comments, but as a researcher my job is to uncover what often remains unstated. If I were to report these comments to the College authorities, then the trust I have gained with my colleagues will have been diminished. Researchers need to ensure confidentiality to their participants, even when they voice ideas that are unpalatable for most. I was fortunate enough to discuss these moral quandaries with my supervisor and navigate a solution, where we decided that I would exercise caution in using my colleagues' quotes verbatim and draw attention to the controversial nature of the comments.

8.2 Original contributions of this study

The paucity of research on GCSE English re-sits is something that Morris *et al* (2024) comment on as being 'remarkable,' given the scale of the offering and low number of good passes. Indeed, they have only found 5 studies examining GCSE English compared to 40 for maths re-sits. I hope my research can help redress that balance, even if it is a small dent. My research also attempts to make several valuable theoretical and empirical contributions to the existing field of knowledge, which are detailed below.

Firstly, whilst the 5 studies mentioned above look at the experiences of learners doing GCSE English re-sits, they almost entirely omit the lecturers' experiences. My research has carried out extensive observations and interviews to show that the lecturers' experiences is often just as poor as the learners'. Indeed, it may be argued successfully, as this research does, that it is almost impossible to disentangle the two experiences as they are so interwoven. Thus, in many cases, lecturers' low expectations of the learners lead to the production of low-quality and low-quantity work or disruptive behaviour, which in turn negatively impacts on lecturers' well-being.

Secondly, this research explores the minutiae of learners' and lecturers' experiences, which have not been previously studied. For example, while some have noted the issues with basing the curriculum around GCSE exams, detailed evidence has been provided here of its pernicious impact, considering different perspectives, including those of managers, learners, and lecturers. It is this 'thick description' that truly separates this research from others. Indeed, the richness of evidence used to base my findings—classroom observations, document analysis of lesson plans, learners' work, schemes of work, lesson resources, and interviews with lecturers, learners, and managers—sets this research apart from similar studies in this field. For each of the findings, I have sought to ensure its trustworthiness by triangulating them through using varied methods. Each method addresses the gaps of the others, ensuring that the entirety of the experience is comprehensively captured.

Thirdly, while many researchers have used general theories of motivation, engagement, and achievement to understand learners' outcomes at secondary or primary school levels, this is the first research to employ Self-Determination Theory and Cultural Capital, along with engagement theories, to understand both learners' and lecturers' experiences of GCSE re-sits. Indeed, I found that these theories not only provided avenues for designing the research, but also helped me to gain insights from my findings. For example, the common experience of re-sit learners not producing work in sufficient quantity or quality is accounted for by their lack of intrinsic motivation. Similarly, whereas some researchers spoke of learners lacking engagement in their re-sit classes, I investigated the different dimensions of this lack of engagement with references to Fredricks *et al*'s (2004) theories. Crucially, whereas most research only apply these theories to learners, this study also applies to them understand lecturers' experiences.

Lastly, my research uncovered many findings that is novel. In the Findings and Discussion chapters, I have pointed to these new findings. Briefly, some of these findings include lecturers' perceptions of own achievement being intimately associated with whether their learners achieve; the pernicious impact of having unstable or unsuitable timetables, especially at the beginning of the academic year; classes not feeling like 'classes,' and lecturers having low expectations of their learners. While some existing research may suggest these findings, my research provides empirically based, detailed evidence to support these conclusions.

8.3 Summary of the findings for Question 1: learners' lived experiences of re-sitting GCSE English

My findings present a rather grim picture of learners' lived experiences of GCSE English at London Metropolitan College. There is little sense of the classes feeling like a class in the traditional sense. Not only are the learners often sitting away from each other, but they typically did not even acknowledge each other. The learners are often engaged in repeated low-level disruptive behaviour, which hampers their ability to engage with their work. Although these disruptions are referred to as 'low-level,' the cumulative impact is that they not only stop the perpetrators from learning, but also hinders others' attempts. This also accounts for my next finding: very little productive work is done inside and outside the classroom.

Moreover, even from the start of the term, the learners are faced with a curriculum that seems to orient itself to the terminal GCSE exams. In fact, it seems that all the work that the learners do is based on previous exam papers. Many of the learners find the excessive focus on exams in class to be anxiety inducing, and some feel that they would be better off just answering past papers at home. I also note that a sense of boredom prevails, and this is perhaps not surprising given that they are focusing solely on exams. Furthermore, learners' attendance and punctuality are identified as a cause for concern, with many classes having less than 40% of learners in attendance, and almost 100% of these learners being late. This made progress difficult as the lessons are sequenced. The causes of non-attendance are varied. Some learners speak of the distance from the College, others of medical absences, and a minority speak of the need to work to support their family. Another finding is that unsuitable and constantly changing timetables impact the learners negatively. The learners also find lessons at the beginning of the day (8:45am) and at the end of the day (4:15pm) unsuitable as they speak of feeling tired and exhausted. Other learners voice issues with having large gaps in their timetable.

On a more positive note, the learners are optimistic that they would pass this year. They put their optimism down to maturity and the fact that they have worked harder this academic year. For some, GCSE English seems to make more 'sense' now than it did previously. Although evidence of intrinsic motivation is not found, plenty of evidence of external motivation is apparent. The learners state that they must pass English to secure a place at university or further their career prospects. Unfortunately, many instances of amotivation - where the learners do not do work in the classes- are also recorded. No amount of support or coercion from the lecturer succeeds in getting work from many of the learners.

8.4 Summary of the findings for Question 2: Lecturers' lived experiences of teaching GCSE English re-sit course

A similar picture to the above resonates with my findings for lecturers' lived experiences of GCSE re-sit English. Lecturers perceive that they are overburdened with work, and that their managers do not appreciate the toil it takes on them. It is not only planning and administrative responsibility that consumes their time and energy, but they also must cover classes because the Department is perpetually understaffed. This places both a heavy physiological and psychological burden on them. Overwhelming workload is often attributed to poor management. Moreover, there is a genuine desire to engage with CPD training on lecturers' part. However, the lecturers also report that they find it difficult to access suitable training sessions, with many stating that they have had to take initiatives to develop themselves. Some of the lecturers pay out of their own pocket, and some also undertake training in their own time. The CPD sessions that is accessible to them are often generic in nature, and the lecturers desire more subject specific training. Furthermore, the lecturers are subjected to a series of observations, both from London Metropolitan College and from OFSTED. They find these observations essentially penalising and not supportive of their professionalism or development. These observations also cause the lecturers immense psychological and physiological trauma.

The research also finds that although the lecturers are not intrinsically motivated, they do, however, want to make a difference to the lives of their learners. The lecturers also mention that their low pay often warrants taking on extra employment to cover their outgoings. Surprisingly, no lecturer speaks of becoming a lecturer because they want to share their passion for English. The lecturers also perceive that it is their responsibility to motivate their learners, a role that they take seriously. Indeed, their own sense of achievement is inextricably linked with learners' achievement; and, therefore, when many of their learners fail, they find that emotionally taxing. Perhaps because the lecturers witness so many learners failing, year after year, they have low expectations of them in terms of stretch and challenge. The lecturers also perceive that learners' socio-economic background is a barrier to success for which they feel a need to compensate.

8.5 Recommendations

One of the explicit aims of this research is to provide a series of recommendations so that lecturing practitioners, policymakers and managers can provide a more compelling and rewarding experience for the learners. Another related aim is to offer recommendations that support lecturers in effectively carrying out their duties. These recommendations are not comprehensive, but rather those I perceive to be the most pressing.

8.5.1 Recommendations for policy makers:

- **Consider revising the *Condition of Funding Policy* to better support lecturers to improve learners' outcomes**

Although the justification for continuing with the *Condition of Funding Policy* remains strong, its inflexible application often results in adverse outcomes for most learners and lecturers. Many of these outcomes have been highlighted in this research. It appears that the Government has also recognised these negative outcomes and has implemented a change: Achieving Level 2 Functional Skills English now exempt learners from mandatory GCSE re-takes. Unfortunately, this alternative English provision of Functional Skills only exists for those learners who have achieved Grade 2 or below at their previous GCSE attempts. Learners with Grade 3 must continue to pursue GCSE re-sits until they achieve a Grade 4. Perhaps if all learners are provided with a choice between these qualifications, they would become more engaged in their English studies. After all, if a learner has failed English at GCSE three times, it may be more compassionate and "trauma-informed" to explore alternative pathways.

There is a discussion of providing a GCSE maths provision specifically designed for re-sit learners, which is to be more streamlined than the current GCSE provision designed for secondary schools. It might be worth having a similar discussion for GCSE English. It is encouraging to see that the *Call for Evidence* by the Curriculum and Assessment Review (2024) section of DfE is explicitly asking if 'we have the right qualifications at level 2 for those 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?' Hopefully, the sector's voice will be heard, and the recommendation I propose above is considered.

- **Increase funding for the sector, with a particular focus on increasing lecturers' pay**

A common complaint from the lecturers in my research is that they are not adequately compensated for their efforts, and it is easy to understand why. Many are hourly paid lecturers who are not paid for holidays, and even those who are permanent staff members are paid less than schoolteachers. Many lecturers speak of having to take on second jobs to make ends meet. Increased funding will support the recruitment of qualified and experienced lecturers and help retain them within the profession, thereby reducing the high attrition rate.

- **Consider re-evaluating the role of OFSTED to better support lecturers**

The current OFSTED inspection regime induces significant anxiety among lecturers, who report finding these inspections unhelpful in performing their duties. The managers, especially the SLT, place an inordinate amount of stress on lecturers prior to inspection visits. For example, some lecturers report coming into work during the weekend to complete paperwork, such as lesson plans. It reminds them of the worst elements of graded, judgemental observations. Perhaps if OFSTED could take on a more supportive role, where lecturers are provided access to Inspectors' expertise and experience, this would reduce their apprehension. Although OFSTED is revising its inspection approach and generally moving away from graded outcomes, these changes cannot be implemented swiftly enough for colleagues at FE colleges.

8.5.2 Recommendations for lecturers:

- **Support and empower the lecturers to plan and deliver more compelling lessons**

The orientation of lessons towards the exams is hugely damaging, especially since it provides little incentive for learners to attend their lessons. Learners are often hostile to exams as these vocational students associate negative emotions with them. Lecturers should be empowered to move away from such narrowly defined curriculum to a broad-based one, informed by dialogue with their learners. Lecturers should aim to provide a curriculum that inspires and enriches their learners' education. This may mean providing lecturers with the autonomy to leave aside Departmentally produced schemes of work and lesson plans for materials that they craft based on their knowledge of their learners' needs, interests and aspirations. Moreover, although contextualising lessons based on vocational areas is not always possible, more effort should be made to choose topics that reflect the lifeworlds of young, inner-city Londoners. The reading materials from exam boards are often about topics far removed from our

learners' lived experiences, such as mountain climbing or skiing. Ultimately, lecturers taking a risk and planning innovative lessons based on their professionalism will yield greater motivation, engagement and achievement.

- **Encourage lecturers to foster a sense of belonging in their classes**

The classes should feel more like classes, a place where learners from different vocational background can come together and feel a sense of unity. This could be achieved by using more group work and having a seating plan that engineers group coherence. There should also be more of a concerted effort at the beginning of the year to encourage mixing between different vocational groups, for example through 'icebreakers.' The managers should also ensure that suitable feeder groups are put in GCSE classes, so for example, Level 1 Multi-skills Course and Level 3 Science should not be placed in one GCSE class. The dynamics of such mixed level groups are often not conducive to cohesion and group-feeling.

- **Prompt lecturers to set higher expectations for their learners**

Much of the work set by lecturers evidenced the low expectations they had of their learners. Often, the level of work seems to be more suited to primary school learners than young adults. There needs to be more recognition of the fact that many of the learners have previous experience of studying English at schools via a suitable initial assessment. Stretch and challenge must be at the heart of the lessons, so that the learners are given the opportunity to academically flourish and grow. The aim of GCSE English is, after all, to prepare learners for higher studies and to improve their communication skills, especially in employment contexts.

8.5.3 Recommendations for managers/ SLT

- **Provide targeted Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for lecturers**

This research has established that there is a tangible drive on lecturers' part to improve their skills and knowledge via CPD, yet they are not sufficiently supported in this endeavour. The College should actively listen to each individual lecturer regarding their CPD needs and provide a tailor-made solution for them. The lecturers can then disseminate good practices following these CPD sessions, perhaps even becoming a Departmental expert on specific areas. While the general pedagogic-based CPD sessions are certainly welcomed by the lecturers, many argue that these should be supplemented with subject-specific training sessions.

- **Provide a stable and suitable timetable for both learners and lecturers**

The beginning of the academic year sets the tone for the rest of the year, and having an ever-changing timetable means that both lecturers and learners are adversely impacted *e.g.* habits around poor attendance become embedded. The timetable should not change drastically for either the learners or lecturers. Moreover, the timetable should be 'wrapped around' vocational courses, where possible, so that it is neither the first lesson for the learners nor the last lesson. Ideally, there should not be a significant time gap between vocational classes and English classes.

- **Ensure that the lecturers' workloads are manageable**

All the lecturers in the study report that their workload is overwhelming, with some considering leaving the profession as a result. Managers can support the lecturers by ensuring that the deadlines do not converge at specific times, especially around the marking of assessments. When lecturers are busy with marking, they have less time to plan and deliver inspiring and engaging lessons. London Metropolitan College has recently employed Attendance Officers to assist lecturers with managing attendance. Expanding their remit to include other administrative responsibilities would enable lecturers to concentrate on their core TLA duties.

8.6 Possible directions for future research

This section expands on the research limitations discussed previously, suggesting potential avenues for future research. The research findings are based on an inner-city London college, characterised by conditions common to this region, such as the ethnic and socio-economic make-up of its staff and learners. These characteristics may not be present in FE colleges located in other geographic regions. Future research could investigate whether my findings are applicable in other contexts. To facilitate this, I have initiated discussions with lecturers at colleges outside of London to explore potential research collaborations.

Furthermore, this research raises questions and findings that warrant further investigation. I have received approval from London Metropolitan College to investigate an aspect of engagement behaviour that is not extensively covered in this research: attendance. This will involve a questionnaire and focus groups of 100 learners whose attendance is a cause for concern. This research may inform the College's attendance policy and practice. At this moment, attendance in FE, especially in relation to re-sit classes, is an underexplored field of study.

Lastly, the qualitative nature of this study provided numerous valuable insights and illuminations, many of which can be further explored through quantitative approaches. For example, are there statistically significant times of the day, week, or term when learners are more likely to be absent or late for their classes? Additionally, is there a correlation between learners' prior GCSE grades and their likelihood of passing the re-sit course?

Bibliography

Abla, Cheryl and Fraumeni, B.R. (2019) *Student Engagement: Evidence-Based Strategies to Boost Academic and Social-Emotional Results*, *McREL International*. Available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED600576.pdf.

Abramson, L.Y., Seligman, M.E. and Teasdale, J.D. (1978) 'Learned helplessness in humans: Critique and reformulation.', *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 87(1), pp. 49–74. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.87.1.49.

Adams, R. (2023) *Flood of English and maths resits expected amid tougher GCSE grading*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/23/flood-of-english-and-maths-resits-expected-amid-tougher-gcse-grading#:~:text=Schools%20and%20colleges%20in%20England,of%20the%20two%20key%20subjects.

Addison, R. and Brundrett, M. (2008) 'Motivation and demotivation of teachers in primary schools: the challenge of change', *Education 3-13*, 36(1), pp. 79–94. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004270701733254.

All-Party Parliamentary group for Further Education and Lifelong Learning (2023) *The Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on students in further education*. Available at: https://www.paulblomfield.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/348/2023/06/APPG-for-Students-Impact-of-cost-of-living-on-FE-Students-030723.pdf.

Alrashidi, O., Phan, H.P. and Ngu, B.H. (2016) 'Academic engagement: an overview of its definitions, dimensions, and major conceptualisations', *International Education Studies*, 9(12), p. 41. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v9n12p41.

Chowdry, H. and Emmerson, C. (2010) *An efficient maintenance allowance? Institute for Fiscal Studies.* Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/articles/efficient-maintenance-allowance.

Anderson, N. and Peart, S. (2016) 'Back on track: exploring how a further education college re-motivates learners to re-sit previously failed qualifications at GCSE', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 21(3), pp. 196–213. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2016.1196978.

AoC (2022) *Worst staffing crisis in two decades in England's colleges*. Available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fd4hfzltwt4wv7.cloudfront.net%2Fuploads%2Ffiles%2FReport-AoC-college-staffing-challenges-February-2022-FINAL-002.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK.

AQA (2014) *GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (8700) Specification*. Available at: https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-8700-SP-2015.PDF.

Baird, J.-A., Rose, J. and McWhirter, A. (2012) 'So tell me what you want: a comparison of FE college and other post-16 students' aspirations', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 17(3), pp. 293–310. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2012.700095.

Bandura, A. (1977) 'Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change.', *Psychological Review*, 84(2), pp. 191–215. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191.

Barkoukis, V. *et al.* (2008) 'The assessment of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and

amotivation: Validity and reliability of the Greek version of the Academic Motivation Scale', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 15(1), pp. 39–55. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09695940701876128.

Bartleton, L. (2019) Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Continuing Professional Development on Their Professional Practice in a Further Education College in the West Midlands. Educationalfutures, [online] Vol. 9(2). Available at: https://educationstudies.org.uk/?p=10157

Bathmaker, A. and Avis, J. (2005) 'Becoming a lecturer in further education in England: the construction of professional identity and the role of communities of practice', *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 31(1), pp. 47–62. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470500043771.

Belgutay, J. (2017) *Most disadvantaged students fall behind peers in resit success*, *TES Magazine.* Available at: https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/most-disadvantaged-students-fall-behind-peers-resit-success.

Bellamy, A. (2017) 'Forced GCSE mathematics resits: Students' voices', in F. Curtis (ed.) *Proceedings of the British Society for Research into Learning Mathematics*. Available at: https://bsrlm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/BSRLM-CP-37-1-03.pdf.

BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fourth edition*, *BERA*. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018.

Berger, J. (ed.) (1972) *Ways of seeing*. London, Harmondsworth: British Broadcasting Corporation; Penguin.

Bernard, H.R. (2006) *Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. 4th ed. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Blazar, D. and Pollard, C. (2023) 'Challenges and tradeoffs of "good" teaching: the pursuit of multiple educational outcomes', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 74(3), pp. 229–244. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/00224871231155830.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The Forms of Capital', in J. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Bowen, G.A. (2009) 'Document analysis as a qualitative research method', *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), pp. 27–40. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027.

Bowser-Angermann, J. (2023) *If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again: the case of GCSE resit students, teachers and policymakers in 2016-2017*. Doctoral Thesis. Anglia Ruskin University.

Bowser-Angermann, J. and Draper, E. (2022) 'Rethinking, Reimagining English in the Post-16 Sector', in P. Bennett, L. Lambert, and R. Smith (eds) *Rethinking and reviving subject English: the murder and the murmur*. 1st edn. London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003262718.

Brannick, T. and Coghlan, D. (2007a) 'In defense of being "native": the case for insider academic research', *Organizational Research Methods*, 10(1), pp. 59–74. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428106289253.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative*

Research in Psychology, 3(2), pp. 77–101. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2012) 'Thematic analysis.', in H. Cooper et al. (eds) *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological.* Washington: American Psychological Association, pp. 57–71. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: a practical guide for beginners*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019) 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), pp. 589–597. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. London; Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.

Brink, H.I.L. (1993) 'Validity and reliability in qualitative research', *Curationis*, 16(2), pp. 35–38. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4102/curationis.v16i2.1396.

Brinkmann, S. (2014) 'Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing', in Brinkmann, S., *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Edited by P. Leavy. Oxford University Press, pp. 276–299. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199811755.013.030.

Broad, J.H. (2015) 'So many worlds, so much to do: Identifying barriers to engagement with continued professional development for teachers in the further education and training sector', *London Review of Education*, 13(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.13.1.03.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social research methods*. 4th ed. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2019) *Social research methods*. Fifth Canadian edition. Don Mills, Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press.

Buckley, C. and Husband, G. (2020) 'Lecturer identities and perceptions of CPD for supporting learning and teaching in FE and he in the UK, *International Journal of Management and Applied Research*, 7(4), pp. 432–453. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18646/2056.74.20-031.

Burgess, S., Metcalfe, R. and Sadoff, S. (2021) 'Understanding the response to financial and non-financial incentives in education: Field experimental evidence using high-stakes assessments', *Economics of Education Review*, 85, p. 102195. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2021.102195.

Burgess, S., Rawal, S. and Taylor, E.S. (2022) *Characterising Effective Teaching*. Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Burgess-Characterising-Effective-Teaching-Full-Report-April-2022.pdf.

Byrne, D. (2022) 'A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis', *Quality & Quantity*, 56(3), pp. 1391–1412. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y.

Camden, B. (2023) *GCSE English and maths resit funding boost*. Available at: https://feweek.co.uk/gcse-english-and-maths-resit-funding-boost/.

Camden, B. (2024) *DfE to introduce English and maths resit minimum hours and scrap 5% tolerance*, *FE Week*. Available at: https://feweek.co.uk/dfe-to-introduce-english-and-maths-resit-minimum-hours-and-scrap-5-tolerance/.

Charmaz, K. and Thornberg, R. (2021a) 'The pursuit of quality in grounded theory', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), pp. 305–327. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1780357.

Charmaz, K. and Thornberg, R. (2021b) 'The pursuit of quality in grounded theory', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), pp. 305–327. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1780357.

Check, J.W. and Schutt, R.K. (2012a) *Research methods in education*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.

Choudhury, M. (2023) *It wasn't my fault, my alarm didn't go off!* Available at: https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Diba-Choudhury-Presentation-Attendance-and-Punctuality-PPP.pdf.

Chowdry, H. and Emmerson, Carl (2010) *An efficient maintenance allowance?* Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/articles/efficient-maintenance-allowance#:~:text=The%20Government%20defends%20its%20intention,enough%20bang%20for%20its%20buck.

Coe, R. (2017a) *Research methods and methodologies in education*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Coe, R. (2017b) 'The nature of educational research', in R. Coe, M. Waring, and J. Arthur (eds) *Research methods and methodologies in education*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Coffield, F. and Borrill, C. (1983) 'Entrée and Exit', *The Sociological Review*, 31(3), pp. 520–545. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1983.tb00906.x.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018) *Research methods in education*. Eighth edition. London; New York: Routledge.

Collyer, E. (2021) 'You can change the seats around, but I still won't give a shit': the impact of seating arrangements on four boys' engagement with English', *Changing English*, 28(2), pp. 186–195. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2020.1845610.

Creswell, J.W. (2015) *Educational research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Fifth edition. Boston: Pearson.

Crisp, B. *et al.* (2023) *Post-16 GCSE Resit practice review*. The Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/post-16-practice-review.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014) *Applications of flow in human development and education: the collected works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9094-9.

Curriculum and Assessment Review (2024) *Call for evidence*. Available at: https://consult.education.gov.uk/curriculum-and-assessment-team/curriculum-and-assessment-review-call-for-

evidence/supporting_documents/Curriculum%20and%20Assessment%20Review%20%20Call%20for%20Evidence.pdf.

Davis, H.A., Summers, J.J. and Miller, L.M. (2012) *An interpersonal approach to classroom management: strategies for improving student engagement*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press/A Joint Publication (Classroom insights from educational psychology).

Deci, E.L. and Ryan, Richard M (2009) 'Promoting self-determined school engagement: Motivation, learning, and well-being', in David B. Miele (ed.) *Handbook of Motivation at School.* New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 171–195.

Deci, E.L. and Ryan, R.M. (1985) *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Boston, MA: Springer US. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-2271-7.

Demie, F. (2003) 'Raising the Achievement of Caribbean Pupils in British Schools: unacknowledged problems and challenges for policy makers', *London Review of Education*, 1(3). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1474846032000146785.

Denscombe, M. (2014) *The good research guide: for small-scale social research projects*. 5. ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds) (2018) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Fifth edition. Los Angeles London New Delhi Singapore Washington DC Melbourne: SAGE.

DeWalt, K.M. and DeWalt, B.R. (2011) *Participant observation: a guide for fieldworkers*. 2nd ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, Md.

DfE (2011) *Government publishes response to the Wolf Review of Vocational Education*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-publishes-response-to-the-wolf-review-of-vocational-education.

DfE (2023) *A Level and Other 16 to 18 Results, Academic Year 2022/23, 2023.* Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results.

Dickinson, L. (1995) 'Autonomy and motivation a literature review', *System*, 23(2), pp. 165–174. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(95)00005-5.

Draper, E. (2020) 'Engaging students-as-researchers to understand GCSE resit students' experience of English', *RaPal*, 101(Winter 2020). Available at: https://www.rapal.org.uk/_site/data/files/users/6/files/04813FFD310C5295FDC7059C615EE3F3.pdf.

Dunne, M. and Gazeley, L. (2008) 'Teachers, social class and underachievement', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(5), pp. 451–463. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690802263627.

Dweck, C.S. (2017) 'The journey to children's mindsets—and beyond', *Child Development Perspectives*, 11(2), pp. 139–144. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12225.

Early, E. *et al.* (2023) 'The influence of socio-demographics and school factors on GCSE attainment: results from the first record linkage data in Northern Ireland', *Oxford Review of Education*, 49(2), pp. 171–189. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2022.2035340.

Edgerton, J.D. and Roberts, L.W. (2014) 'Cultural capital or habitus? Bourdieu and beyond in the explanation of enduring educational inequality', *Theory and Research in Education*, 12(2), pp. 193–220. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878514530231.

Education and Skills Funding Agency (2024) *16 to 19 funding: maths and English condition of funding*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding.

Edwards, F. (2012) 'Early to rise? The effect of daily start times on academic performance', *Economics of Education Review*, 31(6), pp. 970–983. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.07.006.

Elliot Major, L. and Parsons, S. (2022) 'The forgotten fifth: examining the early education trajectories of teenagers who fall below the expected standards in GCSE English language and maths examinations at age 16', *UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies*, CLS Working Paper 2022/6.

ETF (2022) *Landmark research reveals motivations and challenges of FE and training professionals*. Available at: https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/news/landmark-research-reveals-motivations-and-challenges-of-fe-and-training-professionals/.

Evans, P. (2015) 'Self-determination theory: An approach to motivation in music education', *Musicae Scientiae*, 19(1), pp. 65–83. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864914568044.

FE News (2010) *Is FE still the 'neglected middle child' between HE and schools? FE News*. Available at: https://www.fenews.co.uk/fe-voices/is-fe-still-the-neglected-middle-child-between-he-and-schools/.

Finn, J.D., Pannozzo, G.M. and Voelkl, K.E. (1995) 'Disruptive and inattentive-withdrawn behavior and achievement among fourth graders', *The Elementary School Journal*, 95(5), pp. 421–434. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1086/461853.

Finn, J.D. and Zimmer, K.S. (2012) 'Student engagement: what is it? Why does it matter?', in S.L. Christenson, A.L. Reschly, and C. Wylie (eds) *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*. Boston, MA: Springer US, pp. 97–131. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_5.

Fredricks, J.A., Blumenfeld, P.C. and Paris, A.H. (2004) 'School engagement: potential of the concept, state of the evidence', *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), pp. 59–109. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059.

Freire, P. (1974) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Tenth printing. New York: The Seabury Press (A Continuum book).

Froiland, J.M. and Worrell, F.C. (2016) 'Intrinsic motivation, learning goals, engagement, and achievement in a diverse high school', *Psychology in the Schools*, 53(3), pp. 321–336. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21901.

Fuller, C. and Macfadyen, T. (2012) '"What with your grades?" Students' motivation for and experiences of vocational courses in further education', *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 64(1), pp. 87–101. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2011.622447.

Furrer, C. and Skinner, E. (2003) 'Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance.', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(1), pp. 148–162.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.1.148.

Gage, N.L. (1989) 'The paradigm wars and their aftermath: a "historical" sketch of research on teaching since 1989', *Educational Researcher*, 18(7), p. 4. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/1177163.

Gagné, M. (ed.) (2014) *The Oxford handbook of work engagement, motivation, and self-determination theory*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press (Oxford library of psychology).

Gaw, A. (n.d.) *Writing an Effective Literature Review*. Available at: https://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/iad/Postgraduate/PhD_researchers/Study_Guide_How_to_Write_an_Effective_Literature_Review_v2.0_.pdf.

GCSE Resits Hub Project (2024) *Engaging and motivating learners for GCSE resit success*. Available at: https://gcseresits.education/events/.

Geertz, C. (1973) *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Gillborn, D. (2012) *Education and institutional racism.* London: Institute of Education Press (Inaugural Professorial Lecture).

Gillies, V. (2005) 'Raising the "meritocracy": parenting and the individualization of social class', *Sociology*, 39(5), pp. 835–853. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505058368.

Gillison, F. *et al.* (2009) 'Exploring the experience of introjected regulation for exercise across gender in adolescence', *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10(3), pp. 309–319. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2008.10.004.

Golafshani, N. (2015) 'Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research', *The Qualitative Report* [Preprint]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2003.1870.

Goldhawk, A. and Waller, R. (2023) 'Voices from the deck: lecturers' and middle managers' perceptions of effective FE sector professional development', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 28(3), pp. 485–504. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2221121.

Goldthorpe, J.H. (2007) '"Cultural capital": some critical observations', *Sociologica* [Preprint], (2). Available at: https://doi.org/10.2383/24755.

Graef, R., Csikszentmihalyi, M. and McManama Gianinno, S. (1983) 'Measuring intrinsic motivation in everyday life', *Leisure Studies*, 2(2), pp. 155–168. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02614368300390121.

Graneheim, U.H., Lindgren, B.-M. and Lundman, B. (2017) 'Methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis: A discussion paper', *Nurse Education Today*, 56, pp. 29–34. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.06.002.

Greatbatch, D. and Tate, S. (2018) *Teaching, leadership and governance in Further Education*. DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c441bed915d76e2ebc33f/Teaching__leadership_and_governance_in_Further_Education.pdf.

Gregson, D. (2020) 'Drawn to story', *Education Sciences*, 10(3), p. 71. Available at:

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10030071.

Gregson, D., Gregson, M. and Spedding, P. (2019) 'Top-down and outside-in: breaking boundaries between research, theory and practice in education', *Journal of Management Policy and Practice*, 20(3). Available at: https://doi.org/10.33423/jmpp.v20i3.2229.

Gregson, M. and Gregson, D. (2024) 'Deeper than reason: why practical and productive forms of knowledge need to be restored to vocational education', *International Journal of Higher Education Pedagogies*, 5(1), pp. 1–18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.33422/ijhep.v5i1.592.

Guay, F. *et al.* (2010) 'Intrinsic, identified, and controlled types of motivation for school subjects in young elementary school children', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(4), pp. 711–735. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1348/000709910X499084.

Guay, F. (2022) 'Applying self-determination theory to education: regulations types, psychological needs, and autonomy supporting behaviors', *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 37(1), pp. 75–92. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/08295735211055355.

Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1981) *Effective evaluation: improving the usefulness of evaluation results through responsive and naturalistic approaches*. 1. edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (Jossey-Bass classics).

Guest, G., Namey, E.E. and Mitchell, M.L. (2013) *Collecting qualitative data: a field manual for applied research*. 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications, Ltd. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506374680.

Halligan, C. and Baines, E. (2023) 'How do teachers engage students in the lowest attaining English sets in high achieving schools? A mixed methods, multiple case study', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 53(1), pp. 97–116. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2022.2083076.

Hammersley, M. (2008) *Questioning qualitative inquiry*. London: SAGE. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857024565.

Hammersley, M. (2012) *Methodological Paradigms in Educational Research*. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/methodological-paradigms-in-educational-research.

Han, J. and Yin, H. (2016) 'Teacher motivation: Definition, research development and implications for teachers', *Cogent Education*. Edited by M. Boylan, 3(1), p. 1217819. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1217819.

Hardman, J. and Hardman, F. (2017) 'Observation and recording classroom processes', in D. Wyse *et al*. (eds) *The BERA/SAGE handbook of educational research*. Los Angelas: Sage.

Hattie, J.A.C. (2003) 'Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?', in. Available at: https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=research_conference_2003.

Heidegger, M. (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. New York: Garland Pub.

Hemsley-Brown, J. (1999) 'College Choice: Perceptions and Priorities', *Educational Management & Administration*, 27(1), pp. 85–98. Available at:

https://doi.org/10.1177/0263211X990271007.

Higton, J. *et al.* (2017) *Effective practice in the delivery and teaching of English and Mathematics to 16-18 year olds.* DfE. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81d316e5274a2e87dbfad7/English_and_Mathematics_to_16-18_year_olds.pdf.

Holmes, A.G. (2020) 'Researcher positionality - a consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research - a new researcher guide', *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8(4), pp. 1–10. Available at: https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v8i4.3232.

House of Commons Library (2022) *The Post-18 Education and Funding Review: Government conclusion*. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9348/#:~:text=On%2024%20February%202022%2C%20the,including%20the%20lifelong%20loan%20entitlement.

Howard, J.L. *et al.* (2021) 'Student motivation and associated outcomes: a meta-analysis from self-determination theory', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(6), pp. 1300–1323. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620966789.

Husband, G. (2015) *The impact of teacher training on continuing professional development needs for teaching and learning in post compulsory education*. EdD. Bangor University. Available at: https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/files/20576041/null.

Husband, G. (2020) 'Ethical data collection and recognizing the impact of semi-structured interviews on research respondents', *Education Sciences*, 10(8), p. 206. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10080206.

Husbands, C. and Pearce, Jo (2022) *What makes great pedagogy? Nine claims from research*. National College for School Leadership.

Husbands, C. and Pearce, J. (2022) *What makes great pedagogy? Nine claims from research*. National College for School Leadership. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7e413c40f0b6230268a2a3/what-makes-great-pedagogy-nine-claims-from-research.pdf.

Ibn Khaldūn (2015) *The Muqaddimah: an introduction to history*. First Princeton Classics edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (Bollingen series).

Impetus (2018) *Thousands of young people are facing an endless cycle of GCSE resits*. Available at: https://www.impetus.org.uk/news-and-views/2018/thousands-of-young-people-are-facing-an-endless-cycle-of-gcse-resits.

Kay, J. (2021) *Improving English and maths in further education a practical guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Kelley, P. *et al.* (2015) 'Synchronizing education to adolescent biology: "let teens sleep, start school later"', *Learning, Media and Technology*, 40(2), pp. 210–226. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2014.942666.

Kessell-Holland, P. (2020) 'Vocational Education Matters: Other People's Children…Not Seen and Not Heard', in G. Margaret and P. Spedding (eds) *Practice-Focused Research in Further Adult and Vocational Education*. London: Palgrave.

Kiger, M.E. and Varpio, L. (2020) 'Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No.

131', *Medical Teacher*, 42(8), pp. 846–854. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030.

Kirby, Philip and Cullinane, Carl (2016) *Class differences: Ethnicity and disadvantage*, *The Sutton Trust*. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Class-differences-report_References-available-online.pdf.

König, J., Jäger-Biela, D.J. and Glutsch, N. (2020) 'Adapting to online teaching during COVID-19 school closure: teacher education and teacher competence effects among early career teachers in Germany', *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), pp. 608–622. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1809650.

Le Gallais, T. (2008) 'Wherever I go there I am: reflections on reflexivity and the research stance', *Reflective Practice*, 9(2), pp. 145–155. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940802005475.

Ledger, S. (2024) *Are past papers and blind faith really the right strategy for learners who need to tackle post-16 resits? GCSE Resits Hub Project*. Available at: https://gcseresits.education/2024/05/20/are-past-papers-and-blind-faith-really-the-right-strategy-for-learners-who-need-to-tackle-post-16-resits/.

Legault, L. (2016) 'Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation', in V. Zeigler-Hill and T.K. Shackelford (eds) *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 1–4. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_1139-1.

Legault, L., Green-Demers, I. and Pelletier, L. (2006) 'Why do high school students lack motivation in the classroom? Toward an understanding of academic amotivation and the role of social support.', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(3), pp. 567–582. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.98.3.567.

Lewandowski, M. (2022) 'Autonomy In ESOL', *inTuition Magazine*. Available at: https://issuu.com/redactive/docs/linked_intuition_summer2022?fr=sMGIzMTQzOTMwNjQ.

Li, Y. (2021) *The social mobility of ethnic minorities in Britain in the last 50 years (1972-2019)*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities-supporting-research/the-social-mobility-of-ethnic-minorities-in-britain-in-the-last-50-years-1972-2019-by-professor-yaojun-li.

Liu, Y. and Hou, S. (2017) 'Potential reciprocal relationship between motivation and achievement: A longitudinal study', *School Psychology International* [Preprint]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034317710574.

Lloyd, K. (2021) *The Pioneers of the Hybridised World of Vocational Education and GCSE retake*. EdD thesis. University of Reading.

Lo, J.C. *et al.* (2018) 'Sustained benefits of delaying school start time on adolescent sleep and well-being', *Sleep*, 41(6). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/sleep/zsy052.

London Metropolitan College (2022a) *Student Learning and Behaviour Policy.* London Metropolitan College.

London Metropolitan College (2022b) *Attendance Policy*. London Metropolitan College.

London Metropolitan College (2022c) *English Department Self-Assessment Review*. London:

London Metropolitan College.

Longhurst, R.J. (1999) 'Why Aren't They Here? Student absenteeism in a further education college', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 23(1), pp. 61–80. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877990230106.

Lough, C. (2019) *Exclusive: New GCSEs less accurate, teachers warn*, *TES Magazine.* Available at: https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/exclusive-new-gcses-less-accurate-teachers-warn.

Macpherson, W. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stephen-lawrence-inquiry.

Magnusson, E. and Marecek, J. (2015) *Doing interview-based qualitative research: a learner's guide*. 1st edn. Cambridge University Press. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107449893.

Maier, S.F. and Seligman, M.E. (1976) 'Learned helplessness: Theory and evidence.', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 105(1), pp. 3–46. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.105.1.3.

Malinowski, B. (1989) *A diary in the strict sense of the term*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

Maris, R. (2024) 'Blog: Time for a resit reset?', *Education Policy Institute.* Available at: https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/blog-time-for-a-resit-reset/.

McCallum, I. and Demie, F. (2001) 'Social class, ethnicity and educational performance', *Educational Research*, 43(2), pp. 147–159. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131880110051146.

McCulloch, G. (2004) *Documentary research in education, history, and the social sciences*. London; New York: RoutledgeFalmer (Social research and educational studies series, 22).

Mckelvey, C. and Andrews, J. (1998) 'Why do they do it? a study into the perceptions and motivations of trainee further education lecturers', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 3(3), pp. 357–367. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13596749800200036.

McKie, L., Bowlby, S.R. and Gregory, S. (eds) (1999) *Gender, power, and the household*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: New York: Macmillan Press; St. Martin's Press.

Meschi, E., Vignoles, A. and Cassen, R. (2014) 'Post-secondary school type and academic achievement', *The Manchester School*, 82(2), pp. 183–201. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/manc.12006.

Miller, J. and Glassner, B. (2004) 'The "Inside" and the "Outside": Finding realities in Interviews', in D. Silverman (ed.) *Qualitative research: theory, method and practice*. 2nd ed. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.

Moran, D. (2000) *Introduction to phenomenology*. London; New York: Routledge.

Morgan, H. (2022) 'Conducting a qualitative document analysis', *The Qualitative Report* [Preprint]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5044.

Morris, R., Perry, T. and Grace, D. (2024) *Developing a joined-up, research-informed*

approach to post-16 GCSE English and maths resits, *Impact Magazine*. Available at: https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/developing-a-joined-up-research-informed-approach-to-post-16-gcse-english-and-maths-resits/.

Muijs, D. (2022) *Motivation and learning: what comes first?* Available at: https://educationruminations.com/2022/07/01/motivation-and-learning-what-comes-first/#:~:text=Focusing%20on%20strategies%20that%20improve,learning%20is%20motivating%20in%20itself.

Mulhall, A. (2003a) 'In the field: notes on observation in qualitative research', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 41(3), pp. 306–313. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2003.02514.x.

Mulhall, A. (2003b) 'In the field: notes on observation in qualitative research', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 41(3), pp. 306–313. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2003.02514.x.

Munoz-Chereau, Bernie *et al.* (2024) *Ofsted inspection in the general further education and skills sector in England*. London: Edge Foundation. Available at: https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/521/DD1601_-_Edge_Ofsted_inspection_in_FE_report_FINAL.pdf.

Neubauer, B.E., Witkop, C.T. and Varpio, L. (2019) 'How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others', *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 8(2), pp. 90–97. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/S40037-019-0509-2.

Niemiec, C.P. and Ryan, R.M. (2009) 'Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice', *Theory and Research in Education*, 7(2), pp. 133–144. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878509104318.

Nikos Ntoumanis *et al.* (2004) 'An idiographic analysis of amotivation in compulsory school physical education', *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 26(2), pp. 197–214. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.26.2.197.

Nowell, L.S. *et al.* (2017) 'Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), p. 160940691773384. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847.

Ntoumanis, N. (2001) 'A self-determination approach to the understanding of motivation in physical education', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71(2), pp. 225–242. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1348/000709901158497.

Ntoumanis, N. *et al.* (2004a) 'An idiographic analysis of amotivation in compulsory school physical education', *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 26(2), pp. 197–214. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.26.2.197.

Ntoumanis, N. *et al.* (2004b) 'An idiographic analysis of amotivation in compulsory school physical education', *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 26(2), pp. 197–214. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.26.2.197.

Nuffield Foundation (2020) *New maths GCSE proposed to break demoralising resit cycle*. Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/new-maths-gcse-proposed-to-break-demoralising-resit-cycle.

Odejimi, O. and Ekpenyong, M.S. (2019) 'Further Education Lecturers: A Glimpse into

Factors Influencing Their Career Satisfaction, Aspirations and Development', *Journal of Education and Practice*, 10(7). Available at: https://doi.org/10.7176/JEP/10-7-08.

OFSTED (2019a) *Education inspection framework*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/education-inspection-framework#:~:text=Ofsted%27s%20education%20inspection%20framework%20(EIF,institutions%20and%20early%20years%20settings.

OFSTED (2019b) *London Metropolitan College Ofsted Report (anonymised)* . OFSTED.

OFSTED (2022a) *Education recovery in further education and skills providers: spring 2022*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-recovery-in-further-education-and-skills-providers-spring-2022/education-recovery-in-further-education-and-skills-providers-spring-2022#:~:text=Gaps%20in%20knowledge%20and%20skills,fine%20art%2C%20than%20previous%20cohorts.

OFSTED (2022b) *Education recovery in further education and skills providers: summer 2022*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-recovery-in-further-education-and-skills-providers-summer-2022/education-recovery-in-further-education-and-skills-providers-summer-2022.

Ofsted (2018) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2017/18*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c0692f6ed915d7460c9dba9/29523_Ofsted_Annual_Report_2017-18_041218.pdf.

Orwell, G. (2018) *Notes on nationalism*. London: Penguin (Penguin Modern).

'Parental worklessness and children's early school achievement and progress' (2014) *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 5(1), pp. 19–41. Available at: https://doi.org/10.14301/llcs.v5i1.230.

Parker, K. (2019) *Compulsory maths is vital, insists Baroness Wolf – but a different curriculum is needed in post-16 education*, *Compulsory maths is vital, insists Baroness Wolf – but a different curriculum is needed in post-16 education*. Available at: https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/alison-wolf-post-16-alternative-maths-gcse-needed.

Parsons, S., Schoon, I. and Vignoles, A. (2014) 'Parental worklessness and children's early school achievement and progress', *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 5(1), pp. 19–41. Available at: https://doi.org/10.14301/llcs.v5i1.230.

Paterson, B.L. (1994) 'A framework to identify reactivity in qualitative research', *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 16(3), pp. 301–316. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/019394599401600306.

Pearson (2022) *Qualified to Succeed Building a 14-19 education system of choice, diversity and opportunity*. Available at: https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/global-store/en-gb/files/pearson-report-future-qualifications-assessment-england.pdf.

Pelletier, L.G., Séguin-Lévesque, C. and Legault, L. (2002) 'Pressure from above and pressure from below as determinants of teachers' motivation and teaching behaviors.' *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(1), pp. 186–196. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.94.1.186.

Powell, K. (2021) 'Why I stopped talking about language features to my GCSE English re-sit students (and what happened when I did)', *FEtapestry.* Available at: https://pdnorth.org.uk/2021/11/03/re-sits/.

Pring, R. (2015) *Philosophy of educational research*. Third edition. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Rapley, T. (2007) *Doing conversation, discourse and document analysis*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208901.

Read, B. (2021) *A Sense of Belonging – Some Reflections on Literacy, Identity and GCSE Resit Programmes*, *Claire Collins Consultancy*. Available at: https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-7/sense-of-belonging/.

Rebecca, M., Perry, T. and Grace, D. (2024) *Developing a joined-up, research-informed approach to post-16 GCSE English and maths resits*, *Impact Magazine*. Available at: https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/developing-a-joined-up-research-informed-approach-to-post-16-gcse-english-and-maths-resits/.

Reeve, J. and Su, Y (2014) 'Teacher Motivation', in M. Gagne (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Work Engagement, Motivation, and Self-Determination.* Oxford: Oxford University press.

Robey, C. and Jones, E. (2015) *ENGAGING LEARNERS IN GCSE MATHS AND ENGLISH*. Available at: https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/engaging-learners-in-gcse-english-and-maths/.

Roth, G. *et al.* (2007) 'Autonomous motivation for teaching: How self-determined teaching may lead to self-determined learning.', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(4), pp. 761–774. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.99.4.761.

Roth, G. (2014) 'Antecedents and Outcomes of Teachers' Autonomous Motivation', in P.W. Richardson, H.M.G. Watt, and S.A. Karabenick (eds) *Teacher Motivation: Theory and Practice*. New York: Rutledge.

Rothon, C. (2007) 'Can achievement differentials be explained by social class alone? An examination of minority ethnic educational performance in England and Wales at the end of compulsory schooling', *Ethnicities*, 7(3), pp. 306–322. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796807080231.

Ruddle, M. (2024) *Co-curating the curriculum with GCSE English re-sit students*, *FE Week*. Available at: https://feweek.co.uk/co-curating-the-curriculum-with-gcse-english-re-sit-students/.

Runge, J., Munro-Lott, N. and Buzzeo, J. (2019) *Embedding contextualisation in English and mathematics GCSE teaching*. The Education Endowment Foundation. Available at: https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/projects/AELP.pdf?v=1725220347.

Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2000a) 'Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: classic definitions and new directions', *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), pp. 54–67. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020.

Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2000b) 'Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being.', *American Psychologist*, 55(1), pp. 68–78. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68.

Ryan, R.M. and Grolnick, W.S. (1986) 'Origins and pawns in the classroom: Self-report and projective assessments of individual differences in children's perceptions.', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(3), pp. 550–558. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.50.3.550.

Ryan, R.M. and Weinstein, N. (2009) 'Undermining quality teaching and learning: A self-determination theory perspective on high-stakes testing', *Theory and Research in Education*, 7(2), pp. 224–233. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878509104327.

Schaufeli, W.B. *et al.* (2002) 'The Measurement of Engagement and Burnout: A Two Sample Confirmatory Factor Analytic Approach', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3(1), pp. 71–92. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015630930326.

Scott, D. (ed.) (1996) *Understanding educational research*. London: Routledge.

Seidman, I. (2006) *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. 3rd ed. New York: Teachers College Press.

Seifert, T. (2004) 'Understanding student motivation', *Educational Research*, 46(2), pp. 137–149. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0013188042000222421.

Sennett, R. (2008) *The craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shah, B., Dwyer, C. and Modood, T. (2010) 'Explaining Educational Achievement and Career Aspirations among Young British Pakistanis: Mobilizing "Ethnic Capital"?', *Sociology*, 44(6), pp. 1109–1127. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510381606.

Shenton, A.K. (2004) 'Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects', *Education for Information*, 22(2), pp. 63–75. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201.

Sibieta, Luke, Tahir, Imran and Waltmann, B. (2021) *2021 annual report on education spending in England*, *IFS*. Available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/2021-annual-report-education-spending-england#:~:text=Further%20education%20and%20sixth%20forms&text=The%20government%20allocated%20an%20extra,rapid%20growth%20in%20student%20numbers.

Smit, B. and Onwuegbuzie, A.J. (2018) 'Observations in qualitative inquiry: when what you see is not what you see', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1), p. 160940691881676. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918816766.

Smith, M. (2020) *How can I be sure?* Doctoral Thesis. University of Sunderland.

Smith, R. and Duckworth, V. (2022) *Transformative teaching and learning in further education: pedagogies of hope and social justice*. [United Kingdom]: Bristol University Press: Policy Press (Key issues in social justice).

Smith, V. and Husband, G. (2024) 'Guest editorial: Teacher recruitment and retention challenges in the further education and skills sector: lessons and solutions from international perspectives', *Education + Training*, 66(5), pp. 465–476. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-06-2024-518.

Standage, M., Duda, J.L. and Ntoumanis, N. (2005) 'A test of self-determination theory in school physical education', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75(3), pp. 411–433. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1348/000709904X22359.

Standing, K. (1999) 'Negotiating the home and the school: low income, lone mothering and unpaid schoolwork', in L. McKie et al. (eds) *Gender, Power and the Household*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 116–136. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230376632_7.

Stopforth, S. and Gayle, V. (2022) 'Parental social class and GCSE attainment: Re-reading the role of "cultural capital"', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 43(5), pp. 680–699. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2045185.

Su, Y.-L. and Reeve, J. (2014) 'Teacher motivation', in *The Oxford handbook of work engagement, motivation, and self-determination theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 349–362.

Sugino, T. (2010) 'Teacher demotivational factors in the Japanese language teaching context', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 3, pp. 216–226. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.07.036.

Sullivan, A. (2001) 'Cultural capital and educational attainment', *Sociology*, 35(04), pp. 893–912. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0038038501008938.

The English Association (2024) *Working Group on GCSE English Reform: Report and Recommendations*. Available at: https://englishassociation.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Working-Group-on-GCSE-Reform-FINAL.pdf.

The Huffington Post (2013) *School Reforms: Teenagers Forced To Stay On At School Until They Pass English And Maths GCSEs*. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/09/02/teens-forced-stay-school-pass-english-maths-gcses_n_3854837.html.

Thorne, S. (2000) 'Data analysis in qualitative research', *Evidence Based Nursing*, 3(3), pp. 68–70. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1136/ebn.3.3.68.

Thornton, A. *et al.* (2020) *College Staff Survey 2019 follow-up*, *DfE*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61703f96e90e071979dfecde/CSS_follow_up_survey_Sep_2020.pdf.

'Top-down and outside-in: breaking boundaries between research, theory and practice in education' (2019) *Journal of Management Policy and Practice*, 20(3). Available at: https://doi.org/10.33423/jmpp.v20i3.2229.

Truby, Ray (2024) *Motivation: the oxygen that keeps the learning torch alight*, *GCSE Resits Hub Project*. Available at: https://gcseresits.education/2024/04/15/motivation-the-oxygen-that-keeps-the-learning-torch-alight/.

Tully, P. (2024) 'Mission impossible? A strategic approach to improving the recruitment and retention of further education and training teachers in England', *Education + Training*, 66(5), pp. 510–523. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-04-2023-0130.

Usher, R. (1996) 'A critique of the neglected epistemological assumptions of educational research', in D. Scott and R. Usher (eds) *Understanding educational research*. London: Routledge.

Veitch, R. (2022) 'Reading the word instead of the world: GCSE English re-sits and the divorce of literacies from their lifeworld use', *Changing English*, 29(2), pp. 124–140. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2021.2024427.

Verhoeven, B. (2022) 'The politics of GCSE English language: popular language ideology's influence on England's national curriculum English language qualification', *English Today*, 38(4), pp. 244–253. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078421000110.

Walker, W. (2007) 'Ethical considerations in phenomenological research', *Nurse Researcher*, 14(3), pp. 36–45. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2007.04.14.3.36.c6031.

Wallace, S. (2014) 'When you're smiling: exploring how teachers motivate and engage learners in the further education sector', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 38(3), pp. 346–360. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2013.831040.

Wallace, S. (2017) *Motivating unwilling learners in further education: the key to improving behaviour.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Waters, T. and Waters, D. (2015) 'Bureaucracy', in T. Waters and D. Waters (eds) *Weber's rationalism and modern society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137365866.

Weale, S. (2018) *Labour: we'll end compulsory GCSE maths and English resits*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/20/labour-vow-end-compulsory-maths-english-retakes.

West, A. and Pennell, H. (2003) *Underachievement in schools*. London; New York: RoutledgeFalmer (School concerns series).

Whitehead, M. (2021) *PEER TUTORING IN FURTHER EDUCATION: A STUDY OF THE PERCEIVED EXPERIENCES FOR A GROUP OF GCSE RESIT AND A LEVEL STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS*. Doctoral thesis. University of Huddersfield.

Williams, M. (2016) *Key concepts in the philosophy of social research*. Los Angeles: SAGE (SAGE key concepts).

Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7a38c4ed915d1fb3cd6520/DFE-00031-2011.pdf.

Worth, D. (2023) *Rise in GCSE resits reveals 'misery of the policy'*. Available at: https://www.tes.com/magazine/analysis/secondary/rise-gcse-resits-exams-english-maths#:~:text=GCSE%20resits%20policy%3A%20demands%20for,proof%20that%20reform%20is%20needed.

Wragg, E.C. (2012) *An introduction to classroom observation*. Classic ed. London; New York: Routledge (Routledge education classic edition series).

Wyse, D., Selwyn, N., Smith, E., Suter, L., *et al.* (eds) (2017) *The BERA/SAGE handbook of educational research*. Los Angelas: Sage.

Wyse, D., Selwyn, N., Smith, E. and Suter, L. (2017) *The BERA/Sage handbook of educational research: two volume set*. 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473983953.

Zeigler-Hill, V. and Shackelford, T.K. (eds) (2020) *Encyclopedia of personality and individual differences*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3.

Appendices

8.7 Appendix 1: Project Information Sheet

University of Sunderland

PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

Study Title:

Ticking the box: FE learners' and lecturers' lived experiences of GCSE English re-sit course.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research aims to help FE Colleges to understand and provide a better experience of GCSE English for both re-take students, teachers and managers. By investigating students' and teachers' lived experiences, this research hopes to explain the low engagement and attainment rates in GCSE re-sit English.

Who can take part in the study?

Managers, lecturers teaching English at City of Westminster College, learners who are doing GCSE English re-sit with us.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you change your mind about taking part in the study, you can withdraw at any point during the session without giving a reason and without penalty. After you have completed the study, you can also withdraw your consent for your data to be included by contacting me via email within 2 weeks of participation and providing me with your participant code. The participant code will be given to you after you have consented to take part in the study. If you decide to withdraw during the study or in the subsequent 2-month period, your data will be destroyed and will not be used in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are very little foreseen disadvantages or risks to you by your participation in this study. Your identity will be protected through anonymization. You may be inconvenienced by taking part in this research as it could last for between one and two hours. Furthermore, in relating your experiences of GCSE English re-sit courses, there might be a chance you could feel emotionally distressed. In which case, I will stop the interview and signpost you to our College's counselling service.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

If you take part in this research, you may be helping to change policies and improve your experiences of GCSE re-sit, either as a manager, teacher or learner.

What if something goes wrong?

If you change your mind about participation, please contact me by email to cancel your participation. If you feel unhappy after the study, please contact me immediately or the Chairperson of the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Committee, whose contact details are given below.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Every effort will be made to keep your data confidential throughout the research. You participation will be anonymised, and any interviews will take place in a private space. Any audio data collected will be destroyed promptly upon transcribing. All information collected from the interviews will be protected in a computer using encryption, and only I will have access to that computer.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

If suitable, the results may also be presented at academic conferences and/or written up for publication in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The Education and Training Foundation is providing funding for this research. They are a registered charity concerned with improving the delivery of learning in further education.

Who has reviewed the study?

The University of Sunderland Research Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved the study.

8.8 Appendix 2: Gatekeeper Letter

To: **Azmol Hussain**
University of Sunderland Research Student

Date: 24/03/2023

This letter is confirmation of permission for the **Azmol Hussain** to access the English Department and learners at London Metropolitan College in order to undertake a research study entitled **Ticking the Box: learners' and lecturers' lived experiences of GCSE re-sit course.** Azmol has permission to interview staff and learners, observe some lessons and collect publicly available documents from the College. This permission is for the duration of his research.

The study may proceed subject to approval from the University of Sunderland Ethics Sub-committee.

Yours sincerely,

(Name removed for anonymity)

Signature

(Name removed for anonymity)

8.9 Appendix 3: Consent Form

University of Sunderland

Consent Form

Study title:

Ticking the box: FE learners' and lecturers' lived experiences of GCSE English re-sit course.

Participant code/ Anonymised name:

……

I have read and understood the attached study information and, by signing below, I consent to participate in this study	
I am over the age of 18	
I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study without giving a reason at any time during the study itself. However, if the findings are to be published, then withdrawal request cannot be made after it has been sent to the publisher.	
I understand that I also have the right to change my mind about participating in the study for a short period after the study has concluded, i.e., 2 weeks after attending the interview session	

Signed: _____

Print name: _____

(Your name, along with your participant code is important to help match your data from the interviews. It will not be used for any purpose other than this.)

Date: _____

Witnessed by: _____

Print name: _____

Date: _____

8.10 Appendix 4: Research questions for learners

Motivation

1. What's it like doing GCSE English at this college?
2. How would you describe your motivation for doing GCSE English? (Why are you doing it?)
3. Do you enjoy doing GCSE English?
4. What would help to motivate you more to do well in GCSE English?
5. What do you feel about your ability to do the work in class?
6. Do you get along with your classmates? How would you describe your relationship with others in the classroom?
7. What's your feeling towards the teacher?
8. If you could change one thing about your GCSE English class, what would it be?
9. Do you think you will pass this year? Why?
10. How is your GCSE English class in college different from your school?
11. Do you feel like you're making progress? Do you feel you are capable of passing GCSE English with hard work and support?
12. Do you see the link between GCSE English and your vocational courses?
13. Will passing GCSE English help you with your future goals?
14. Are you given the ability to decide what you want to work on for GCSE English? (Autonomy). Would that help you?
15. Do you know why you're doing GCSE English?
16. Does doing assessments and mock exams motivate you to work harder?
17. Why do you think you didn't get grade four last year?
18. Are you set homework? If yes, do you do it? If not, do you feel guilty about not doing it?
19. Are you more motivated to do your vocational course than GCSE English? Why? Why not?

Cultural Capital

20. Do you do any reading outside of College for pleasure?
2. Thinking about the readings/texts for your lessons. Can you relate to them?
3. Do you get any support from your parents/ guardian to do well for English?
4. How would you describe your social background? (Prompt about parents'/guardians' profession)
5. Do you think teachers make any assumption about you based on your background? Link to race, ethnicity.

Engagement

1. How engaged would you say you were in classes? Explain what that means and discuss phone, off task, etc.
2. Are you more engaged with the exam part of the course than other parts?
3. Do you think teachers focus too much on exams and is that impacting on how you do in the class?
4. If the teachers made the subjects more relevant to you and your interests, would you work harder in that subject?
5. Are the texts/materials you study at college more (or less) relevant to your real-life experience than those you studied at school?
6. Has your past experience of GCSE English influenced your view of the subject now?

Non-attendance:

1. If you miss your English lesson, what is the most common reason?
2. Does anything happen if you miss your class?
3. Do you get any recognition for attendance?
4. Is timetabling an issue for you?

8.11 Appendix 5: Sample transcript of an interview with a learner

Azmol Hussain

First of all, thank you for taking the time to take part in my research. So, my first question is, what's it like doing GCSE English at this college?

James

It's very, very calm, steady Lesson. They teach you, and they teach you about language features. Adjectives and a lot of stuff like structure as well. And most importantly, most importantly, punctuation.

Azmol Hussain

Why is it important to know this stuff?

James

Very important, because this is, this is the basics of what you would need when doing GCSE English. It basically requires you to make inferences and other sort of judgments based on a story. So, some of things are explicitly stated. Some things are implicitly implied.

Azmol Hussain

How would you describe your motivation for doing GCSE English?

James

My motivation for doing English is it's very, it's very nice. It's very I don't know how to describe it, it's, it's there. I'm very motivated to try and get better at English and maths like. Um, the only problem I have with it is that sometimes when it's a long day, and you don't about three lessons of coursework, you get tired before you can even properly sink with lesson. And it's sad, because I want to believe that it's just being lazy. But really everyone in the class, they're tired, they're drained, and most of them want to leave. Yeah, so because of issues.

Azmol Hussain

What would you change about your GCSE English class, if we could make it better.

James

Honestly if I had to change anything, I would say I would probably say make it more make it a bit more competitive and fun.

8.12 Appendix 6: Sample transcript of an interview with a lecturer

Azmol Hussain

So, tell me about your experience of Ofsted.

Shireen

Well, one thing that was was really brought to my attention is that a huge class I teach was split. Because the day and I was given this put on my timetable for that, like the evening before. Yeah. Late afternoon evening for however, there was all sorts of confusion, the only split, it's only been split now. And there's almost 60 students in the register, it was only split for that one lesson. On that day that officer came in. Because the other option was loads of students coming in and writing on their laps having no desks, no chairs to sit on. But then there's three GCSE lessons, and it's not being split for all three, it's only being split For that one lesson Ofsted came in.

Azmol Hussain

Ofsted made a comment about the lack of energy in the classroom. What's your perspective on this comment?

Shireen

Yeah, it's very disheartening to hear that because I like to think that I, I do have a lot of energy in the classroom. Because I always are more of the thought process of, if I bring the energy, then hopefully, my students will, will pick up on that and, and want to be there and want to succeed ultimately, and to hear very, to hear things like having a lack of energy. Not just students not being challenged, but how could they possibly I mean, this for my point of view, how can they even possibly judge, because he only stayed there, the inspector only stayed there for what 10/15 minutes and was when she was there, she wasn't even watching. She was walking around whispering to my students looking at books. And so, I don't know how she managed to see anything and typing away. And also, then I was writing something on the board. And then all of a sudden, she stopped me mid writing and said, Would you mind if you just step out? So that I could talk to the students? And fair enough posted out there for about 1015 minutes? And the comments, the questions seem quite subjective, like there was the question that I heard from, from students, something about random from teachers, like if you it was either, if you liked like them, we'll get all of them or not? I'm not quite sure what word for word. But ultimately, that's the, I don't know, I don't know if that's a subjective question. And also, they asked about targets, and we'll really, we're still at the beginning of the academic year. So don't necessarily know their targets. And also actually, another thing is that like this class, so many people have come like being changed around, come into the class and gone out of the class, because of the changes. And actually, the changes that we made a vocational areas. So, because students have been, I suppose their level is gone from level two to level three, they've had to go to different classes or come into my class. And, and so lots of them didn't actually do the diagnostic diagnostic assessments with me. And because they've got three teachers, some of the there's duplicates of the diagnostic assessments. And also, not all of the diagnostics match up. So, we're not all doing the same diagnostic. So actually, there's no standardisation there. And that's problematic. And it's difficult having three lessons with with, as in, I see them through a different teacher, three different teachers. Yeah, sorry, three different teachers.

8.13 Appendix 7: Examples of subject topics for AQA GCSE English paper 2

Source A is an extract from *The Tent, The Bucket and Me* in which Emma Kennedy describes her camping holidays in France in the 1970s.

Source A is an extract from *Touching the Void*, in which experienced climber Joe Simpson describes how he and fellow climber Simon Yates scaled a 21 000 foot mountain in Peru. On the way down, Joe fell and broke his leg. In this extract, Joe explains how, because of his broken leg, Simon had to lower him down the mountain using a rope.

In 1893, William Hudson travelled by sea to Patagonia, a remote area in South America, to study birds. In his book *Idle Days in Patagonia*, he describes the journey to get there.

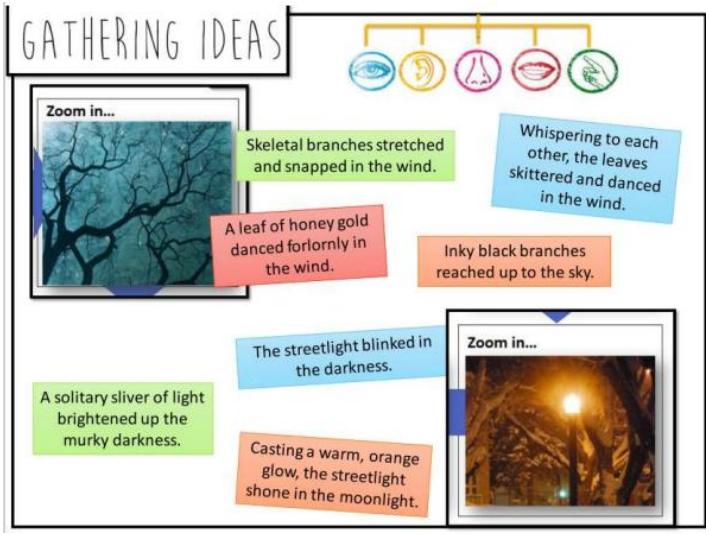
In 2005, Ben Fogle and James Cracknell set off together in a seven week race across the Atlantic Ocean in a rowing boat called 'Spirit'. In their book *The Crossing*, Ben describes what happened one night as he rowed and James slept.

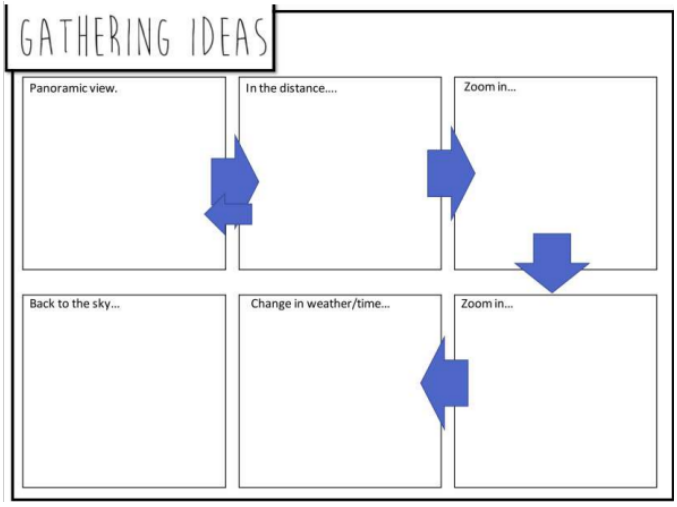
British climber, Matt Dickinson, together with his team, is attempting to scale Mount Everest. At base camp, a thousand feet below them, his colleague, Audrey Salkeld is the first to see the approaching storm.

In 1899, British explorer Gertrude Bell set out to climb one of the most dangerous mountains in the Alps, the Meije. Source B is an extract from the letter she sent home describing the climb.

Source B is an extract from *In The Wilderness*, written in 1878 by the American writer Charles Dudley Warner. At this time, some Americans were looking for adventure by camping in the wild.

8.14 Appendix 8: Examples of lesson handouts





8.15 Appendix 9: A page of my field note

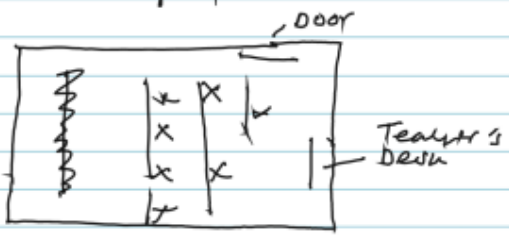
Lesson Observation. 12/01/22

11:39 – Two learners early. Lesson starts at Three
11:45.

"Hi. How are you?" PI

↳ S1 – 'I'm good'.

– Teacher on her computer.



PI Is this your first lesson today? | Concern with attendance
Sts – NO
PI I will have to send messages. |

Learner (1) has his headphones on.
All learners on their phones.

↳ Teacher messages the learners regarding the attendance.

PI ↳ "Are you better now. How are you?"

~~8~~ 8 learners at start. (8)

P I saw you home work.
I haven't seen you in a while, how are you.

S I was abroad.

P I don't know where the rest are, hopefully they will join later.

8.16 Appendix 10: Further example of limited work produced by a learner

Flashback 1. To show why it happen or add information from the past that we havent read or seen.

2. ~~To analysis a character's behaviour and with good~~ ~~and~~ To Analysis ~~a the persons personality and their behavio~~ ~~well.~~ the deeper meaning.

3. ~~It~~ The point of ~~it~~ it is to make the reader think.

4 "He ran" ~~is~~ is such a simple sentense but it helps ~~with~~ the ~~[illegible] ending~~ ending of some stressful scene.

5. I will not wear this dress in a million years

6. She does not like the food but had to consume for whatever reason.

7. ~~Explixic and implixic~~ Explixics ~~[illegible]~~ goes into detail in everything ~~[illegible]~~ and the other is vague.

8. Heard him screaming for hours until it stop when the light gone off.

Mary tried her best to swallow the mother's meal.