Academic Buoyancy: First-Year A-Level Students' and Tutors' Experiences and Perceptions

by

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Abstract

An extensive body of literature considers the concept of academic achievement/ underachievement, high-stakes testing, and a variety of subject-domain-specific research into GCE A-Level qualifications. Less prominent in the literature is a focus on studying A-Levels from the viewpoint of A-Level students themselves, their 'everyday' experiences of studying the qualifications, the influences that shape their perspectives of achievement and success during A-Level study, or the factors that they perceive to affect or improve it. This focus on the 'everyday' ups and downs that form an inevitable part of academic life and how students successfully handle them is also a growing area of research, termed *academic buoyancy* (Martin & Marsh, 2009), and identified as a concept that is related to, but distinct from, other areas of research including academic achievement, 'high-stakes' qualifications, academic self-concept, character education, and resilience.

This thesis presents an exploratory study into the concept of academic buoyancy in an A-Level context, focusing in particular on the perspectives and experiences of students who have transitioned from school and GCSE into their first year of A-Level studies at an FE college, along with the perspectives and experiences of A-Level tutors who teach or have taught first-year A-Level students.

This explorative qualitative study, heavily influenced by phenomenology, takes an inductive approach with the assistance of 10 first-year A-Level students and 8 A-Level tutors involved in 4 focus groups. The data has been analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, underpinned by aspects of narrative analysis, with emergent themes exploring participant perspectives and attempting to capture the authentic voice of the participants.

The main findings to emerge from the data was a sense of 'external' and 'internal' factors shaping participants' academic buoyancy: societal and external expectations and perceptions; the high stakes A-Level environment and the first year as a time of transition; participants' own actions, expectations and perceptions; and the dialogue/interactions they have with themselves and others.

Whilst these factors possessed distinct components, *how* participants communicated their experiences presented these components as intrinsically and inextricably linked.

Their experiences tended to be conveyed in an ‘overarching’ narrative - conceptualised in this research as a ‘quest’ (Booker, 2004), in which A-Level students’ academic buoyancy is simultaneously both a quantitative, publicly high-profile experience, and also a less tangible, intensely individual, emotional and reflective developmental journey.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Research

Throughout my 18 years as a practitioner in Further Education (FE), there has been a complex narrative that surrounds A-Level qualifications. January 2023 saw the Department for Education release its *Guide to the Post-16 Qualifications Landscape at Level 3 and Below for 2025 and Beyond* (Department for Education, 2023a). This policy document outlined the most recent in a series of post-16 qualification updates that have taken place in the United Kingdom (UK). Stemming from the *Post-16 Skills Plan* (Department for Education, 2016), the reforms were stated as a means of moving past a perception that A-Levels served as the lone option for the ”best and brightest students” (Department for Education, 2021a, p. 4) to ensure that all post-16 qualifications are high quality and deliver positive outcomes for students.

The reference to “best and brightest” (Department for Education, 2021a, p. 4), and the definitively-toned statement ”we have already reformed A-Levels“ (Department for Education, 2023a, p. 5), reinforces a longstanding view that A-Level qualifications in the UK are the ”gold standard” (Ofqual, 2012, p. 25), emphasised by the evaluation that the A-Level reforms that took place in 2015 brought refreshed content, increased rigour, and as better preparing students for, and keeping pace with, university and employer demands (Department for Education, 2014; Ofqual, 2019). There is, however, an ongoing and arguably paradoxical narrative that surrounds A-Level qualifications. This narrative has permeated my years as a practitioner in A-Level education at a Further Education (FE) College and has served as the inspiration for undertaking this research; as Ravitch (2014) observes, practitioner research is powerfully driven by what concerns, confuses, challenges and rewards us in our localised settings.

This dichotomous view of A-Levels has undoubtedly been rewarding, challenging, a cause for celebration, concerning and confusing throughout my practice. A-Levels have been cited as “gold standard” (Ofqual, 2012, p. 25) but simultaneously critiqued for rising pass rates (68% in 1982 to 97-98% since 2008), resulting in criticisms that A-Levels were

“getting easier” (The Economist, 2015). Similarly, the A-Level reforms were viewed as signifying high quality deep learning (Long, 2017) but also criticised as generating an exam factory climate, at risk of reducing learning to a mechanistic, shopping list method of measuring achievement (Nash, et al., 2021, p. 155; Smith, 1996, 2000). This is presented alongside criticisms in the literature of A-Level qualifications’ challenging high-stakes exam format (Chamberlain, et al., 2011); concerns are raised in research that many students studying A-Levels are seeking out access to counselling services (TES, 2016), with studies of anxiety and mental health problems linked to academic and exam pressure notable in the literature (Nash, et al., 2021; Stubbs, et al., 2023a).

These contrary views of A-Level qualifications and student experience and outcomes were something I encountered as a teacher and manager in an FE College. As a practitioner I experienced metrics on a local and national level that reinforced A-Level qualifications as high quality and delivering positive outcomes (Department for Education, 2021a), for example the number of learners who achieved 3 or more A* or A grades rising from 2460 in 2018 to 2785 in 2019 (Ofqual, 2022a), and strong progression to positive university or employment destinations. Simultaneously, national data reporting retention rates on A-Level qualifications identified that non-completion or non-achievement of the A-Level course were the outcome for some who started on the A-Level path (Department For Education, 2020a) – a 4-year retention decline was recorded nationally from 96.1% in 2016 to 91.3% in 2019 (Department For Education, 2020a, p. 1), as well as recording 89.4% of students completing to assessment stage (Department For Education, 2020a, p. 5).

Practitioner research is described as a vehicle through which the educational status quo can be questioned (Fichtman Dana, 2016), and which often starts from a point of direct personal experience (Silverman, 2013). Whilst these objective, quantitative ‘extremes’ formed an inherent contextual backdrop, it was my interactions with students and how they articulated their day-to-day experiences of studying A-Levels that inspired this research, in particular how students perceived and reflected on their own performance.

Of particular interest were interactions where successes students celebrated were not grade-related or where students would express frustration about their own performance,

despite possessing what would usually be perceived as positive markers of past and current performance, as well as predictors of positive academic trajectory, e.g. prior attainment (Steinmayr, et al., 2019), high attendance, and current strong formative assessment performance. This interest was brought to the forefront in November 2016, when the Collins English Dictionary (2017) entered into its collection the term ‘snowflake generation’. Its definition is: “informal, derogatory: the generation of people who became adults in or after the 2010s, viewed as being less resilient and more prone to taking offence than previous generations” (Collins English Dictionary, 2017). Webster and O’Leary (2017) critique that narratives on resilience fuel a derogatory discourse when students are seen as needing ‘toughening’, or where struggle is viewed as the lack of resilience or character traits, and that a more supportive, collaborative and cooperative approach is needed. This position was echoed by Finch et al. (2010) whose study of over 400 A-Level students in Ireland found students expressing this sense of being ‘lacking’ or ‘at fault’, reporting feelings of self-disappointment, worthlessness, incapability and stupidity that left them feeling some loss in terms of identity, apathetic or wishing to give up their studies.

Once again, Smith’s (1996, 2000) caution around reducing education to a series of mechanistic measures (e.g. retention) was highlighted, and Ravitch’s (2014) commentary on practitioner research resonated here: it is a chance to engage in useful, relevant, meaningful research focused on a specific context, with a specific population born out of attention to, and caring about, people from our own settings. Ravitch’s (2014) assessment of practitioner-research further struck home: deeply-contextualized, person-centred research is “where the hope is” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 6), and whilst there is substantial documented research and commentary *about* A-Level qualifications, student achievement, stress, mental health, resilience and related topics, further research *from the perspective of* A-Level students would be insightful (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011; Stubbs, et al., 2023a).

Similarly, whilst there is considerable research into students considered ‘at risk’, affected by acute or chronic adversities (Martin & Marsh, 2006), the ‘everyday’ challenges that affect the majority student body, termed *academic buoyancy* by Martin and Marsh (2008),

and considered from the perspective and experiences of A-Level students, is an area which would benefit from further exploration.

1.2 The Concept of Academic Buoyancy in this Study

As noted in the literature, the concept of academic buoyancy is a relatively recent concept in educational research (Martin & Marsh, 2008) and one which I discovered as a result of exploring another source of inspiration for this research: my practitioner experience of the 2015 A-Level reforms (Ofqual, 2019). These reforms are contextually significant for the current study, as my interactions with students indicated that their perceptions of performance and progress were informed by the external policy, qualification structure and subsequent narratives of success that shaped A-Level qualifications, and which they were measured against. The reforms were also a significant influence as the aforementioned resilience narrative was prominent alongside them, including in UK policy around 'character education' (Department for Education, 2017). A focus on concepts such as resilience, as well as simultaneous significant structural, content and assessment changes to the qualification raised one of Curriculum Theory's central tenets: to question "what are we educating for?" (Young, 2014, p. 194).

Following further investigation of existing research and UK educational policy, it became apparent that the A-Level qualification has, to varying degrees, been involved in this discussion through repeated reform since its inception in 1951 (Stewart, 2015), and as most recently evidenced through 2023 proposals to introduce the new Advanced British Standard (Department for Education, 2023b). Whilst the focus of this study is not an evaluation of the evolution of the A-Level qualification, how A-Levels are constructed and viewed are significant to the concept of academic buoyancy in two ways: their structure, content and assessment form the basis of the 'everyday challenges' which academic buoyancy will have to overcome; they shape expectations of what is perceived as educational success for students.

The following sections provide a brief contextual background of the relevant A-Level reforms, including how they have shaped this study's focus on academic buoyancy.

1.3 A-Level Reforms – Policy, Purpose and Perceptions of Success

The 2010 Department for Education White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education, 2010a), announced the government's intention to implement a 3-wave phased set of GCSE and A-Level reforms - the first wave of teaching from 2015, second from 2016 and final from 2017. These reforms signalled a shift to address criticisms of previous changes via Curriculum 2000 (Hodgson, et al., n.d.), which saw a move from terminal, linear assessment at the end of two academic years to a modular structure (UK Parliament, 2003), assessed in January and June of both the first and second year of study. This modular approach was viewed as a way of helping improve student achievement; changes to January and June assessment, as well as the opportunity to re-sit modules resulted in a rise in pass rate from 68% in 1982 to 97-98% since 2008, suggesting improvement (The Economist, 2015). Through the lens of Curriculum Theory, however, this model drew criticism for situating A-Level assessments as a product-driven curriculum (Smith, 1996, 2000), with a focus on measurability. Warmington and Murphy (2007) illustrate this 'product-driven' perception of achievement in A-Levels, and the increasingly public nature of this perception, via what they consider to be an ever-growing "bitter media debate" (Warmington & Murphy, 2007, p. 70), played out annually in August in the UK's news media's calendars. In their article *'Read All about It!' UK News Media Coverage of A-level Results* (Warmington & Murphy, 2007), they conclude that escalating news coverage focused on A-level exam results has created an "ideologically and emotionally charged debate" which has become "ritualistic" and "polarised" (p. 70) and permeates the public perception of achievement at A-Level.

The 2015 A-Level reforms essentially repealed the modular structure (Ofqual, 2018) based on what then Education Secretary Michael Gove (Department for Education, 2014) cited as concerns that the modular format was creating a negative impact on student achievement (e.g. teaching for a qualification rather than for learning, grade inflation through re-sit opportunities). As a result, and in the case of the students in this study, students now undertake linear A-Levels where assessment of achievement takes place at the end of the students' two years, with the majority of A-Level subjects assessed primarily through terminal exams. The qualifications are described as requiring "deeper",

"holistic", "coherent" study, where students are expected to make links across their programme of study, and be assessed "synoptically" on knowledge and skills (Cambridge International Examinations, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Whilst some of the benefits of reform were pragmatic (e.g. removal of disruption to teaching time caused by January modules) and identified as part of the government's intention to address perceived issues in the modular structure, the 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education, 2010a), also indicated a view that the discourse surrounding education, curriculum and student achievement needed to take a new direction. In the foreword, Prime/Deputy Prime Ministers David Cameron and Nick Clegg (Department for Education, 2010a, p. 3) stated that "so much of the education debate in this country is backward looking: have standards fallen? Have exams got easier?". Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education, reiterated this view: that reform was needed to make the British education system a global competitor, act as an "engine of social mobility" (Department for Education, 2010a, p. 6), and address a widening social gap in educational achievement. An Ofqual investigation (Ofqual, 2012) which gathered the perspectives of different stakeholders (higher education sector workers, teachers and employers) on the suitability of A-Levels, deemed that generally they were desirable for employers and to prepare most students in terms of knowledge and broad skills for higher education (Ofqual, 2012) – reinforcing the view of A-Levels as this 'engine' preparing students for transition to positive next steps.

Of interest to this research, however, was the intersection of my interactions with students and the reference to more abstract language such as "deep", "coherent" and "holistic" (Cambridge International Examinations, 2013, pp. 1-2) – and the notion of "collateral learning" (Dewey, 1938, cited in Smith, 1996, 2000), where learning of 'attitudes' as well as the explicit formally-examined curriculum has similar long-range importance. This research was also influenced by Curriculum Theory's concepts of curriculum as process and praxis; rather than being "objects to be acted upon" (Smith, 1996, 2000), curriculum as process places emphasis on the "active" (Smith, 1996, 2000), where learners are in an "ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers,

knowledge and milieu" (Cornbleth, 1990, cited in Smith, 1996, 2000), and praxis bringing to the centre education and curriculum as a means of emancipation (Smith, 1996, 2000).

This focus was emphasised further in the form of research undertaken alongside the A-Level reforms into 'character education' in UK schools (Department for Education, 2017), and a number of investments that have been made into character education in schools since 2014. Defined by the Department for Education (2017) as any activity designed to "develop desirable character traits or attributes in children and young people" (2017, p. 3), they concluded that these traits:

- Can support improved academic attainment;
- Are valued by employers;
- Can enable children to make a positive contribution to British society.

(Department for Education, 2017, p. 3)

At the time of the most recent A-Level reforms, former UK Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, emphasised a focus on character education via announcing 27 schools and organisations who were recipients of the 2015 Character Awards (Department for Education, 2015) in recognition of work done to promote character traits for students, concluding that education institutions who were not teaching these skills were only doing "half the job" in terms of achievement (TES, 2017).

The importance of the wider holistic development signposted here was further reinforced through a key regulatory body for UK education organisations: Ofsted (Ofsted, 2023a). As can be seen in both the Common Inspection Framework (introduced in 2015) (Ofsted, 2015) and the subsequent Education Inspection Framework (introduced in 2019, most recently updated 2023) (Ofsted, 2023b), educational organisations are evaluated on how the curriculum "extends beyond the academic, technical or vocational", into more process and praxis aspects, through the quality of development and outcomes for students' "behaviours and attitudes" and "personal development" alongside more traditional measures such as academic/qualification outcomes (Ofsted, 2023b).

1.4 Character Education

This study does not intend to portray character-related concepts in education and educational research as a brand-new focus or emerging as a result of the A-Level reforms; nor is it undertaking a comprehensive critical analysis of the concept of character education. This study is, however, rooted in students' experiences of studying A-Levels and how they articulated these experiences in relation to both academic and 'character' aspects.

Interest in the field of character education, sometimes referred to as moral education, is long-standing. Arthur (2014) charts the development of character education in Britain and America from Greek Aristotelian virtue ethics and Plato's *Republic*, and details both its religious and secular influences. Arthur (2014) cites that the Victorian period was a "high point in character education", particularly the "language of character" (p. 47), but that secular developments saw phrases such as "character training" emerge as an alternative to the moral focus derived from religious texts (p. 48). Arthur (2014) notes that criticisms of character education have arisen when character education takes the standpoint of being a remedy to the "social ills of society" (p. 51), or when it takes an authoritarian, instructive approach; subsequently, more contemporary approaches to character education promote more self-direction, where students have a say in their development, which Arthur (2014) notes is influenced by the work of cognitive behavioural theorists.

Literature into concepts of character and moral education have grown substantially (McGrath, et al., 2022), encompassing a range of fields, for example: 'Positive Psychology' and emotional intelligence (Bates, 2019); "habit training" (Goodman, 2019, p. 29); studies in "grit" (Duckworth, 2016) and "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2006). Consequently, character education has at its foundation competing definitions; ranging from the "narrow" to the "broad" (McGrath, et al., 2022, p. 219), or "contested and vague" (Goodman, 2019, p. 15), and "driven by diverse political, social and economic objectives" (Bates, 2019, p. 695). The literature also reflects that it is not a topic without its controversies and critics. Goodman (2019), Bates (2019) and Kristjánsson (2021) illustrate just some of the contested nature of character education: its varied definitions

(Bates, 2019; Goodman, 2019; Kristjánsson, 2021); that the role of educational institutions in “teaching character” is “questionably” enlarged (Goodman, 2019, p. 15); that there is a danger of it being “counterproductive” or being “indicative of the performativity in English education policy” (Bates, 2019, p. 706). Kristjánsson (2021) presents the “fiery” (p. 375) political and ideological debate across the “current battle lines” of this “highly controversial educational topic” (p. 363), one of which suggests a risk of “instrumentalism” (p. 365) and a focus on the “individualistic and self-centred” (Jerome and Kisby, 2019, p.40, cited in Kristjánsson, 2021, p. 367). Despite these debates, the focus in UK educational policy, and the experiences emerging from students’ and teachers’ stories that frequently referenced the importance of ‘character’-related concepts in perceptions of studying A-Levels, identified this an initial contextual area of research.

Exploring the ‘types’ or ‘categories’ found in character education literature established that whilst it was a diverse field, there is some consensus that character education incorporates the following: the moral (e.g. honesty, kindness, integrity), civic (e.g. community service, volunteering), intellectual (e.g. reflection, curiosity, creativity) and performance (e.g. perseverance, confidence) (McGrath, et al., 2022; Bates, 2019; Goodman, 2019; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). This can be evidenced by returning briefly to Morgan: stating that qualifications and exam grades were not enough, Morgan concluded that there needed to be an explicit focus on students’ “stickability”, ensuring they “are able to cope with all that life throws at them” (TES, 2017). “Stickability” is just one term Morgan utilises to describe character education – in the article announcing the 27 winners of the Character Awards, the following can also be found, which can be categorised into the moral, civic, intellectual and performance:

Grit	Resilience	Ready for Life	Rigorous	Rounded	Grounded
Ambitious	Aspiration	Self-Awareness	Professionalism	Integrity	Respect
Endeavour	Spark	Eloquence	Expertise	Craftsmanship	Reciprocity
Reflection	Resourcefulness	Bounce Back	Camaraderie	Loyalty	Discipline
Responsibility	Determination	Friendship	Passion	Independence	Self-Management
Challenge	Honesty	Kindness	Perseverance	Friendship	Creativity
Motivation	Positivity	Initiative	Habits of Mind	Empathy	Problem-Solving

Table 1-1 - Terms used related to character education in an article on the 2015 Character Awards (Department for Education, 2015)

As a result of their perceived value in improving academic achievement this study placed focus on character education as quantified by 'intellectual' and 'performance' traits (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). Phrases that linked to Morgan's importance on how students 'coped' stood out, echoing the "active" (Smith, 1996, 2000) student-centred stance that was important to me as a researcher: terms such as 'grit', 'reflection', 'resourcefulness', 'bounce back', 'self-management', 'challenge', 'perseverance' and 'habits of mind' – with the most prominently recurring one being 'resilience'.

1.5 Resilience

Bates (2019) claims a "revival of interest" in character education, referencing resilience as one of "the new three Rs" of education: "resilience, respect, and responsibility" (p. 696). Resilience is also often attributed as a prerequisite of "improved academic attainment" (Department for Education, 2017, p. 3), and is repeatedly referenced in key regulatory reports by Ofsted, noted as a positive where schools/colleges have been deemed to promote and develop resilience in students, or the impact where this is not the case (Bates, 2019).

This was further reinforced in an A-Level context by an emergence of publications and training courses that explicitly made the link between ‘intellectual’ and ‘performance’ traits and achievement. For example, a course offered by AQA, one of the largest UK A-Level awarding bodies, titled *Mental Toughness for Exam Success* (AQA, 2015a), focused on emotional resilience as an issue impacting students’ achievement, and a second course, *A-Level Mindset* (AQA, 2015b), claimed to "have uncovered the five key drivers of success at A-level, all of which can be learned” (AQA, 2015b). Further work linked to this was an A-Level Mindset book (Griffin & Oakes, 2016) and VESPA coaching model (VESPA Academy, 2020) drawing on a wide field of research into the “heart of success” (Griffin & Oakes, 2016, p. 6). This work spanned the domains of education, psychology and sport, and was contextualized specifically with the aim of developing a practical, ‘consistent’ system of interventions and associated teaching and learning resources/activities to improve academic success for A-Level students by addressing their “ways of thinking, behaving and working” (Griffin & Oakes, 2016, p. 8).

As Smith (2015) identifies, the implementation of resilience-based intervention programmes has seen an increase in educational institutions; indeed, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, this study started life as a proposed action research project into resilience interventions, based on my experiences of A-Level reform and research into character education discussed so far. Smith also observed, however, that whilst there are “laudable” (Smith, 2015) aspects to these programmes, there were also some conceptual and implementational problems in existing resilience programmes, ranging from “vague and conceptually weak” definitions of resilience, lack of clarity around intended impact and outcome measures, and an “absence” of “an evidence base”. Smith’s (2015) conclusions draw upon a systematic consultative review undertaken by Hart and Heaver (2013) into literature around resilience-based programmes. Their evaluation of this literature concludes that these interventions take many different forms, can be “difficult to navigate” (Hart & Heaver, 2013, p. 29), which are “most effective” is difficult to discern (p. 49), and can result in frustration for practitioners who are seeking recommendations for “what to do in the immediate future” (p. 28) to support young people. They also report that “there is a huge gap between what research often reports, and what people want to know and

learn about when working in the messy complexity of situated practice" (p. 48). These observations illuminated points that had stood out in Griffin and Oakes' work (2016): namely, the centrality of the student as an active participant, with an the emphasis on students taking control, and the acknowledgement that "educators can be guilty of doing too much pushing" leading to students feeling a "lack of control" (VESPA Academy, 2020).

This subsequently opened a new line of inquiry – academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008) - and highlighted a potential gap in the research perspective: the qualitative lived experience of how students perceive and manage undertaking A-Level study.

1.6 Academic Buoyancy

At the early stages of this study I had allowed researcher practitioner assumptions to prematurely ringfence the term 'resilience' as the area of study I wished to research; as McGeown et al. (2016) observe, it is a concept with a variety of approaches, and which has close links to other related concepts such as mental toughness.

The concept of resilience in this study is defined, in what is considered its 'classic' form, as an individual's capacity for, process of, or the outcome of, their effective adaptation in circumstances or life experiences that are threatening, challenging, or stressful (Luthar, 1991; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Masten, 2001; Martin & Marsh, 2006). As Martin and Marsh (2006) identify, however, research focused on this definition of resilience often deals with broader life circumstances or events, for example social disadvantage, divorce, severe illness, bereavement; even when in an academic context (which they define distinctly as "academic resilience" (Martin & Marsh, 2009, p. 353)), it often refers to "a student's capacity to overcome acute or chronic adversities" which act as "major assaults on educational processes" (p. 353). A limitation of this, they argue, is that this does not map over to the majority student body, nor does it address the negotiation of the "ups and downs of everyday academic life" (Martin & Marsh, 2009, p. 353), or the view that at some point "all students may experience some level of poor performance, adversity, challenge or pressure" (Martin & Marsh, 2006, p. 267).

Martin et al. (2010) also identified that this area of research tended to focus on very specific groups in educational settings, “a particular cohort […] who experience marked adversity and problems” (p. 474), for example students affected by community violence (Overstreet & Braun, 1999) or learning disabilities (Meltzer, 2004). Martin and Marsh (2008) discerned the need for a conceptually discrete area of study that focused on “the many students who are faced with setbacks, challenges and pressures that are part of ‘everyday’ academic life” (Martin, et al., 2010, p. 474) – which they termed “academic buoyancy” (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 53), and defined as “students’ ability to successfully deal with academic setbacks and challenges that are typical of the ordinary course of school life (e.g., poor grades, competing deadlines, exam pressure, difficult schoolwork)” (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 54). Martin and Marsh (2008) explain the need for this delineation as in “substantive, operational, and methodological terms” they see buoyancy and resilience being demarcated on “two primary dimensions”: “differences of degree and differences of kind” (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 55). A ‘difference of degree’, they argue, would be chronic underachievement linked to resilience vs isolated patches of performance or poor grades linked to buoyancy; a ‘difference of kind’ would be truancy or total disaffection from studying linked to resilience vs a dip in motivation or engagement linked to buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 55).

Whilst Martin and Marsh (2010) establish academic buoyancy as a distinct researchable concept located in the academic environment, it is also acknowledged that academic buoyancy draws on, is underpinned by, or is interrelational with wider-domain concepts under the ‘umbrella’ of resilience (Putwain, et al., 2015a; Martin, et al., 2017; Thomas & Allen, 2021; Putwain & Wood, 2022).These include: motivation, engagement, adaptive coping, ‘hassles’, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, confidence, anxiety, mindset and grit (Dweck, 2006; Martin & Marsh, 2008; Duckworth, 2016; Thomas & Allen, 2021). This body of research is also described as having its roots in both ecological literature (Holling, 1973), where resilience references the recovery ability of ecosystems threatened by outside influences or following natural disasters, before being adopted in the field of psychology to encapsulate humans’ ability to ‘bounce back’, evolving to consider both internal and external factors affecting resilience such as self-esteem (internal), family history or social environment (external) (Werner & Smith, 1982; Forbes & Fikretoglu,

2018). Of particular relevance to this research, however, was the view that academic buoyancy as a concept is situated "within a positive psychology context" (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 53), identified as being brought to prominence by the work of Seligman (2002a; 2002b).

Seligman, it is argued, wanted to "correct the trajectory of modern day 'pathologically focused' psychology" and shift the view of people as "passive individuals subjected to external forces" to "proactive, creative, self-determined beings" (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011, p. 5); reframing psychology post World War II to ask not "Why do these individuals fail?" but "What makes some individuals succeed?" (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011, p. 5), and building on what is right rather than fixing what is not (Seligman, 2002b). This focus on positive thriving and flourishing, where adapting and "optimal functioning" (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011, p. 16) are a key aim, and where there is a sense of individual empowerment, are tenets from positive psychology that are reflected in the concept of academic buoyancy.

This is reinforced by one of the recommendations to emerge from Martin and Marsh's work on academic buoyancy: the 5C model (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Martin, et al., 2010).

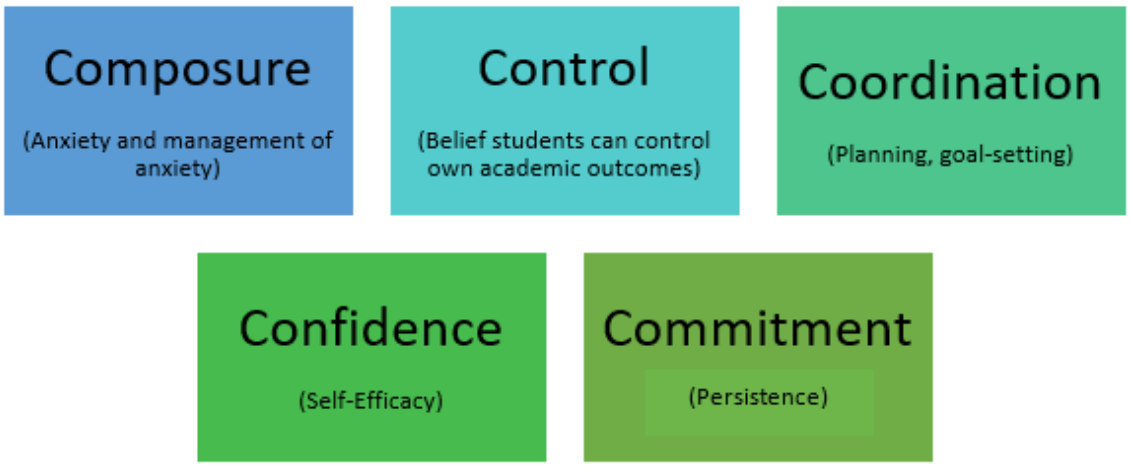

Figure 1-1 - The 5Cs of Academic Buoyancy based on Martin and Marsh (2006) and Smith (2020)

This model identified 5 areas associated with students' academic buoyancy and which they suggested were effective points for intervention: confidence (assessed via high self-efficacy), coordination (high planning), commitment (high persistence), composure (low anxiety), and control (low uncertain control) (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Martin, et al., 2010). What stood out in this research was their focus on how these interventions focused on supporting the enhancement of *students' ability* to deal with the challenges of their academic setting – supporting students to be in an empowered position.

Masten's (2001) insights into resilience research support concepts such as the 5Cs, stating the "surprising conclusion" to emerge from these studies was the "ordinariness of resilience" (2001, p. 227). In what is described as a "quest to understand the extraordinary" (Masten, 2001, p. 235), Masten (2001) remarks on how resilience portrayed in the media and scholarly research was framed as requiring something "remarkable" or "special" about the subjects involved, phrases like "invulnerable" or "invincible", "extraordinary" or "Superkids" (Masten, 2001, p. 227) appearing prominently; what Masten (2001) found, in fact, was that resilience does not come from "rare and special qualities" but rather the "everyday magic of the ordinary", and from "ordinary processes" – also emphasising the shift this signifies to a "far more optimistic outlook" and the "self-righting power of development" (Masten, 2001, p. 235).

This shift to the 'ordinary', with a focus on positive, empowered, everyday processes inherent in the "normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities" (Masten, 2001, p. 235) has clear parallels to the emerging argument for academic buoyancy as a unique, independent concept worthy of exploration. Putwain and Wood (2022) position academic buoyancy as "a proactive response" relevant to the majority of students, rather than resilience's "retroactive response" relevant to the minority, and which understanding of, and intervention in, will enable the "nurturing of such attributes" which will "allow students to flourish" (p. 1). It was this standpoint that shaped its appeal to me from a practitioner researcher perspective, and which led to the following research aims.

1.7 Aims of the Research

With a reported 852,200 entries for the UK summer 2022 exam series (Ofqual, 2022b), A-Levels account for a substantial uptake in post-16 education by school leavers nationally. It is therefore essential to remember Plato's observation that learning has an emotional base (Nash, et al., 2021), and that it is essential in matters of educational significance that the student's voice, experience (Holdsworth, et al., 2018) and emotions are captured and shape understanding and developments – a view which has underpinned the focus, design and undertaking of this research. As Stubbs, et al. (2023a) observe, there is a need for research of the A-Levels qualifications, the 'everyday challenges' they present, and the first-hand perspectives of how students' perceive and handle the ups and downs that form an inevitable part (Martin & Marsh, 2009) of A-Level academic life.

A-Levels serve as a significant life event for those that study them, acting as a critical step to university study (Chamberlain, et al., 2011) or future career goals, and progression to further education (FE) is recognised as a key transitional stage in a young person's journey (Packer & Thomas, 2021). A gap in research exists in this area, however, with research into educational transition largely focused on primary to secondary school transition, or the transition into university or higher education, and without much exploration of the "voices of stakeholders" (Packer & Thomas, 2021, p. 225). Educational transitions can be critical for students (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011), and the first year of a study programme can often create the greatest vulnerability (Feldman & Zimbler, 2011). This prompted the design and scope of this research as an inductive, explorative, qualitative study of academic buoyancy via the perceptions and experiences of first-year A-Level students, as well as those that teach them – heavily influenced by phenomenology to harness voices (Packer & Thomas, 2021) that were currently less evident. The inclusion of teachers' voices and experiences was an opportunity to situate myself within the research but also to give fair consideration to alternative interpretations, viewpoints and methodologies (Elo, et al., 2014) – and not inadvertently limit the research journey through the lens of my own professional experience by allowing insider researcher pre-understanding to bias (Doyle, 2019).

These aims have informed the subsequent research questions:

- What are first-year A-Level students' and tutors' perceptions of the influencing factors in first year A-Level students' academic buoyancy?
- What are first-year A-Level students' and tutors' perceptions of what supports or impacts first-year students' academic buoyancy?

In addition to contributing to knowledge in this area of research, this study also reflects the view that practitioner research is undertaken with a view to improve practice (Campbell & McNamara, 2010; Newby, 2014). This research aims to better understand the needs and challenges for learners studying A-Levels, with a view to exploring how professional practice can be informed to improve not only achievement outcomes for students, but also student experience and buoyancy whilst studying A-Levels: to contribute to the field of academic buoyancy research and build on the proactive, optimistic, nurturing of students which will enable them to flourish (Putwain & Wood, 2022).

1.8 The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into six chapters. Following this introduction, which presents the rationale for this study, including contextual background emerging from my practitioner experience, as well as the intended aims of this study, are a further five chapters, shaped in content and structure by the inductive nature of the methodology taken in this research.

Chapter 2: The Literature Review. Whilst the topic of academic buoyancy, influenced by the experiences in my professional practice, has shaped the origins of this study, the emergent themes from the collected data have been central to the selection, inclusion and use of literature throughout. Research literature is identified in Chapter 2 which provides insight into concepts and key works significant to the emergent themes, acting as contextual background to specific literature utilised in Chapter 5 to analyse participant extracts.

Chapter 3: Methodology – The Design of the Study. This chapter outlines methodological and reflexive choices made in the research design, including how the final research scope evolved from its initial iteration as a result of my research journey. This chapter explores the ontological and epistemological stance of this research, defining and justifying the approach taken. This chapter also details the data collection process, including approaches to sampling and the undertaking of focus groups, including consideration of their limitations and ethical implications.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis. This chapter contextualizes the choice of Reflexive Thematic Analysis as a data analysis method, before outlining the data analysis process undertaken which led to the production of themes.

Chapter 5: Thematic Findings and Discussion. This chapter presents the findings to emerge from the data analysis in relation to the research questions. This chapter also includes critical discussion of participant extracts in relation to existing literature.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations. This chapter concludes the study by outlining its contributions to the research field and presenting recommendations and considerations for future study and action, both for my own personal practice and in a wider educational context.

CHAPTER 2 - THE LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Literature Review

Boote and Beile (2005) observe that the field of education research holds messy and complex problems, and thus requires a sophisticated and thorough review of the literature; a review which does not simply outline a summary of existing research, but rather understands what research has already been undertaken in order to contribute to and advance this research, defined by Shulman as “generativity” (Shulman, 1999, cited in Boote & Beile, 2005, p.3). Maxwell (2006) argues that a key component of the literature review is relevance; that selected prior research should not only deal with the identified topic or defined research field, but also include works that have been important in terms of determining significant research design choices (Maxwell, 2006).

This study’s explorative, qualitative and inductive stance has shaped the content of the literature both here and in Chapter 5; literature used throughout this study has been informed by the reflexive and iterative consideration of themes emerging *from* participants’ experiences and not imposed *by* an a priori approach from the literature onto the data.

The chapter is therefore not an exhaustive presentation of existing literature; but rather a synthesised contextual background of research, key themes and concepts identified as relevant to exploring A-Level students’ perspectives and experiences of academic buoyancy in the first year of studying A-Level qualifications. It also incorporates literature that has informed and shaped this study’s design choices through a consideration of previous research methods, and identification of limitations, gaps and areas for further research (Boote & Beile, 2005).

2.2 Academic Buoyancy

As outlined in the introduction, the concept of academic buoyancy is proposed as a distinct area of research which takes a “positive, constructive, and adaptive” approach (Putwain, et al., 2012, p. 349); defined by Martin and Marsh (2008, p. 53) as “students'

ability to successfully deal with academic setbacks and challenges that are typical of the ordinary course of school life". Whilst developed as a distinct concept, Martin and Marsh (2008) acknowledge that academic buoyancy draws on research domains such as resilience, everyday hassles and coping; however, their development of academic buoyancy was in response to what they felt were significant differences between existing concepts and their notions of academic buoyancy. One difference, and significant to my research interests was Martin and Marsh's (2008) study proposed to focus on the 'majority' student body, contending that traditional resilience-related research had a focus on acute and chronic adversities that affected smaller numbers.

Martin and Marsh (2008) also identified that their work on buoyancy was informed by the "broaden and build" (p. 54) theory of positive emotions referred to by positive psychologists, thus having a focus on "emphasizing proactive rather than reactive approaches" (p. 54). This further highlights a distinction made between academic buoyancy and extant literature; Martin and Marsh (2008) acknowledge that whilst they "recognize and harness" (p. 56) the concepts of 'everyday hassles' (for example, research into 'daily hassles' such as Kanner et al.'s (1981)) and 'coping' (research such as Compas et al.'s (1991)), buoyancy is distinct in that it integrates aspects of these two or takes a different standpoint in exploring them. For example, buoyancy is "akin" to hassle-related research in that they both deal with the "stresses and strains that characterize everyday frustrations in life" (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 56); however, they state academic buoyancy is distinct as, unlike hassle-related research, it focuses on not just the "existence and extent" of the hassles, but instead centres on "an individual's response to their everyday challenges" (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 56).

Similarly, whilst research into coping does focus more on an individual's response, it encompasses two aspects: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Martin & Marsh, 2008). Again, Martin and Marsh (2008) place emphasis on how their concept of academic buoyancy stresses the proactive, empowered nature as it aligns with problem-focused coping and a focus on the individual's efforts to deal with stressful scenarios. These claims of distinction are nuanced, but have been explored and validated by wider research; for example, Putwain et al. (2012) explored the relationship between academic

buoyancy and a model of coping based on Stöber (2004, cited in Putwain, et al., 2012, p.351), and found aspects of variance in test anxiety explained by academic buoyancy above those accounted for by coping.

In their proposal for academic buoyancy, Martin and Marsh (2008) aimed to identify 'predictors' of academic buoyancy; drawing on existing resilience research, they concluded that these fell into either 'distal' (e.g. ethnicity, single parent) or 'proximal' (e.g. school related, psychological factors). Because proximal factors are more "manipulable and amenable to intervention" (p. 57), they subsequently focused on these with an aim of enabling practical practitioner implementation. They grouped these proximal factors as:

- **Psychological factors:** e.g. "self-efficacy, control, sense of purpose, and motivation";
- **School and engagement factors**: e.g. "class participation, educational aspirations, enjoyment of school, relationship with teachers, teacher responsiveness, effective teacher feedback, attendance, value placed on school, extra-curricular activity, and challenging curriculum";
- **Family and peer factors:** e.g. "family support, positive bond with a pro-social adult, informal network of friends, peer commitment to education, authoritative and caring parenting, and connections to pro-social organisations".

(Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 57)

From both a preliminary study into academic resilience (Martin & Marsh, 2006), and subsequent academic buoyancy research, they thus proposed the 5C model of factors considered to 'predict' academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008; Martin, et al., 2010):

- **Confidence** – high self-efficacy
- **Control** – e.g. where students can see positive connections between effort or strategy and academic outcomes
- **Coordination** - planning
- **Commitment** - persistence

- **Composure** – low anxiety

Smith (2020) argues that one of the strengths of the academic buoyancy model is the fact that it draws on a "strong evidence base" (p. 13); as evidenced by the 5C model, these factors are not new concepts in themselves, but draw from established research across a range of disciplines such as: personality; self-efficacy; self-concept; goal setting, behavioural economics; adaptive learning (Smith, 2020). In establishing these concepts under one model, Martin and Marsh (2006) state their work responds to a suggestion that educational research sometimes yields "limited practical implications and applications" (p. 277), by proposing that the 5Cs identify areas of potentially effective intervention (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Martin & Marsh, 2008; Martin, et al., 2010).

The 5Cs model, and as suggested by the proximal factors listed previously, concludes that academic buoyancy is "multidimensional" (Martin, et al., 2010, p. 489), and as such interventions seeking to build academic buoyancy are "best shaped around the multidimensional elements that predict it" (Martin, et al., 2010, p. 489). This multidimensionality is also reinforced by another finding from their original work on academic buoyancy, which they termed a "differential weighting in predictive powers […] across factors" (Martin, et al., 2010, p. 489), i.e. anxiety (incorporated into the 5Cs as Composure) was a more salient predictor of academic buoyancy in their study. From this they concluded it might be beneficial to sequence academic buoyancy interventions to reflect not only the 'multidimensionality' of factors, but the salience scale of each factor, e.g. addressing higher-salience factors such as anxiety (Composure) earlier (Martin, et al., 2010).

In reviewing the literature, there has subsequently followed a range of academic buoyancy research. Research has explored the validity of academic buoyancy as a distinct construct, and whether it is or is not related to similar concepts: grit (Fong & Kim, 2019), adaptive coping (Putwain, et al., 2012), psychological risk (Martin, et al., 2013). Researchers have also explored different aspects of its multidemensionilty, as well as the potential outcomes of positive academic buoyancy. Studies have shown academic

buoyancy to positively predict achievement (Yun, et al., 2018), participation in academic tasks (Datu & Yang, 2018), and success under high pressure conditions (Putwain, et al., 2015a; Yun, et al., 2018). Academic buoyancy has been shown to relate to higher adaptive cognitions (e.g. self-efficacy) and behaviours (e.g. planning) and lower maladaptive cognitions (e.g. failure avoidance) and behaviours (e.g. self-handicapping) (Hirvonen, et al., 2020). Other studies have explored the moderating role academic buoyancy can play on reducing the negative relationships between test anxiety and task focus (Putwain, et al., 2012), or fear appeals (e.g. exam reminders) and threat appraisal (Symes, et al., 2015), as well as the relationship between minor academic adversity (e.g. lower attendance) and subsequent achievement (Putwain, et al., 2020). As well as behaviours and outcomes, research has shown that academic buoyancy is a factor in emotional aspects such as school satisfaction (Hoferichter, et al., 2021), and that there is a positive relationship between academic buoyancy and academic emotions (Putwain, et al., 2022; Xu & Wang, 2023) such as hope (Azadianbojnordi, et al., 2022). Irwin (2022) notes that academic buoyancy is largely shown in the literature to be an enabling and protective concept.

Studies have also undertaken to study the concept of academic buoyancy in different socio-cultural contexts, for example, studies undertaken in Australia (Martin & Marsh, 2008) and the Phillipines (Datu & Yang, 2018), as well as a comparative study of UK, North America and China (Martin, et al., 2017). Another comparative study in the UK considered academic buoyancy across various curriculum subjects (Malmberg, et al., 2013); further studies have explored academic buoyancy in different academic settings such as primary, secondary and undergraduate (although caution must be taken around terminology in the literature as dependent on *where* the study has taken place, these do not equate wholly with UK educational phases) (Putwain, et al., 2012; Malmberg, et al., 2013; Martin, 2013; Datu & Yang, 2018; Shafi, et al., 2018; Hirvonen, et al., 2020). Studies have also focused on specific sample groups, such as Martin's (2014) study which identified a significant positive link between academic buoyancy and outcomes for students with ADHD. Datu and Yuen (2018) conclude that these empirical studies point to a "promising applicability of the academic buoyuancy construct in various societies" (p.

208); however, Putwain et al. (2023) note some inconsistencies in findings, such as statistically non-significant links between buoyancy and academic achievement (Collie, et al., 2015; Putwain & Aveyard, 2018). There were similar variations in studies which explored academic buoyancy and gender: studies reported higher academic buoyancy in males (Aloka, 2023), with further studies identifiying no statistically significant difference between males and females (Jahedizadeh, et al., 2019). Datu and Yuen (2018) note that even though “burgeoning literature” situates academic buoyuancy as a predictor and consequence of “academic success and wellbeing”, existing studies, findings and variations also identify “several research gaps remain unfulfilled” in the field of academic buoyancy (p. 209).

Of significance to this study was an evaluation of the existing literature as potentially limited as a result of its largely quantitative research designs (Datu & Yuen, 2018). As Putwain et al. (2023) observe, in research they had studied thus far, academic buoyancy was “almost exclusively” explored through the use of the academic buoyancy scale (Martin & Marsh, 2008), collated through a “retrospective self-report questionnaire that asks students about their general (i.e., trait) ability to deal with typical challenges of ordinary academic life” (Putwain, et al., 2023); Datu and Yuen (2018) also highlight in their findings the predominance of cross-sectional and longitudinal quantitative design focus of academic buoyancy research, and critique that these approaches, whilst methodologically beneficial in one respect, potentially limit “in-depth explanations of *how* and *why* academic buoyancy may promote academic success” (p. 209) and the design of more qualitatively focused research into academic buoyancy. Hoferichter et al. (2021) reiterate this conclusion, stating that research from a person-centred standpoint would be beneficial to this field of study, and Irwin (2022) notes that research from the perspectives of students, and which is used to inform practical implementations, is scarce. Anderson’s (2022) exploration of the relationship between academic buoyancy and attendance in UK secondary education also identified that, based on a systematic review of academic buoyancy literature, reports thus far indicated academic buoyancy as potentially malleable to intervention, but that further investigation was required. A review of the

existing research also established a further gap: academic buoyancy in an A-Level specific context, and which explores the concept from an A-Level student perspective.

This exploration of the literature has shaped this study's research design as an exploratory, qualitative one, heavily influenced by phenomenology; however, this was also influenced by points in the research literature where the complexity of academic buoyancy factors was illuminated, especially at an individual experiential level. A return to Martin and Marsh's (2008) highlighting of anxiety as a more salient predictor of academic buoyancy illustrates this. Martin and Marsh (2008) link anxiety to low-Composure, which therefore operates as a potentially negative impactor on academic buoyancy; this supports a large body of research that notes the negative effects of anxiety, such as an inverse relationship between test anxiety and academic buoyancy (Putwain, et al., 2012), and the potential impact on a range of academic factors, e.g. performance decrements (Martin & Marsh, 2008). They also acknowledge, however, that there is research that demonstrates anxiety is not "unambiguously maladaptive" (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 58), and in fact may have a "fight" rather than "flight" impact on academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2008, p. 59). The combination of these two points raises an interesting consideration about academic buoyancy, and the design and implementation of related interventions: are they best considered at the 'global' level (e.g. institution or class level), the individual level (Martin, et al., 2010), or a combination of both (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Martin, et al., 2010; Smith, 2020). As explained more fully in the methodology section, this individual experiential factor is the basis for this research's design: an explorative qualitative study, informed by aspects of hermeneutic phenomenology, aiming to understand rather than measure, and in this understanding to prioritise the lived experience, perspectives and voice of the participants.

The literature included so far is to set contextual background to academic buoyancy research, however, the design of this study is an inductive, interpretive exploration rather than hypothesis-testing, and I was interested to explore the experiences of a particular group of students in my own practitioner context: a group of students and context that is not prominent in the existing literature. In an attempt to minimise practitioner assumptions,

and not enforce meaning a priori from the literature onto the data set, this research was undertaken from the standpoint of two questions: what are first-year A-Level students' and tutors' perceptions of influencing factors on academic buoyancy; and Martin and Marsh's (2008) question, "which factors are the most salient in determining a student's capacity to deal effectively with academic setback, challenge, and adversity" (p. 57). The remainder of the literature review now narrows to focus on both specific academic buoyancy research and wider literature that is relevant to the themes emerging inductively from those questions.

2.3 High Stakes Environment

Studying for A-Levels and the A-Level qualification structure emerged as being a high stakes environment, and as an influencing factor in academic buoyancy. As Stobart and Eggen (2012) observe, high-stakes testing and qualifications are a "global phenomenon", have existed "for over two thousand years", and become high-stakes "when the results lead to serious consequences for at least one key stakeholder" (p. 1). As well as societal consequences such as accountability and raising standards, these consequences can be individual, affecting educational, professional or life choices and chances (Stobart & Eggen, 2012). Denscombe (2000) goes as far as to quantify the taking of high-stakes qualifications such as GCSEs as an example of a "fateful moment" (Giddens, 1991, cited in Denscombe, 2000, pp. 371): occasions carrying particular importance, that can have "far-reaching consequences" for individuals' futures and "shape their destinies in a very real fashion" (Denscombe, 2000, pp. 371-372). This is evidenced in the fact that, as well as grade-related high-stakes, even the selection of A-Levels as a pathway, in particular subject choice, is also a source of high-stakes feeling; as Dilnot (2016) explores, notions of "right", "wrong", "facilitating", "useful" (p. 1082) exist in discussions around choosing A-Level subjects.

Whilst the terms 'fateful' and 'serious consequences' may potentially place high-stakes exams and qualifications in the ominous or negative, they in fact signpost the existence of paradox in the literature when it comes to high-stakes testing (Madaus & Russel, 2009;

Mccarthy, 2022). On one hand described as “well intentioned” (Madaus & Russel, 2009, p. 26), and instilling a meritocratic approach to educational achievement and progress (Suto & Oates, 2021), on the other high-stakes qualifications are criticised for potentially leading to narrowing of the curriculum and a focus on preparing for the test (Madaus & Russel, 2009). Similarly, a further paradox exists around high-stakes exams: that the stakes involved in preparing for and taking them are so potentially powerful that they can act as both a positive and negative – serving as motivators for some; demotivating, or even a pressure or stressor for others (Putwain, 2020; Mccarthy, 2022). As one study of high-stakes qualifications in Irish schools found, this paradox is embodied in the lived experience of students, one stating, “your whole life depends on it” (Banks & Smyth, 2015, p. 598).

Discussion around high-stakes qualifications often comes from the perspective of what stakes there are to be gained or lost – the “selection, placement and certification” perspective (Stobart & Eggen, 2012, p. 1) - for example, qualification certificates, entry to institutions such as universities, or the securing of professional credentials (e.g. a ‘license to practise’). Other research focuses on specific features or potential impacts of high-stakes format qualifications, such as tests, test-related anxiety, academic pressure, contribution to mental health, and stress (von der Embse, et al., 2018; Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2020; Barsham, 2021). These studies include A-Level specific research into pre-exam and exam day test-anxiety (Chamberlain, et al., 2011), a study in the North of England where A-Level students were asked to describe their experiences of studying A-Levels in 3 words (Nash, et al., 2021), a study of school-related stress involving A-Level students at 2 grammar schools in Northern Ireland (Finch, et al., 2010), and a study of female A-Level students’ experiences of academic demands, stress and coping (Stubbs, et al., 2023a). Specific studies have been undertaken into the relationship between academic buoyancy and high-stakes examinations, or related concepts such as test anxiety (Putwain & Daly, 2013; Putwain, et al., 2015a; Putwain, et al., 2015b; Putwain, et al., 2023); these studies argue that academic buoyancy can play a protective role in mitigating test anxiety, that academic buoyancy is something that can be developed and fostered (Putwain, et al., 2020) and thus provide a ‘buffer’ both before and during high-stakes exam situations (Putwain, et al., 2015a).

As Stubbs et al. (2023a) observe, these studies demonstrate that the high-stakes nature of the A-Level qualifications and their assessments make them "uniquely challenging" (p. 482), with research in this field often conveying A-Levels as "difficult, stressful and overwhelming" (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 79); however, of interest to this research was the duality that repeatedly emerged in research which acknowledged the "contradictory" (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 78) nature of the experience of studying A-Levels: that their high stakes nature rather than frustrating can be enriching (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011), presenting students with a healthy opportunity for "agentic behaviour (autonomy); the development of their academic and organisational abilities (competence); and the cultivation of meaningful relationships (relatedness)" (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 79).

Indeed, as Stubbs et al. (2023b) find in a piece of research that asked 136 A-Level students to describe their experience of sixth form in 3 words or phrases, 57% of the terms provided by participants were categorised as "unambiguously positive", e.g. "engaging, interesting or stimulating", with 89% of participants using at least one positive term (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 72). In the same piece of research, Stubbs et al. (2023b) also identify that where terms have been categorised as "challenging" (p. 72), this does not by default equate to a negative; for example, terms such as "demanding" or "difficult" (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 73), whilst for some participants may well signal an "arduous or unpleasant experience" (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 73), for others it reflects high-stakes educational experiences as opportunities for growth and development precisely because of their challenging nature, where students positively step out of their comfort zone (Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011; Stubbs, et al., 2023b). As Stubbs et al. (2023b) conclude, and of relevance to this study's topic of academic buoyancy, it is therefore important to "understand what factors contribute towards promoting and diminishing positive learning experiences" (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 70) for students studying A-Levels in order to harness the constructive rather than deleterious side of this potentially 'contradictory' high-stakes environment.

An interesting point raised in Putwain et al.'s (2023) study into academic buoyancy and test anxiety is that what makes a scenario high-stakes, or what is considered achievement or failure in a high-stakes scenario, is subjective; as they note, for some students negative

outcomes could be grade-related, negative judgements from others, the limiting of future educational or career plans, or negative judgments of one's self-view (Putwain, et al., 2023). Key contextual factors and perceptions relevant to this study that influence these subjective judgements are explored in the following sections.

2.4 Defining Achievement

As noted in the existing literature, academic achievement and its conceptual opposite, underachievement (in their various phrasings, e.g. performance, success, attainment, outcomes, failure) are one of the most widely researched topics (Strayhorn, 2012), described as a "predominant discourse in education" (Smith, 2007, p. 1), but also regarded as concepts about which there is "much confusion and little consensus" on "either its definition or its measurement" (Smith, 2007, p. 6). The following sections present a synthesis of the contextual discussions and debates around achievement deemed pertinent to this study's goals and themes emerging from data.

Whilst the focus of this study is individuals' perspectives and experiences, it is important to consider the broader educational landscapes, contexts and values in which individuals are situated. As Spinath (2012) states, academic achievement is "one of the most investigated issues" because of its "high individual and societal importance" (p. 2); the notions of the individual and societal in relation to achievement, as well as the interplay between them, are explored as a means of understanding different ways of perceiving achievement, and how these shape the way in which students, teachers and those responsible for creating education curricula view and measure achievement.

As Guskey (2012) argues, the academic achievement of students forms the "basis of nearly every aspect of education", giving "direction to all educational improvement efforts" (p. 3). The drivers for this cited in the literature are varied and multifaceted: addressing disadvantage and inequality; social responsibility to individuals; equity and aspiration; opening future opportunities; fairness (Smith, 2007; Hattie & Anderman, 2012). An additional driver that features heavily, is often "coupled" (Smith, 2007, p. 3) with the empowerment-and-social-mobility-driven reasons listed, is a recognition by governments, both local and national, that "high levels of achievement are required for students to

become successful in an increasingly competitive global marketplace" (Trent Haines & Mueller, 2012, p. 10); whilst the emphasis on this view is student-centred, another perspective is that this driver in fact places the emphasis on the nation's "need" to "remain economically competitive" (Smith, 2007, p. 3), subsequently manifesting itself in an "increasing worldwide emphasis on […] academic achievement" (Trent Haines & Mueller, 2012, p. 10), measured through global-comparison-focused, "accountability and high stakes testing" (Smith, 2007, p. 3).

Smith (2007) argues that the "scrutiny of examination performance" has thus become the "most tangible" (p. 2) output of the academic system, and there is a sense in the literature that perceptions of achievement are therefore heavily informed by external, societal expectations: academic achievement becoming reflective not only of individuals, but groups and the nation as a whole, important to societal and "socioeconomic prosperity" and democracy (Spinath, 2012, pp. 1-2). This is reflected in the view that standardised qualifications such as A-Levels are often used as "selection criteria" (Spinath, 2012, p. 1) for higher education and careers, and the link often made between academic qualifications, earnings, and life success (Smith, 2007; Spinath, 2012). As a result they are perceived as having both immediate high-stakes value and as being necessary for future plans which also externally signal success (e.g. university, careers, participation in the global economy); this could be viewed as a form of "fear appeal", which research has shown can either act as a motivational challenge or alternatively be seen as a threat (Putwain, et al., 2017, p. 17).

The significance of this external view and societal implications on perceptions of achievement is reflected in the range of performance and accountability indicators that exist for schools and colleges in the UK (Department for Education, 2022), as well as reference in UK education policies and reforms to the comparative stance of the UK against key global educational and economic markers. For example, in the Department for Education's 2010 White Paper *The Case for Change* (Department for Education, 2010b), comparisons based on standardised tests placed England "ahead of countries like Spain, the USA and Italy, but still well behind, for example, Finland, Hong Kong and

Canada" (Department for Education, 2010b, p. 2), and that emphasis in educational reform should be on matching the "best standards being achieved elsewhere" (Department for Education, 2010b, p. 2), in order to ensure "national prosperity" (Department for Education, 2010b, p. 4). This continued external, societal perspective on achievement can be seen in the Department for Education's 2023 proposal for *The Advanced British Standard* (Department for Education, 2023b), the most recently proposed UK qualification reform. Whilst this proposal is far from implementation stage and outside the scope of this research, it is noted here as a further example of the external, societal context that potentially informs ongoing perceptions of achievement, having as it does at its heart the aim for the UK education system to be "world-leading", at "the forefront of education globally" and thriving in "a fast-moving modern economy" (Department for Education, 2023b, p. 20).

There is a plethora of literature and opinion discussing the relative merits and disadvantages of such a focus, with views varying from globally comparative education as aspirational and empowering, to those who argue it reduces education to measures which focus on the "bread-and-butter end of learning" (Myers, 1916, p. 294); however, it is important to note that this research's scope is not to critique achievement measures but rather explore different perceptions of achievement, and students' experiences of studying within education systems informed by these priorities, and how this shapes their academic buoyancy. This social and external context is therefore included here as it emerged very quickly from the data collected and from investigating the literature that these nationally and globally externally measured "achievement signals" (Bergbauer, et al., 2018, p. 10), e.g. A-Level qualification grades, established significant societal and individual expectations and perceptions.

2.5 Expectations and Perceptions

2.5.1 Parental Expectations

A significant group whose expectations and perceptions are informed by these societal expectations, and who subsequently have been identified as influential to academic

buoyancy are parents. Summarised by Lavrijsen et al. (2022) as “important persons” in the students’ environment as a result of the impact their evaluation of a student’s achievement can have (p. 798), parent expectations have been posited as affecting student outcomes – through both their direct interactions with their children, and how their perceptions and expectations can contribute to students’ self-perceptions (Rubie-Davies, et al., 2010). A study into how academic buoyancy is affected by perceived parental involvement suggested that the perception of greater parental involvement by students led to feelings of more competence in dealing with learning challenges (Chen & Mok, 2023). An interesting finding in Rubie-Davies et al.’s (2010) research was that parents themselves considered their expectations to be a less direct impact; however, parent expectations have been also reported as having greater impact than teacher and peer expectations on student performance (Ma, 2001), and whilst for some students this was motivational, for others they felt “overburdened” by “unrealistically high expectations to succeed” (Rubie-Davies, et al., 2010, p. 49).

Exploring this topic with students found that parental expectations were often influenced by perceptions of student achievement based on comparisons to prior GCSE study; this introduced the topic of academic perceptions and academic buoyancy as shaped by historical achievement, and reflected in literature through a distinction made by Guskey (2012) between “attainment versus improvement” (p. 4). In Guskey’s (2012) definition, attainment is the measure of student achievement “at a particular point in time”, whereas improvement is the “documented change in performance” or the “gain as a result of their learning experiences” (p. 4). Both of these measures are part of the UK accountability and performance indicators for schools and colleges, where attainment measures the graded outcome of a student on an A-Level qualification at the end of their programme of study, and improvement is measured via a value-added methodology which measures “how well students had done in their [A-Level] qualifications compared to students nationally that had similar prior attainment at the end of key stage 4” (Department for Education, 2023c, p. 64).

Here achievement broadens from a potentially ‘static’ summative notion linked to a specific qualification’s ‘end goal’ to incorporate a sense of the temporal, sequential nature

of achievement in a student's educational journey, and that when viewed linearly, must incorporate consideration that the student has a sort of 'forward-momentum': achievement entailing that current and future qualifications must demonstrate equal if not better quality of performance than prior performance – that there must be *progress*. What stood out particularly for this research was a recurring theme that the move from GCSE to A-Level was a moment of challenge for many students in this respect; as Dunn (2019) observes, "crossing the threshold" from GCSE to A-Level can be "troublesome" (p. 24). These findings are supported by Stubbs et al. (2023a) who note that the move from GCSE to A-Level is not "necessarily a seamless or straightforward one", can require enormous efforts from students to "acclimatise to" (p. 487), and which has been explored through the research on educational transition.

2.5.2 Educational Transition

As established in existing A-Level/Further Education research (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011; Powell, 2017; Dunn, 2019; Short, et al., 2020; Packer & Thomas, 2021; Stubbs, et al., 2023a; Stubbs, et al., 2023b), wider educational transition research (van der Zanden, et al., 2018) and research into academic buoyancy (Martin & Burns, 2014; Hirvonen, et al., 2020; Aloka, 2023), experiences of transition are a significant and potentially challenging time for students (Packer & Thomas, 2021). It is also acknowledged in extant literature that research into transition between primary and secondary school education (i.e. age 11 in the UK) or transition into higher education/university (i.e. at age 18 in the UK) is prevalent, and that there is a gap in research into the transition to post-16 provision, A-Levels and from the point of view of learners and practitioners (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011; Packer & Thomas, 2021; Stubbs, et al., 2023b).

Martin and Burns (2014) note in their work on academic buoyancy that young people's lives are "characterized by frequent change, uncertainty, variability, transition, and novelty" (p.3). They observe that these transitions can be considered major or minor transitional milestones: major milestones would include bigger changes such as moving home, or in this study's case the move from school to an FE College, GCSE to A-Level

study; minor milestones are those that occur daily, e.g. changing deadlines. Students also experience transitions within the school day, e.g. moving lesson to lesson, interacting with different teachers and peers (Martin & Burns, 2014). Holliman et al. (2019) observe educational transition involves navigating less familiar learning environments, more independence and increasing demands for autonomy; whilst on the surface this is the consequence of what might appear to be one transition, it in fact means students are handling multiple types of transition simultaneously. This is evidenced in research into A-Level students by Wigley (2004), where friendships, travel, work schedules amongst other factors are part of negotiating successful transfer to, and continuation at, college.

In a study of transition specifically into further education, Packer and Thomas (2021), reflecting the different aspects to educational transition discussed thus far, identified that transition should therefore be viewed as a holistic process, with social, emotional and academic ramifications. They also caution that transition is an on-going process – not a one-off instance that takes place at the end of the school year/start of the college year, but rather a dynamic one, one that starts before students leave school, incorporates their induction period, but then continues (Packer & Thomas, 2021); this is supported by research by Putwain et al. (2019) in a study of students in sixth form studying A-Levels that found there was a decline over the course of the year in school-related wellbeing; they posit that this is an “artefact” (p. 59) of the transition to A-Levels, and that following induction strategies to help students acclimatise to new environment and courses, the exposure to higher levels of study, feedback on work, and significant choices to be made such as university and careers, replaced the ‘fun’ beginning of the year.

As a consequence of their multifaceted significance, educational transitions can impact on a variety of educational outcomes. As St Clair-Thompson et al. (2017) note, transitions have been linked to increased anxiety, issues in behaviour and attendance, retention and academic performance. They also note that individual experience of the process of transitioning can be varied, and mediated by a variety of protective factors: self-esteem, friend networks, positive perceptions of acceptance by peers (St Clair-Thompson, et al., 2017). Returning to the previous point about parent expectations to illustrate this, a

prominent challenge that arises as a result of the GCSE to A-Level transition is around perceptions linked to academic grades.

Categorised as a lateral transition by Beach (1999) - defined as the movement of an individual between “two historically related activities in a single direction” (p. 114) the move from GCSE to A-Level can create a challenge as a result of the comparison of these two historically linked activities, especially if considered in light of Guskey’s (2012) aforementioned notion of *improvement* – an expectation of maintaining or gaining as a result of educational experiences. This challenge can come as a result of a perceived increase in difficulty and competence as a result of differences in experienced complexity and scale of the A-Level qualification (Stubbs, et al., 2023b) or as a result of new content (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011); however, it can also be as a result of expectations and perceptions based on prior achievement by parents, which can result in feelings of disappointment if current grades are negatively compared by others with prior GCSE achievement (Stubbs, et al., 2023a).

It is important to note at this point, however, that there is a critique of some transition literature that transition is viewed as problematic (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011), and that findings in other studies conclude transition is a far more positively experienced milestone, presenting a positive discourse of growth, achievement and excitement around transition (Lucey & Reay, 2000; Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011).

2.6 Academic Self-Concept, Academic Self-Efficacy, Self-Regulation Theory and Self-Determination Theory

The influence of transition from GCSE to A-Levels on academic buoyancy is not only experienced through evaluation from others (e.g. parents), but also as a result of self-evaluation, based on “student self-beliefs” (Lavrijsen, et al., 2022, p. 798), and theories such as academic self-concept and academic self-efficacy.

As discussed, perceptions of achievement/underachievement may draw in part on the more external ‘objective’ measures previously discussed (grades, test scores), however,

as Lavrijsen et al. (2022) outline, they are also formed by more individual 'internal' factors, such as a "person's perception of the degree to which there is a discrepancy between […] perceived potential and achievement" – or "academic self-concept" (Lavrijsen, et al., 2022, p. 797). As defined by Bong and Skaalvik (2003), academic self-concept refers to an individual's perceptions and knowledge about themselves in achievement situations, and is concluded by Colmar et al. (2019) to relate positively to a student's academic buoyancy, supporting findings from other studies that concepts such as academic self-concept have a reciprocal relationship with not only buoyancy, but other aspects such as achievement (Meshkat & Hosseini, 2015). Academic self-concept is argued to be "constructed relative" to both external and internal "frames of reference" (Lavrijsen, et al., 2022, p. 798) – for example, these frames of reference could include students comparing their performance to their class-mates', their own performance across subjects (e.g. maths to English), but also incorporates "actual […] performance with educational aspirations (i.e. whether achievement is on track with academic ambitions) and to factor in perceptions of applied effort" (Lavrijsen, et al., 2022, p. 798).

Another linked but distinct concept (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Smith, 2020) relevant to this study is academic self-efficacy, which Bong and Skaalvik (2003) define as an individual's *convictions* about performing successfully at designated levels in academic tasks. A number of studies have been undertaken exploring the relationship between self-efficacy theory and academic buoyancy (Olendo, et al., 2019; Lei, et al., 2021; Lei, et al., 2022; Li, 2022; Yang, et al., 2022; Weißenfels, et al., 2023), and Martin and Marsh's (2010) 5Cs directly equates 'Confidence' with self-efficacy.

Weißenfels, et al. (2023) cites a conceptual overlap between self-efficacy and academic buoyancy, based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977) in which self-efficacy impacts effort and how it is sustained when subject to obstacles; when transferred to an educational context, academic self-efficacy is the confidence and belief that we can make learning happen, and where hard tasks or failures are seen as challenges, opportunities to learn, rather than as threats or something to avoid (Hattie, 2012). This links to a study of implicit theories of talent and academic buoyancy, in which Valdez (2023) found incremental theory of talent to appear more strongly linked with academic

buoyancy, building on work by Dweck (2006) into fixed and growth mindset, where growth mindset is the belief in the malleability and potential for change in skill or ability. This positive discourse, contrasting with the aforementioned presentation of transition as a negative source of challenge, is evidenced by Hernandez-Martinez's (2011) findings that A-Level students welcomed the challenges that studying A-Levels brought as an integral part of their development, rather than reducing it to a simply negative construct.

Li (2022) observes that self-efficacy beliefs span across "thinking, emotions, deeds, motivation" acting via "cognitive and emotional channels" (p. 3); similar to Martin and Marsh's (2006) 5Cs model, and supporting Putwain et al.'s (2023) earlier referenced 'subjectivities' of experience around achievement and failure, this indicates a multidimensionality, where academic buoyancy is experienced not just as a result of externally, objective measures e.g. qualification grades, but extending across the "domains of learning" (Guskey, 2012, p. 3). Guskey (2012) summarises that there are three broad domains of learning: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Drawing largely on the work between 1956-1972 of Bloom, Krathwohl and Harrow (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956; Krathwohl, et al., 1964; Harrow, 1972) and subsequent revisions in 2001 (Anderson, et al., 2001), the domains of learning are considered to be one of the most "significant and lasting" influences on all levels of the learning and teaching process (Adams, 2015, p. 152). Guskey (2012) summarises the three domains as follows:

1. Cognitive – form the basis of academic achievement in the most commonly viewed purpose of education – the skills and concepts students are to gain, and which form the foundation of the academic curriculum;
2. Affective – linked more to "attitudes, interests, feelings, beliefs, and dispositions" – also how students feel about their learning and "themselves as learners", as well as development of concepts such as "responsibility, consideration, empathy, respect for others, self-confidence, motivation and self-regulation";
3. Psychomotor – "performances or demonstrations" of skills and behaviours that are required in particular fields, e.g. sport, performing arts – but also "learning

> behaviours" including "participation or engagement, attendance, persistence, punctuality, work habits, and effort".
>
> (Guskey, 2012, pp. 3-4)

As Guskey (2012) notes, outside of specific technical fields (e.g. physical education, performing arts), the affective and psychomotor domains "seldom hold the same prominence in school curriculums" (p. 4), and that formal assessment of these aspects arguably lessens throughout the lifespan of the student's educational journey. This is a source of tension for researchers, teachers, parents, students, leaders and policy-makers alike who view affective and psychomotor domains "as just as important as cognitive" (Guskey, 2012, p. 4). As Olendo et al. (2019) found in their exploration of the relationship between self-efficacy and academic buoyancy, where students have higher self-efficacy, they have better chances of navigating academic environments, supporting Bong and Skaalvik's (2003) note that how people construe themselves plays a "determining role" (p. 2) in choices they make for future actions and development. Smith (2020) echoes this in work on becoming buoyant, identifying that efficacy increases the ability to bounce back when there is disparity between outcomes and expectations, and that more buoyant students demonstrate the results of two interrelated processes: the confidence to deal emotionally with setbacks and failures, but also the confidence to learn from failure, and to proactively rectify the reasons for the setback.

Reinforcing academic buoyancy's grounding in positive psychology, Smith (2020) explains that this comes from a complex blend of persistence and also having a *realistic* perspective: that academic buoyancy links to academic self-efficacy's strong *belief* and confidence of ability to succeed, whilst simultaneously accepting failure as a possibility, anticipating it and proactively addressing rather than avoiding it. This is supported by literature on self-regulation theory, which involves an individual's "self-directed use and modification of highly specific strategies" (Sandars & Cleary, 2011, p. 875) in order to accomplish goals. It has been described as "cyclical control" (Sandars & Cleary, 2011, p. 876), emphasising the *active* engagement of students in the "learning process" that sees them "set learning goals, make learning adjustments and achieve goals by monitoring, regulating and controlling their cognition, motivation and behaviour" (Chih-Yuan Sun, et

al., 2017, p. 717). In their study on the impact of academic buoyancy and emotions on self-regulated learning strategies, Xu and Wang (2023) reported significant correlation, and that enhanced academic buoyancy increased university students' positive academic emotions, and facilitated subsequent use of self-regulated learning activities; this supports the inclusion of Control, Commitment and Coordination aspects of the 5C model.

The focus on the individual's self-directed, active role in the learning process is reinforced by links to academic buoyancy and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is described as an organismic theory as a result of its central tenet that humans actively work toward growth, integrating learning into their sense of self, and where their environment can either be nutritious or disruptive to this process (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Legault, 2020; Kritikou & Giovazolias, 2022). Within this theory, humans achieve optimum motivation when three psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Van den Broek, et al., 2016). As Aydin and Michou (2020) observe, feelings of competence can result in self-regulatory skills linked to planning, and endorse self-improving goals; however, as established in the literature (Aydin & Michou, 2020), competence does not necessarily equate to positive participation, instead, as they summarise, students' volitional, self-endorsed participation is important to academic buoyancy. This is explored through the concepts of controlled and autonomous motivation: controlled motivation resulting from less internalised, more externally influenced sources (e.g. school driven, or to please parents), in comparison to autonomous motivation, where students' are motivated by interest, pleasure, or by personal importance perceived in the activities (Aydin & Michou, 2020). In their study of the relationship between self-determined motivation and academic achievement, Aydin and Michou (2020) subsequently validated their hypothesis that personal causation and a sense of volition were positive influencers of academic buoyancy. This was supported by Kritikou and Giovazolias' (2022) study that an "autonomy-supportive" (p. 10) environment was positively linked with student academic buoyancy, and Nurjamin et al.'s (2023) conclusion that students are "reflective practitioners" who should be empowered through developing self-evaluation skills to take "centre stage in educational discussions" (p. 15).

This is further evidenced by a gap Smith (2020) felt the original 5C academic buoyancy model possessed, so extended to incorporate a sixth C – Community. Smith (2020) argues this is a vital component to academic buoyancy; that an individual's buoyancy, their capacity to "thrive and flourish" (p. 14), requires a culture of high expectations which values effort, hard work, but places emphasis on good habit formation and routine. This culture can be linked to self-determination's tenet of relatedness: the importance of connections with others (Van den Broek, et al., 2016).

As Bostwick et al. (2022) note, however, whilst early theoretical and conceptual thinking suggested academic buoyancy was influenced by intrapersonal factors (e.g. autonomous motivation), fewer studies had examined the links between buoyancy and wider school factors (e.g. teacher-student relationships). Drawing on relationship motivation theory, Frisby et al. (2020) note that relationships are key to adjustment and well-being, and that teachers and peers are both potential sources to meet students' relational needs. In their study, they found that whilst teacher relationships may be important, it was peer support that was critical; in comparison, Granziera et al. (2022) found that both instrumental and emotional support by teachers can play unique and important roles in academic buoyancy. Relationship motivation theory specifies that it is the quality of the relationship that is important (Frisby, et al., 2020), and relationships are optimal when supporting autonomy, competence and relatedness needs (Legault, 2020). This is highlighted through a distinction Nurjamen et al. (2023) make: whilst acknowledging teachers' and educational institutions' role in academic buoyancy, they argue it is a role in which the emphasis should be an empowering one, where students take charge of their learning. This is supported by criticisms in the literature of traditional schooling, which can be ineffective or "boring" (Dicheva, et al., 2015, p. 75), in comparison to relationships and learning activities that promote opportunities for self-determination and self-regulation, such as gamification.

2.7 Gamification

Whilst a review of the literature did not reveal specific research into gamification and academic buoyancy, there are studies in gamification and buoyancy-related concepts, such as Moula and Malafantis' (2020) finding that, when used in a revision context, escape room activities (defined as where players, in a live-action group format within a limited time-frame, taking place in one or more room, work together, discover clues and solve puzzles to accomplish a goal (Nicholson, 2015, cited in Moula and Malafantis, 2020)) had positive links to engagement, collaboration and resilience. Gamification is defined as the use in non-game contexts of game based elements (Sailer & Homner, 2020; Krath, et al., 2021), with education being a prominent field of research for gamification (Sailer & Homner, 2020). Gamification is distinct from game-based learning and serious play which both denote the use of full-featured games, whereas gamification is a broader concept, which applies game components to non-game contexts (Krath, et al., 2021). In a learning context, gamification is the "augmenting or altering" of existing learning processes so it is experienced by users as game-like (Sailer & Homner, 2020, p. 78).

Gamification is noted for is linked effects to affect and motivation, behaviours, academic achievement, and on cognitive learning (Krath, et al., 2021); however, it is also not without critical perception, being variously described as "Pavlovication" (Klabbers, 2018, p. 232), or as a "fad" or "buzzword" (Boulet, 2012). In response to these doubts regarding the effects of gamification in non-game contexts, Sailer and Homner's (2020) meta-analysis and Krath et al.'s (2021) systematic review of existing literature both found gamification to have positive effects on behavioural, motivational and cognitive learning outcomes.

Krath et al. (2021) state that coverage of "whether […] how and why" gamification works, led to their findings of a "great variety of 118 different theoretical foundations" (p. 14). As visualised in Figure 2.1, "attempts to explain the effects of gamification from different angles" (Krath, et al., 2021, p. 14) illuminate a complex picture:

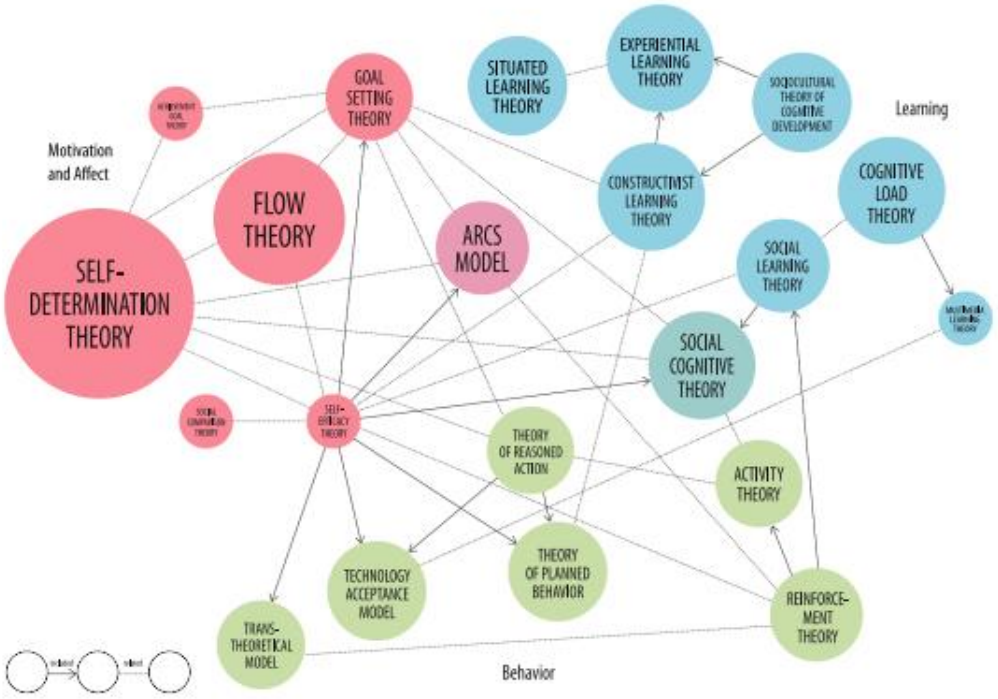

Figure 2-1 - Theoretical landscape: Relationships of theoretical foundations in research on gamification, serious games and game-based learning (Krath, et al., 2021, p. 11)

Both their study and Sailer and Homner's (2020) note that further research into specific frameworks of the *how* and why gamification works would be beneficial – including Sailer and Homner's (2020) specific reference to learner perceptions and experiences of gamification being an area of important investigation. They propose this 'framework' should consider "clearly defined components" and describe "precise mechanisms by which gamification can affect specific learning processes and outcomes" (Sailer & Homner, 2020, pp. 107-108). In their work, Krath et al. (2021, pp. 11-13) proposed ten principles of how gaming works as a result of their systematic review:

- **Clear and relevant goals** –transparently illustrate goals and their relevance
- **Individual goals** –allow users to set their own goals
- **Immediate feedback** –provide users with direct feedback on their actions
- **Positive reinforcement** –reward users for their performance and communicate the relevance of their achievements
- **Social comparisons** –allow users to see their peer's performance

- **Social norming** -connect users to support each other and work towards a common goal
- **Adaptive content** –adapt tasks and complexity to the abilities and knowledge of the user
- **Guided paths** –nudge users towards the actions necessary for achieving the goals
- **Multiple choices** –allow users to choose between several different options to achieve a certain goal
- **Simplified user experience** –gamification systems are usually easy to use and can simplify content.

As evidenced in the ten principles and Sailer and Homner's (2020) work, the literature and concepts of gamification have strong conceptual links with academic buoyancy through self-regulation, self-determination, Martin and Marsh's 5C model (Martin & Marsh, 2006), as well the social component introduced via Smith's (2020) sixth C, Community; however, a gap exists in research which directly explores academic buoyancy and gamification.

2.8 Summary of the Literature

This synthesis of the literature is designed to offer an insight into the range of research relevant to the influences identified by first-year A-Level students' and tutors' experiences of academic buoyancy, as well as key concepts in the contextual literature of academic buoyancy. A number of studies exist that explore the concept of academic buoyancy as a discrete concept, but also highlight its varied relationships with other concepts such as self-efficacy and self-concept, as well as studies that explore and hypothesis-test a range of influences and impacts, such as academic buoyancy's links to academic outcomes such as achievement. Although there are some studies that focus on similar age-range participants as the first-year A-Level students in this study, there is a gap in A-Level-specific academic buoyancy research, especially from the perspective of A-Level students. Similarly, there are numerous references in the existing literature to a significant focus on quantitative studies, and the recommendation for future research to have a qualitative focus. This review has shaped this study's design, as discussed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY – THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

3.1 The Design of the Study

Chapter 2 discussed the literature identified as most relevant to this study's research topic and questions; Chapter 3 now explores Maxwell's (2006) definition of 'relevance' in a literature review as extending beyond content/topic into how chosen works have significant implications on the design, implementation and analysis of the research.

In researching and planning Chapters 2 and 3 of my thesis, I was struck by the range of metaphors and analogies emerging from the literature when dealing with the Literature Review and Research Design stages of undertaking research. From occupied territory with landmines and barbed wire, to chaotic whirlpools, shark-infested oceans, tunnels, mazes, the shifting mosaic of a kaleidoscope, Kamler and Thomson (2014) identified that researcher perceptions and feelings towards the researcher role were often ones that positioned the researcher negatively, or in a disempowered position. This is echoed by McArthur (2012) who describes educational research as a "site of struggle" (2012, p. 419), in which Smeyers and Verhesschen (2001) see educational researchers as feeling a "need to justify" what they are doing because of an "intense debate" (2001, p. 71) about what, how and why educational researchers should research.

These were feelings that resonated with my own research journey. At times they threatened to derail the project as I grappled with what Kamler and Thomson (2014) describe as "identity work" (2014, p. 17) – the challenge of learning to stand back, "'hands on hips'" (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p. 34) and critically survey with authority the existing research and confidently establish my own research's place within it. Thankfully, through engaging reflexively with the concept of "virtuous mess" and "bad mess" (McArthur, 2012, p. 419), where bad mess is the negative result of trying as a researcher to 'tidy up' the virtuous mess that reflects the complex social world as it is really experienced, I was able to acknowledge that I had been inadvertently "persuading an octopus into a jar" (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p. 30). Whilst Kamler and Thomson (2014) use this in reference to writing a Literature Review, I found it relevant to my research design stage; rather than

beginning with a “genuine question spurred by deep curiosity” (Sohn, et al., 2017, p. 129), I was instead acting on assumptions and gut feeling about “what a good piece of research looks like” (Punch, 1998, cited in Silverman, 2013, p.105).

The following chapter offers an account of this journey, taking a reflexive approach to the challenges and decisions (including changes in approach) I faced as a researcher, and provides details of the final ontological, epistemological and associated qualitative design choices made in order to address the research question.

3.2 Conceptual Frameworks

Ravitch and Carl (2016) describe research as an ecosystem: dynamic, interdependent and where one aspect or change of its parts affects the whole system (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). This, combined with Kamler and Thomson’s (2014) wrangling with research metaphors, proved particularly powerful in shaping my own research design. Rather than the aforementioned octopus, a dinner party metaphor initially developed by John Smyth (Kamler & Thomson, 2014) was influential for my own research development. In this metaphor, the researcher is moved from a position of potential struggle and overwhelm to one of host and participant, whose agency “invites to the table” (2014, p. 40) a relevant community of scholars and makes space for discussion of their work in relation to the researcher’s own work. The dinner party metaphor acknowledges that not everyone can fit at the table, that conversations can be mulled over and reflected on after the party is over, that this part might be the starting point of other conversations, and leaves the researcher with the option to invite guests back or not, or to introduce new guests (Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Like the symbiotic parts of Ravitch and Carl’s (2016) ecosystem, the dinner party metaphor can be applied to the research design journey - a journey that has structure and logic, but also evolves. As Maxwell summarises (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), a researcher’s approach is not something that should be constructed and left unchanged, like fixed foundations, before undertaking research. Instead, Ravitch and Riggan (2017) propose taking a “conceptual framework” approach (2017, p. xv), where the conceptual framework acts as a process researchers use in conjunction with essential aspects of their own researcher identity (e.g. their interests, observations).

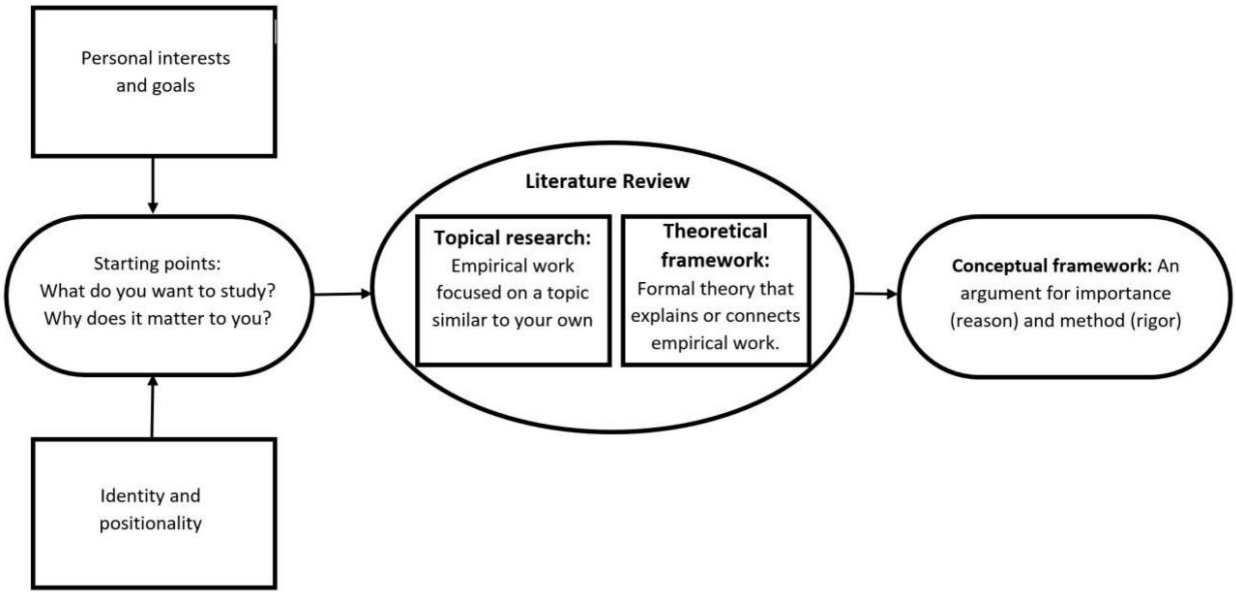

Figure 3-1 - Elements of a Conceptual Framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 9)

From this, a researcher can identify the questions that are most important to them, as well as strategies appropriate to pursue those questions, and reflect on their learning and thinking, including the importance and limitations of findings.

The result of embracing this approach ultimately helped define this research ontologically and epistemologically as interpretivist, influenced by phenomenology, and taking an exploratory and inductive qualitative approach, as outlined later in this chapter; however, mine was not a straightforward chronologically-linear borrowing of a "logical strategy" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 3), where I moved through a fixed series of steps to implement it. This was brought to light as I took a reflexive approach drawing on Sandelowski and Barroso's (2002) observation that reflexivity implies a researcher should aim to reflect in multiple ways: inward toward oneself; outward to other forces that shape inquiry, e.g. cultural, political; and in between, toward the social interaction shared by the participants and researcher. My conceptual framework only clarified and gained definition when this reflection was combined with Kamler and Thomson's (2014) 'dinner party invitation' metaphor and Maxwell's interactive design model (Maxwell, 2013), in particular questions Maxwell encouraged researchers to ask in the *conceptual framework* and *research*

questions sections: what do you think is going on/what do you *not* know about these things that you want to learn? (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 4-5).

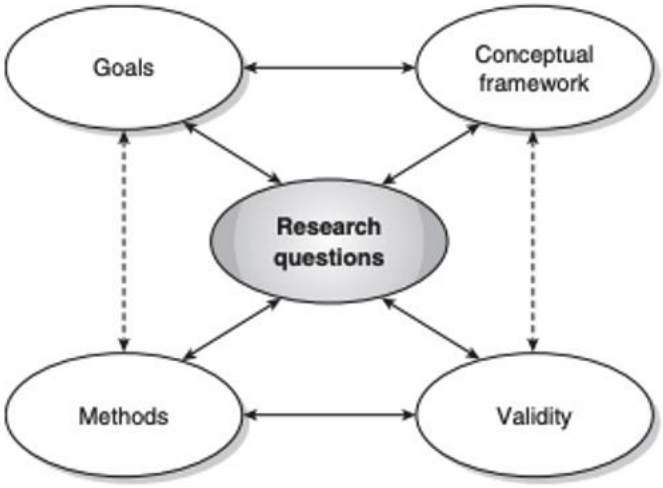

Figure 3-2 - An Interactive Model of Research Design (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 4-5)

Whilst the majority of this chapter will outline the methodological design ultimately implemented in this research, to articulate and rationalise it fully requires a brief insight into the origins it emerged from; design choices that were ultimately set aside, the "false leads" and "dead ends" (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 192), proved as inseparable and critical a part of understanding my positionality, my aims as a researcher, and consequently the findings and recommendations, as those implemented.

At early research conceptualisation stages, my intention was to undertake something more akin to action research in its design, following Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) plan, act, observe and reflect model, and McNiff's (2016) summary of action research as "taking action" (p. 9), introducing a practical intervention with the aim of improving my own practice. I had identified positive qualification outcomes (retention and grade achieved) for A-Level learners as the intended improvement, and was interested to explore the potential impact of resilience-focused teaching resources and strategies designed with improving qualification outcomes in mind. Initial plans for this research were therefore focused on evaluating, developing/amending, implementing, observing then re-evaluating

an existing ‘toolkit’ of student-focused activities designed to strengthen student resilience and therefore achievement. It is important to question all aspects of research design; it was important to me that the chosen focus was not borne from easy access or convenience (Cohen, et al., 2011, pp. 155-156) and at that time, there was a clear logic to this action research approach which was attractive to me in my teaching-practitioner role. I had been teaching in a further education college for over 10 years, all involving A-Level programmes in some capacity, and previous research experiences had established action research as a powerful means for enacting local-level change and improvement (Cohen, et al., 2011). In particular, action research’s aims to bring about “practical improvement, innovation, change or development” of practice and better understanding for the practitioner of their own practice (Zuber-Skeritt, 1996b, p.83, cited in Cohen, et al., 2011, p.345) and its capacity to start small and work towards extensive changes (Cohen, et al., 2011) were things I considered important for my research to achieve, underpinned largely by a desire to contribute research that had practical application and impact for myself, students, and the institution at which the research was being undertaken.

Over time, however, I increasingly felt that whilst the research had potential practical impact it felt loaded with assumptions, and as though it was not truly aligning with what I was most curious about. As researcher reflexivity is an ongoing, mutual shaping that takes place between researcher and research (Attia & Edge, 2017), I considered it important to my own sense of researcher integrity to scrutinise contextual factors that I felt were significant influences in the journey of this research. When reviewing my positionality, I felt it was not coincidental that the misalignment I was feeling about my initial research design coincided with a change in my practitioner identity. An “explicit self-consciousness and self-assessment” (Holmes, 2020, p. 2) is required of researchers, and should be sensitive to changes over time, of researcher context, and never viewed as fixed – nor should it be eliminated (Holmes, 2020). I have therefore endeavoured toward “open and honest disclosure and exposition of positionality” (Holmes, 2020, p. 3), highlighting where/how I believe changes in my role may have shaped research design or findings. Although I remained at the same further education college, I moved from a role with direct teaching and management responsibility of A-Level students, to a role with management responsibility for A-Level staff, less direct teaching responsibility for A-Level

students, and a broader curriculum responsibility than A-Level qualifications. My initial design had undoubtedly been shaped by my A-Level classroom-teacher identity, where my ‘genuine question’ was how I could develop and implement resources to improve achievement outcomes for A-Level students. Whilst the latter half of this remained an important value for my research, my change in role brought a change in experience, different conversations and encounters with students and staff, and ultimately the realisation that my deep curiosity now emerged from a different source: the differing experiences, beliefs, views and ways of expressing these that emerged in my interactions around A-Level student success/achievement.

In discussing the feeling of misalignment, my supervisor supported me in my reflexive journey and encouraged the asking of a more deliberate and methodical series of questions, turning the “researcher lens” (Berger, 2015, p. 220) on myself, my context and my intended interaction with research participants (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002). In a robust and vital discussion, I was asked ‘what do you really care about?’, and found key questions from Maxwell’s design model (Maxwell, 2013) to resonate similarly: “Why is your study worth doing?...Why should we care about the results?” and most significantly “What do you want to better understand about the…people you plan to study?” (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 4-5).

Although Kamler and Thomson (2014) conceptualise the dinner party metaphor in relation to the literature review process, I found it invaluable at this point. The process of reviewing who and what ‘conversation’ my research plans proposed to ‘bring to the table’, which ‘guests’ were invited and therefore what ‘voices’ would be heard ultimately proved revelatory in highlighting that there was a risk with my original plans that I might be inadvertently imposing “a priori theoretical explanations” (Sohn, et al., 2017, p. 124) at the expense of exploring the more expansive humanistic educational questions and the possibility of multiple perspectives (Cohen, et al., 2011), and obscuring the unexpected possibilities that this research might generate (Russell & Kelly, 2002). The concept of bracketing was subsequently instrumental in both the development of my research focus and design and my reflexivity as a researcher.

Bracketing is acknowledged in the literature as a term which is evolving, amorphous and around which there are some definitional tensions and a lack of consensus about at what point in the research process bracketing occurs (Tufford & Newman, 2010). This research was particularly influenced by the definition of bracketing as a method taken to "mitigate…potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81), that it is not a one-off occurrence in the research process, and that bracketing should be encouraged from research conceptualisation and throughout the research (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

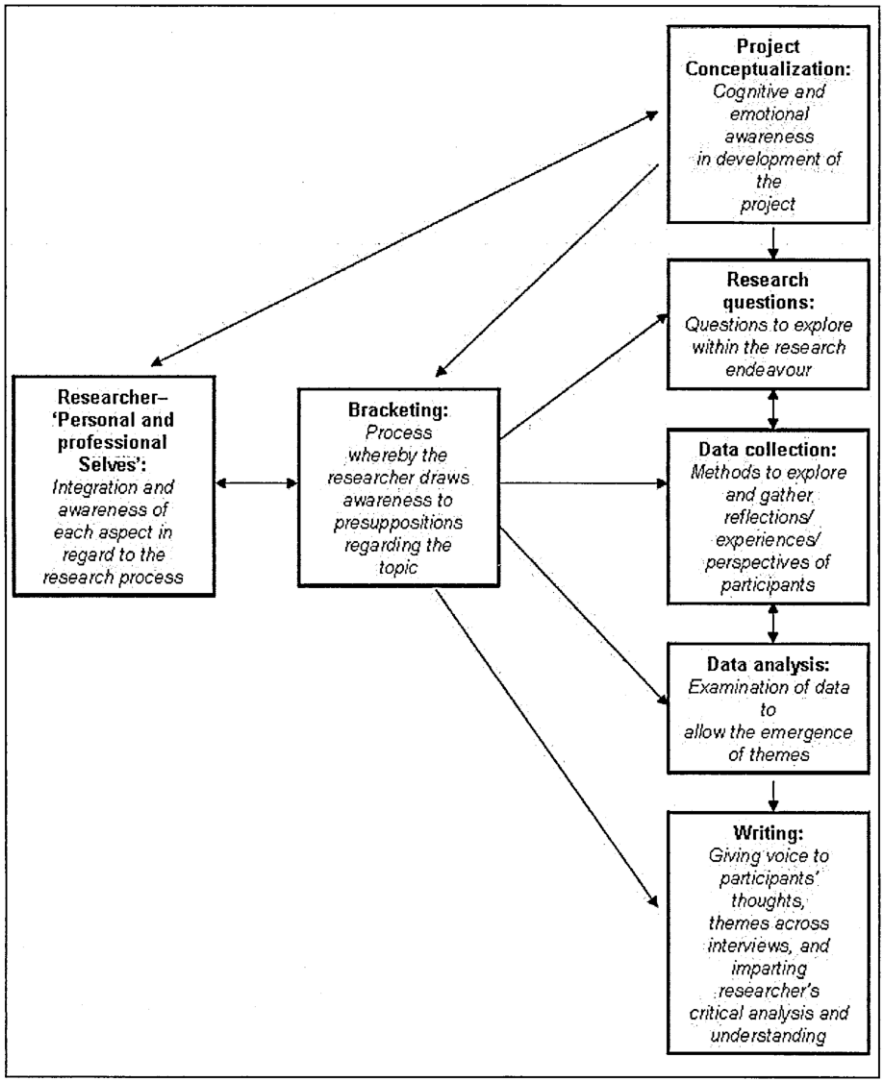

Figure 3-3 - The Integration of Bracketing into Qualitative Methodology (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 88)

By taking deliberate bracketing steps such as engaging with an “outside source” who helped explore, uncover and “bring into awareness” possible preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 86), I acknowledged my initial plans were unintentionally based on some “hunches” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 89) that had emerged from my previous practitioner encounters with educational research surrounding resilience and ‘mindset’ strategies. Similarly, reflecting on how the existing literature had influenced my design I could see that themes/topics had been dominant (e.g. resilience), rather than critiques of research design that I had found equally as interesting at the time. For example, I had noted references in the literature to A-Level student experiences being an area for further research (Stubbs, et al., 2023a), or that research in relation to topics of resilience tended toward quantitative design, and that future research could be “substantially enriched through qualitative methods” that could “better understand individual and contextual features” relevant to the research area (Martin, et al., 2013, p. 133). Although my initial design planned to draw on qualitative feedback from students as they evaluated, tried and reviewed the toolkit strategies and resources, I found myself nudged into re-considering whether this went far enough by Groundwater-Smith’s (2007) critique that key stakeholders – students themselves – are frequently not consulted in research and occupy a “borderland” where others speak for, about and on behalf of, but rarely with them (Groundwater-Smith, 2007, p. 114). An important question I asked myself was whether, under my current design, student voices and views were being encouraged, but only later in a conversation already started by researchers, teachers and toolkit designers and presented to them for review.

Having “surfaced” these preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 85), I realised that my curiosity sat more in designing research questions that would shift the focus from phenomena deemed important by the researcher to what “stands out in the participants’ perceptions” (Sohn, et al., 2017, p. 130), through methods which would “engage the participant in exploring the depths of his/her perspectives” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 89). To revisit the dinner party metaphor, it was A-Level students I wanted to ‘invite to the table’ – not to discuss others’ thoughts, findings and strategies with regard to success/achievement, but to hear, from their point of view and in their “expressed

experience" (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003, cited in Groundwater-Smith, 2007, p.113), A-Level students' own perceptions of academic buoyancy and what affects it.

Reflecting Ravitch and Carl's (2016) stance that research design is dynamic and interdependent (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), this decision shaped the move away from an action-research approach, and defined the 'methodological ecosystem' of the research, outlined in the following sections.

3.3 Philosophical Perspectives

As identified in the literature there is an emphasis placed on the decision between quantitative and qualitative approaches in educational research (Cohen, et al., 2011); however, Guba and Lincoln (1994) observe that method is secondary to "questions of paradigm" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105) – the belief system or overarching worldview guiding the researcher. A challenge in my researcher journey was synthesising and finding a clear path in the literature surrounding this subject through terminology that was not consistent, often interchangeable, and sometimes contradictory (Crotty, 1998): Guba and Lincoln's 'worldview', 'paradigm' and 'belief system' are found amongst references to 'theoretical perspectives' (Crotty, 1998, p. 2; Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 435), and 'research philosophy' (Saunders, et al., 2023, p. 131). It is essential that a researcher is clear and explicit about their philosophical stance, methodological choices and research strategies, not only as a means of showing others the research can be taken seriously (Crotty, 1998), but also to identify assumptions inherent to the research (Saunders, et al., 2023). These can be categorised into assumptions about realities (ontological), human knowledge (epistemological), and the extent to which researcher values influence the research process (axiological) (Saunders, et al., 2023).

It is considered good practice to clearly outline the basis for any knowledge claims made in the research (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015); this research has drawn on work by Crotty (1998), O'Gormon and MacIntosh (2015), and in particular the 'research onion' by Saunders et al (2023) pictured below, which have helped define and visualise the "relationship between the philosophy, theory and methods" (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 434).

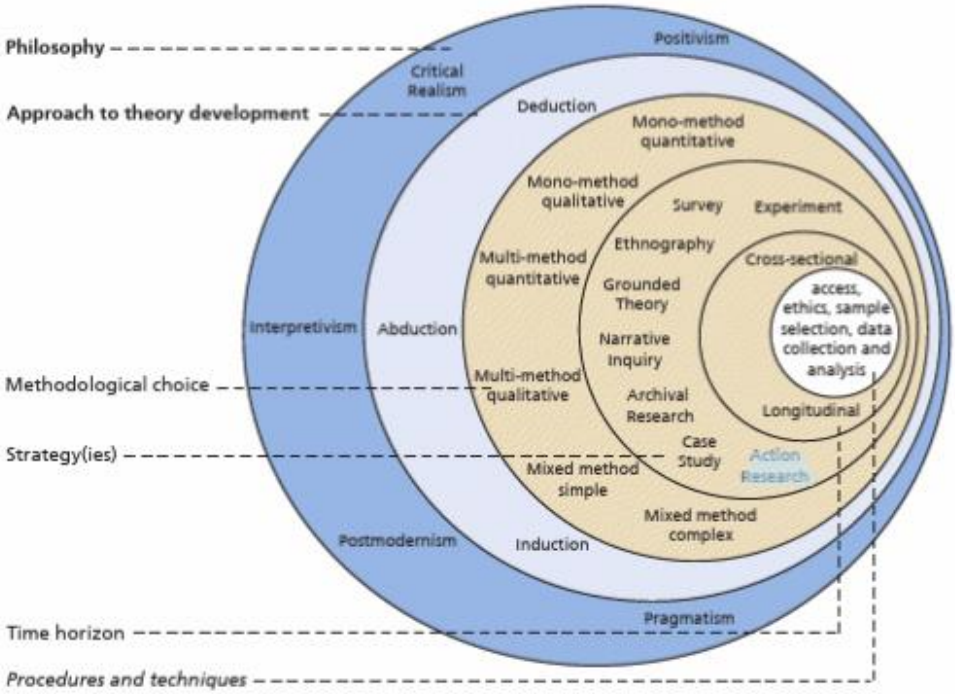

Figure 3-4 - The 'research onion' (Saunders, et al., 2023, p. 131)

Although possessing some conceptual or definitional variance, synthesising these ideas and structure helped established a rationale for how my ontological assumptions have influenced epistemological assumptions, which in turn have influenced methodological considerations and approaches to data collection (Cohen, et al., 2011).

3.4 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology is described in what O'Gorman and MacIntosh (2015) place in 'lay terms' as "how we view reality" (p. 55). Originating in the philosophical "nominalist-realist debate" (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 5), Holden and Lynch (2004) describe this as the "corner stone" of all of a researcher's assumptions: the question of whether reality is external, objective, "out there" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 1), or a product of individual consciousness, with the only meaning of the social world being that attributed to it by social actors, and therefore the possibility of multiple realities (Cohen, et al., 2011; Saunders, et al., 2023; O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015; Crotty, 1998). Whilst outside the scope of this study to discuss in depth the nature of reality, it is important from an axiological perspective to

establish my own values in relation to this topic. My own experiences as a teacher and manager over 18 years in education have brought me into contact with a wide array of people – students, staff, parents/family/carers, colleagues, prominent educational figures and leaders, external services, researchers – and whilst there have undoubtedly been common threads illuminating connections, shared views/ideas/goals, what have always been powerful times in my experience have often emerged from moments that emphasised how humans differ from each other, where facts and theories are proved fallible, or where I have been interested in understanding the individual, or how individuals create, modify and interpret the world (Cohen, et al., 2011). I therefore do not take the realist view that 'objects' or 'truth' have an independent existence, or that there is an absolute, external reality; instead I situate myself and this research more in a relativist perspective, which allows for multiple and even conflicting social realities – as Eisner (1992) states: "The facts never speak for themselves. What they say depends upon the questions we ask" (p. 14).

This ontological stance thus influenced my epistemological position, as a researcher's view on the nature of reality has a profound effect on the researcher's stance on knowledge, how it is created, and how it can be acquired/uncovered (Cohen, et al., 2011). Having rejected more objectivist standpoints ontologically, I also rejected more normative, positivist epistemological paradigms, instead aligning my research with interpretivism. Interpretivism emerged from critiques and tensions resulting from positivist approaches (Cohen, et al., 2011; Crotty, 1998), especially where the more traditional, scientific approach sought to discover 'the truth', utilising observable, measurable facts in order to draw law-like generalisations, and where the observer sought to be equally as detached, striving to keep research value-free (Saunders, et al., 2023). Instead, interpretivism, attempts understanding and explanation of "human and social reality" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Often linked to Weber and the view that the human sciences concern themselves with "Verstehen (understanding)" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67), interpretivism allows the subjective exploration and elucidation of "gritty circumstances of the human condition" (Ions, 1977, cited in Cohen, et al., 2011, p.14), arguing that understanding is situated, affected by context, and can only come from the researcher sharing individuals' frame of reference – from inside the individual's world, not outside it (Cohen, et al., 2011).

As one of the key tenets of this study was the observation that A-Level students' voices are largely underrepresented in research, an epistemological stance that would enable them to be centred was essential; as was an approach that gave space to multiple perspectives on situations, and that championed "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 312) in interpretation, allowing for complexity rather than reduction to simplicity. Cognisant by this point of Groundwater-Smith's (2007) "borderlands" occupied by student stakeholders, I wanted to ensure I was not in danger of simply speaking for, about and on behalf of the participants, or generating findings or theory that reduced them to "passive dolls" (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 17). When scrutinising my ontological and epistemological decisions, the comments of two students, Craig and Kevin, cited in a study undertaken by Jones and Smith (2004) served as reflective benchmark:

> *Why not ask the pupils what they think…Not many pupils of our age have this option; most are conditioned to believe that all the rules laid down are correct…Their views aren't encouraged; instead they're dictated to by teachers who take all the responsibility that shapes their character.*
>
> (Jones & Smith, 2004, p. 17)

Rejecting a positivist epistemology and puzzling through a short detour into pragmatism and action research reinforced that the principles of interpretivism were most aligned to what resonated in Craig and Kevin's critique of educational research and practice, and what I considered most important to my research purpose: I wanted to "set out to understand" (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 18) A-Level students' interpretations of the world around them in relation to academic buoyancy, and I wanted theory, findings and any recommendations to arise from and be grounded in data generated, following from research not preceding it, and to include and be shaped by the meanings and purposes of the people it focused on (Cohen, et al., 2011).

Research purposes can be categorised into exploratory, descriptive, explanatory or evaluative (Saunders, et al., 2023). I located my research as an exploratory study: I was seeking to explore or clarify understanding of an issue, problem or phenomenon – in this case influencing factors on academic buoyancy - commencing with a broad focus, and in which data and insights influence direction (Saunders, et al., 2023). As my aim was not

to start from theory and subject it to rigorous testing, or test hypotheses with a view to verify or falsify a theory which would be more consistent with scientific, positivist research, I instead selected an inductive rather than deductive approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A criticism of deductive approaches is rigid methodologies which limit alternative explanations for phenomena, which would contradict the interpretivist choices already established in this study; an approach that enables alternative explanations, and also consideration of contexts in which phenomena take place, allowing exploration of phenomena and from which theory might be built (Saunders, et al., 2023; Silverman, 2014), was therefore more suitable for my research aims.

As identified by Saunders et al (2023), research that takes an inductive approach is more likely in qualitative research design and data methods, as well as small sample research in order to establish different perspectives on the phenomena, and emphasise subjective interpretation. The definition of qualitative research as involving the “verbal description of real-life situations” (Silverman, 2014, p. 4), which provides “holistic, in-depth accounts” which “attempt to reflect the complicated, contextual, interactive and interpretive nature of our social world” (Salkind, 2010, p. 1158) appealed to my research purpose and aims, and addressed the recommendations in existing academic buoyancy literature that future research explore qualitative methods to complement the quantitative studies already undertaken.

Establishing a strategy of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) underneath the umbrella term of qualitative research (Salkind, 2010) was essential to ensuring that selected data collection tools and analysis techniques brought philosophical and methodological coherence to the ‘operationalised’ sections of the research (Saunders, et al., 2023), enabling me to realize the aims of my research. The strategy of inquiry was also essential in establishing transparency regarding questions of ethics and quality (e.g. validity); the following sections will discuss in more detail considerations and concerns that were identified at research design, data collection and data analysis stages, and strategies taken to overcome or minimise these (Saunders, et al., 2023).

3.5 Strategy of Inquiry – The Influence of Phenomenology

The following sections discuss how this study's strategy of inquiry has been significantly influenced by aspects of phenomenology. It is important to state, however, that this study does not follow a strictly phenomenological methodology or approach, but rather has an exploratory, interpretivist design informed by elements of phenomenological theory and research.

The interpretivist paradigm has close links with Husserl's work on phenomenology. Crotty (1998) notes interest in aspects of the social world tend toward the "unique, individual and qualitative" (p. 68), and that interpretivist, Verstehen-based inquiry has been borne along by approaches such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. Aspects of phenomenology aligned with my research aims as I encountered definitions that emphasised its "context-sensitive" focus on interpreting the "meaning-making" of individuals (Spencer et al, 1997, cited in Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p.151), and the researcher's role to attempt, through rich detail, to "build the essence of experience from participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 67).

However, despite Crotty's (1998) assurance that phenomenology "is a simple enough concept" (p. 78), and that phenomenology is an appropriate, valuable approach to educational research (Randles, 2012; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Dangal & Joshi, 2020; Farrell, 2020), further exploration of this topic also illuminated that there is apprehension, uncertainty, strong warnings about its use (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Farrell, 2020), and a "confusing abundance" of definitions (van Manen, 2017, p. 775). As it is essential that research is underpinned by and articulates a clear methodological rationale, it was important to engage with various views, strengths, challenges and critiques of phenomenology in order to ensure that it was a suitable approach for the phenomenon I was seeking to understand: firsthand experiences of students' academic buoyancy and experiences studying A-Levels. As van Manen (2017) warns, phenomenological lines are not always clear, so it is important to establish that this research had cooking in the kitchen what was listed on the menu (van Manen, 2017).

At once a philosophy, perspective, foundation for qualitative research, and a research method (Farrell, 2020), the phenomenological movement is often traced to Husserl in the early 20th Century (Qutoshi, 2018; Suddick, et al., 2020). Driven by the search for human knowledge's foundations, or essence, Husserl considered consciousness to be the basis of all experience, and envisaged phenomenology as a means by which "the experience of phenomena, as they appear through human consciousness, could be studied" (Farrell, 2020, p. 2). This "battle cry" (Crotty, 1998, p. 78), saw Husserl assert that in phenomenology we should attend to 'the things themselves' (Crotty, 1998, p.78; Cohen, et al., 2011, p.18; Farrell, 2020, p.2), and whilst I will discuss later in this section how differing schools of phenomenological thought cannot be generalised under one umbrella term, the concept of the 'things themselves' provides a useful starting point for understanding the influence of phenomenology on this research.

As Crotty (1998) develops, by focusing on the 'things themselves', phenomenology suggests that it is possible for new meaning, or at least authentication or enhancement of established meanings, to emerge as a result of setting aside prevailing understandings of phenomena (as best we can) and revisiting immediate experiences of them: to "see the world afresh" (Crotty, 1998, p. 86). This resonated with the journey my research design had gone through – by deviating away from an action-research influenced approach and toward understanding experience from a perspective reportedly underrepresented in the existing literature, I felt at least at this very top level aligned with the phenomenological requirement to put our previous understanding "in abeyance" to foreground this "fresh look" (Crotty, 1998, p. 80), a tenet emphasised repeatedly by phenomenologists: phenomenologists should "see through and break down the mental barriers" of "previous habits of thought"; "return to the unadulterated phenomena"; "not to take our received notions for granted"; "an attempt to recover a fresh perception of existence" (Husserl, 1931, p.43; Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 680; Wolff, 1984, p. 192; Sadler, 1969, p.377, all cited in Crotty, 1998, p.80). I also found there to be some level of agreement across the literature that phenomenology seeks realities rather than pursues truth, by capturing experience and insight into lived experience from the perspective of the participant (Crotty, 1998; Randles, 2012; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; van Manen, 2017; Qutoshi, 2018; Farrell, 2020). Again I found this reflected the values I had established as

important to my research: capturing the firsthand experiences of A-Level students, exploring their realities of studying A-Levels, and what stands out to them as influencing factors on their academic buoyancy.

Earlier in the research conceptualisation phase I had also utilised a form of bracketing, identified in the literature as a fundamental part of Husserl's phenomenological procedures, referred to as "epoché" (Farrell, 2020, p. 3); however, it was in exploring Husserl's concept of bracketing that raised potential design concerns in this study and required further interrogation, as I increasingly found Husserlian phenomenology and procedures to possess an element of objectivity (Crotty, 1998) which surprised me, and I felt could raise questions about the veracity of any claims of this research having a purely phenomenological research design.

Husserl's procedures, also known as "reduction" (Farrell, 2020, p. 3), incorporate three concepts: epoché (bracketing); phenomenological reduction; imaginative variation (Farrell, 2020). This study does not cover each in detail, as ultimately this research is not located in the Husserlian phenomenological tradition, which will be discussed in following paragraphs. However, it is important to identify that it is based on these procedures that this decision was made – the most significant influence being the concept of epoché, summarised as 'parenthesising' the 'natural attitude', and where a researcher being guided by Husserlian phenomenology investigates phenomena but makes no assumptions or judgements (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009): a descriptive approach.

Whilst Husserl is cited as the founder of the phenomenological movement (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009; Farrell, 2020), the movement has developed in a number of directions (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012), with Heidegger being cited as initiating one of the most important 'deviations' (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009; Henriksson & Friesen, 2012; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; van Manen, 2017; Fuster Guillen, 2019; Farrell, 2020; Suddick, et al., 2020; Dangal & Joshi, 2020). The basis of this deviation is ascribed to Heidegger's disagreement with Husserl's view of the importance of description over understanding in phenomenology (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009), and, alongside other critics, scepticism over the value of reduction and the ability to 'bracket out' previous knowledge and influences (Farrell, 2020). Here a distinction emerged between Husserl's transcendental,

descriptive phenomenology, and interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology, and underpins the rationale for this research being informed by this second category.

3.5.1 Interpretive (Hermeneutic) Phenomenology

In contrast to descriptive phenomenology's aim to "describe the essential structures of phenomena in a manner that is free of interpretation" (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009, p. 665), the hermeneutic approach is an interpretative style (Sullivan, 2012, p. 9), embracing the belief that there should be equal concern for both the participants' descriptions of phenomena and interpretation or meaning of the experience (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015): the term "hermeneutic" being derived from the Greek 'hermēneuein', meaning 'interpret'. This has been defined as the difference between being of (descriptive) and being in (hermeneutic) the world, inhabiting the perspective that it is impossible to interpret phenomena devoid of the interpreter's lived experience (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009). In fact, hermeneutic phenomenology believes there should be "purposeful recognition of both the researcher's and participants' perceptions" (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 253); it rejects the claims of other phenomenological approaches that objects can be approached in value-free and undistorted contexts (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 225), and promotes the interrelationship between researcher and those being researched, in order to understand rather than measure what is happening in a given context (Saunders, et al., 2023).

At first much of the descriptive/hermeneutic divide was conceptually challenging, particularly the philosophical grappling with the nature of truth; however, acknowledging my positionality in the research made the phenomenological path clearer. These positionality factors are discussed in greater detail in later chapters on data analysis and findings, as I acknowledge how I have approached managing what is a delicate balance between researcher context positively influencing/illuminating versus negatively imposing on research. Here, however, they are included as they clarify elements of hermeneutic phenomenology which have been influential in this study's design.

Reflecting one view that researchers best work in natural settings, employing qualitative methodologies that are deeply rooted in practitioner culture and language (Randles, 2012), the repeated references in literature around hermeneutic phenomenology to

language associated with interpretation, perception, perspectives, interrelationships, personal experiences, layers of meaning, all felt resonant with my practitioner-researcher role, but also are deeply rooted tenets of my subject specialism background: English Language & Literature. As a practitioner, I have always viewed the learning and teaching journey as a collaborative, shared one – facilitated rather than transmittal, dialogue rather than the "sage on the stage" (King, 1993, p. 30) – so a research approach that embraces the presence of the researcher, that gives them space to interpret the understanding of phenomena not on behalf of, but along with, participants (Dangal & Joshi, 2020) appealed to those values.

Similarly, my background as an English Literature & Language student and teacher cannot be ignored; having dedicated nearly 25 years to studying and teaching the subject its fingerprint is indelible in my ways of thinking and analytical tendencies. Interested by the view that, in comparison to other phenomenological and qualitative approaches, hermeneutical phenomenology has an openness to "poetic qualities of writing" (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 1), I found the references to "narratives" (Dangal & Joshi, 2020, p. 26), "stories" (Randles, 2012, p. 13), and the importance of not just the participants' perspectives but how they are expressed in their own words, echoed across hermeneutic phenomenology, literary/linguistic spheres, and cohesive to this research's aim to centralize A-Level students, their perspective and their voice as a starting point and not an afterthought from which the research will emerge.

On reflection, I see that at the heart of both of these is that I enjoy breaking things down to their component parts and, contrastingly, viewing them as a contextual whole, but also appreciate the interplay, interconnectedness and iterative potential in between; this strengthened my leaning toward hermeneutic phenomenology as it has at its core a view that there exists "an ongoing relation between the whole and its parts" (Farrell, 2020, p. 4), understanding of which is linked to particular meanings for participants and researchers that cannot be bracketed out (Farrell, 2020). Subsequently, hermeneutic phenomenologists are encouraged to consider both by employing the hermeneutic circle.

It is important at this point to acknowledge one of the biggest challenges embracing phenomenology as a methodology is its inherently philosophical and conceptual nature.

In fact, a critique in the literature is that with phenomenology “there is no method” (Farrell, 2020, p. 4), that it is difficult translating its complex philosophy into methodological techniques (Farrell, 2020), and that “debates abound” about how best to carry out this research (Finlay, 2012, p. 172). Van Manen (2017) devotes an article to asking the question ‘But is it phenomenological?’, warning of the confusions and, at its most critical, the “failure” (van Manen, 2017, p. 776) of research claiming to be phenomenological; van Manen (2017) goes as far as to say that genuine phenomenological research “should strike fear in the heart of anyone who hopes to practice it” (p. 779). Even in texts dedicated to method and practice of hermeneutic phenomenology (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012), there is the acknowledgement that they do not offer ready-made manuals, which can make hermeneutic phenomenology feel “difficult and elusive” (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 12). Instead, it was helpful to acknowledge these research design complexities and take the view that in phenomenological research there exist “different pathways within a common methodological landscape” (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 12). Rather than situating this study strictly in a phenomenological design, it is instead positioned as an exploratory, qualitative study drawing on elements and influences from these phenomenological ‘pathways’, for example, Heidegger’s ‘whole and its parts’ and the hermeneutic circle.

3.5.2 The Whole and Its Parts - The Hermeneutic Circle – Moving Toward Methods

Heidegger’s lectern example is cited frequently in the literature (Farrell, 2020; Golob, 2020) to illustrate the ongoing relation between the whole and its parts and that all understanding is based on prior understanding, which he terms “forestructures of understanding” (Heidegger, 1927, cited in Farrell, 2020, p. 4). In this example, Heidegger describes walking into a lecture-room and seeing a lectern. In Heidegger’s experience he does not see brown surfaces and right angles, or a larger box with a smaller stacked on top; he doesn’t see it in isolation, but in “one fell swoop” (Heidegger, 1999, cited in Golob, 2020, p.97). Whilst those component parts are there, his understanding sees the whole, but also based on “self-understanding” (Golob, 2020, p. 98): he sees a lectern that is slightly too high, from which he will speak, whereas students see a lectern from which

they will be spoken to. In this research study, A-Level student academic buoyancy acted as the lectern, explored from the starting point of what A-Level students saw in 'one fell swoop', and taking into consideration forestructures of understanding from both a participant and researcher perspective.

Through the lectern example Heidegger exemplifies how "forestructures of understanding represent what we already know" and "form the basis for what it is possible for us to understand" (Farrell, 2020, p. 4); by accepting that interpretation is never 'presuppositionless', and turning toward and carefully examining our presuppositions rather than trying to bracket them out, we can enter in 'the right way' the hermeneutic circle (Farrell, 2020) – the "ongoing, attentive, circular movement between part and whole" (Suddick, et al., 2020, p. 3). In relation to this research, these concepts served an important function: illuminating a research method 'pathway' to follow to bring structure to the research, but also as a means of framing my perspective through a hermeneutical phenomenological lens.

This study's method 'pathway' was particularly influenced by definitions of the hermeneutic circle as an interpretive process aimed at deepening the depth of understanding, by cyclical engagement with 'texts' in a manner that moves from components of experience, to the whole, then back again (Dangal & Joshi, 2020; Farrell, 2020). Through this process of revisiting texts repeatedly the aim is to "progress towards sense and meaning by questioning prior knowledge" but also expand past this into "new horizons of meaning" (Dangal & Joshi, 2020, p. 28); understanding is therefore circular, iterative (Dangal & Joshi, 2020; Farrell, 2020). It was important therefore that methods and tools selected were conducive to undertaking this process, as well as other central values of this research, e.g. data collection and analysis methods, must promote the exploration of lived experience, promote capturing this in the participant's own words, and facilitate cyclical engagement when analysing. For this research focus groups were selected as the method of data collection as they enabled both, which is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Before moving to discuss methods in more detail, it is important to address another concern about taking a phenomenological perspective: validity. One of the key aspects

of action research that had initially appealed to me as a researcher was the practical impacts that type of research can have on real world contexts. Whilst I had overcome concerns around phenomenology being the 'method with no method', I had surfaced concerns in my own beliefs about the validity of the research being undertaken, particularly in relation to applicability or transferability (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). Other issues of validity and reliability will be dealt with in relevant sections on data collection and analysis, however, I was cautious that a key factor in establishing a sound overall methodological rationale is in justifying the potential contribution of the research being undertaken, a responsibility I felt was intensified as a practitioner researcher, and as a researcher undertaking research at my own place of work.

So far I have emphasised the strengths of the phenomenological elements that have informed this study in relation to the aims of the research undertaken; however, I am also conscious that whilst 'deep curiosity' is an acceptable motivation for undertaking research, questions must be asked in more detail to ascertain the scope and contribution to wider research. In discussing qualitative and phenomenological research concerns are sometimes raised around the generisability of findings: small sample sizes, the importance of context, and a focus on the individual lived experience make this type of research "less amenable" (Dangal & Joshi, 2020, p. 36) to generalisation when compared to large-scale quantitative research. In this study, this is reflected in the acknowledgement that whilst I am choosing to focus on A-Level students, this does not mean that they represent all A-Level students, or even all A-Level students at my FE College – therefore I would be remiss to make any claims that findings of this research can be blanket applied and are of universal use across this demographic. Initially this, combined with the fact that I was keen to let findings and recommendations emerge from the data, concerned me: it felt unpredictable, and as though there was a risk that a hermeneutic phenomenological approach might affect how 'useful' this research could be, both within or outside my own practice and context. In response, I reviewed examples of educational research that had utilised this approach (Randles, 2012; Farrell, 2020) and found similar concerns represented – that when it came to research educators hesitated in using experience-focused research, usually as a result of not "knowing how to learn from the

experience of others" (Farrell, 2020, p. 1); however, what I also found was that whilst this might be cited as criticism of a phenomenological approach, it is not de facto so.

Consequently, this research has been underpinned by a more expansive view than I initially possessed about contribution in research, which sees phenomenology as "messy", but which can invite "readers into a dialogue" (Randles, 2012, p. 12), and where transferability can be "achieved when one's own experiences and the contexts surrounding those experiences are similar to those of a particular study's participants" (Randles, 2012, p. 18). One of my concerns as a practitioner-researcher was reconciling the choice of understanding in hermeneutic phenomenology, rather than what felt like the more 'obvious' practical benefits of action research. Again, it was important to challenge my preconceptions: hermeneutic phenomenology's contributions to educational research are valuable precisely because of its reflexive nature - enabling researchers to illuminate their own thought processes, shaping approaches to teaching and learning (Randles, 2012), bringing researchers into closer contact with phenomena and experiences of phenomena in order "to respond, as educators, as humans, with insight and compassion in developing policy, instigating change and in engaging in our role as educators and as humans" (Farrell, 2020, p. 6).

3.6 Methods & Data Collection

Having established this conceptual framework, I was then able to make reasoned decisions about what research methods were appropriate to the philosophical design and would allow me to conduct my research in a way that maps to the aims of the study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Appropriate data collection strategies and instruments must demonstrate "fitness for purpose" (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 375): ensuring useful, usable, substantive data (Cohen, et al., 2011; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017) leading to credible findings being generated (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). They must also carefully consider researcher positionality and reflexivity. Rather than naively engaging in research as though there is minimal connection between researcher "subjectivities, priorities, theoretical orientations", "design and methods" and "methods and findings" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017,

p. 80), choices made in research design inevitably reflect who the researcher is as a person. This relationship should be scrutinised and wrestled with (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), and acknowledged explicitly throughout every stage of the research.

In this section I will outline the research methods choices made linked to the overarching conceptual framework, as well as discussing contextual factors, strengths, tensions and reflexive considerations experienced when undertaking the data collection design and implementation stage of the study.

3.6.1 Research Methods – Focus Groups

Research methods must also be influenced by an understanding of the methods, including the strengths and weaknesses, found in the literature of prior research (Boote & Beile, 2005). One of the most significant influences on the methodology, methods and participants chosen for this study, was Nash et al.'s (2021) observation that research that explores the perspectives and experiences of those studying A-Levels, is "a largely unexplored area of investigation" (p. 153). In light of this, I explored qualitative research methods that would foreground these factors, concluding that focus groups were best suited on a number of levels for my research aims. Whilst I have experience of undertaking focus groups as part of the Masters in Education, I felt it was important that this choice was scrutinised for its validity in relation to the current research aims, and that it was not just a choice made out of researcher familiarity; as Bradbury-Jones, et al. (2009) argue, researchers must justify their choice of method in light of their philosophical underpinnings.

Philosophically, focus groups aligned with the interpretivist nature of this research as they are described at their simplest as informal discussions among selected individuals, commonly used to research "people's own views and understanding" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 184). Conscious that one of my key aims as a researcher was to avoid placing those researched into 'borderlands', or as Johnson (1996) describes, contributing to the "implicit silence imposed upon them by those who claim to have the blueprint for their lives" (p. 524), I wanted a research method that would foreground "talk as a gateway into lived experience" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 8). The strength of focus groups as a method for this

research, therefore, is their potential to give the researcher access to experiential knowledge, grounded in the participants' own opinions and understanding, and give insight into how they contextualize and categorise phenomena (Johnson, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998; Acocella & Cataldi, 2021).

Focus groups recognise the subjective, interpretivist standpoint this research takes in its view that reality is "multiple" and that "each person experiences and perceives reality differently" (Saunders, et al., 2023, p. 137). Similarly, having established this research as exploratory and inductive in its nature in relation to generating themes and findings, focus groups are noted for their strength in exploring research questions in new areas, examining established areas or questions from different perspectives, and developing whole new lines of research (Johnson, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998; Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). Focus groups can also produce insights less readily obtained in methods such as individual surveys, as a result of their more spontaneous group dynamics (Johnson, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998).

I also felt that focus groups had a strength in relation to taking steps towards addressing researcher positionality as well as prior conceptions, beliefs and biases. At an overarching research-design level, I felt focus groups embedded "minimal intervention by the researcher/moderator" (Johnson, 1996, p. 521), encouraging the researcher to play the "role of host and witness rather than interviewer" (Johnson, 1996, p. 523), and where issues of researcher-participant power (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021), although not removed, could be considered reduced by virtue of a focus group's make-up - the very fact that there are a number of participants involved simultaneously "inevitably" reducing researcher power and control, in what Wilkinson identifies as a "relatively 'egalitarian' method" (Wilkinson, 1998, pp. 189-190) compared to other interview methods. A consequent potential advantage of this also appealed to my research motivations as I had identified early in the research design assumptions that had been steering, and dominating, the direction of the research, and "reduced researcher control gives focus group participants much greater opportunity to set the research agenda, and to "develop the themes most important to them"" (Cooper et al, 1993, cited in Wilkinson, 1998, p.190). A key reason for choosing focus groups therefore was that they provide an opportunity to

move participants from “passive objects” (Johnson, 1996, p. 519) to “actors” (Johnson, 1996, p. 522), providing an environment through which the researcher can access the participants’ meanings (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021), rather than imposing the researcher’s own opinions and assumptions (Johnson, 1996), thus uncovering the what and why behind participants’ thoughts (Murray, 1997). This resonated with my identity as a practitioner researcher and the centrality I had placed on exploring experiences from the participants’ perspectives, and in their own words. Descriptions of focus groups as enabling researchers to “gain a sense of the texture of talk” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 187), and where “dialogue can be revelatory” (Padilla, 1993, p. 153) aligned with my natural inclination towards methods which enabled a focus on the nuances of language, cohesive with my personal and practitioner background.

Data collection methods, however, are not without their tensions and compromises in relation to the practicalities of data gathering and the researcher’s endeavours to engage “power-reduction strategies” (Ayrton, 2019, p. 323), and capture authentic lived experience and participant voice. As indicated, it is important to explicitly acknowledge that focus groups only ‘take steps’ to ‘reduce’ these tensions, and that as a reflexive researcher it is important to always have at the forefront the fact that “however skilled the facilitation, some sources of power asymmetry are innate and self-evident” (Ayrton, 2019, p. 325). For example, whilst compared to a one-to-one interview it is arguable that a focus group reduces some of the potential power imbalance, a researcher must always be aware that their position as an adult researcher conducting research with young people will factor into “participants’ perceptions” (Ayrton, 2019, p. 325). Similarly, it is also important to remember that the content of the gathered data is “indivisible from the social process that produces it” (Ayrton, 2019, p. 325); whilst a focus group might offer the aforementioned ‘greater opportunity’ for participants to influence the agenda and identify themes most significant to them, it must be acknowledged that the researcher has ultimately set the overarching agenda, and that pragmatic factors such as the order of contributions by this particular group of participants are inevitably influencing the experiences and topics discussed. In addition, whilst focus groups may represent a “safe peer environment” (Adler, et al., 2019, p. 2) on the one hand, “social pressure in adolescent focus groups can bias the results”, and factors such as “social desirability”

(e.g. conformity or reluctance to disagree) (Adler, et al., 2019, p. 11) can influence what is/what is not said, as well as how participants express themselves.

To attempt to mitigate these tensions it was therefore essential to ensure that I did not lose sight during data collection and analysis of the fact that focus groups are "semi-informal spaces" (Ayrton, 2019, p. 324) where participants are engaged in "positional relations of power", both between participants and between participants and the researcher, where interactions made and language used are "not a neutral activity" but are "knowingly observed" (Ayrton, 2019, p. 324) and "infused" by the "immediate context" and "micro-dynamics" of the discussion (Ayrton, 2019, p. 323). This coincided with a critical moment in my reflexive research journey, when I encountered a question raised in the literature regarding whether focus groups and phenomenology were in fact incompatible methodologically (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009). This discussion originated in the philosophical differences previously discussed between Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, with conflicting views presented. On the one hand, focus groups were seen as incompatible due to their group nature and potential 'presence' of the researcher as moderator, as they do not enable Husserl's standpoint which prioritises individuals being able to "describe their experiences in an 'uncontaminated' way" (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009, p. 666). In contrast, the Heideggerian perspective centralizes the view that interpretive phenomenology is, by its very nature, concerned with interpretation, that the researcher is not trying to arrive at an objective truth, and that there is a "jointly constructed" (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009, p. 667) relationship with the researcher and researched; thus, focus groups promote these qualities. As this research has been informed by the Heideggerian-influenced interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenological standpoint, it also takes the view that focus groups are not only methodologically congruent with phenomenology as discussed in previous paragraphs, but that focus groups are actually advantageous in some of their unique features, and can enhance and achieve a "richer understanding" (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009, p. 668) of the phenomenon being studied, compared to other methods such as one-to-one interviewing.

Bradbury-Jones, et al. (2009) summarise focus groups as being congruent with phenomenological research in three ways: they support the phenomenological endeavour that holds collaboration and dialogue as important; focus groups stimulate discussion, encourage new perspectives, and promote interaction, exchange, agreement and challenge; and, consequently, they help researchers become aware of and potentially bracket preconceptions, biases and prejudices as a result of different perspectives, or even challenges, by group members. As discussed in the previous section, one of the key concerns I had regarding this research was validity and transferability, also highlighted as one of the disadvantages of the focus group method; when viewed within a traditional research framework (e.g. large scale, positivist research), focus groups could be viewed as having comparably limited reliability and validity, and were subject to moderator and respondent bias in various forms (Wilkinson, 1998). Bradbury-Jones, et al. (2009) represent the counter-view that focus groups are set apart positively from other research methods, as "the phenomenon being researched comes alive within the group" (Halling, et al., 1994, p. 112) in a way not found in other methods, precisely due to their focus on dialogue (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021) and participant interaction "with each other as well as with the moderator" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 182), and which brings with it features that in fact strengthen validity and transferability, and can enrich the data collected.

Wilson (1997) argues that the strength of focus groups lies in the "apparent face validity" (p. 220) in the data collected, as they allow voices to be heard and 'stories' to emanate from the groups, a strength which Wilkinson (1998) expounds not only as a result of the data collecting the "participants' own language, concepts and concerns" (p. 188), but also the potential for more fully articulated accounts, and the opportunity to observe "collective sense-making" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 188). Whilst this attention to becoming familiar with terminology, vocabulary, idioms and the way participants "habitually talk" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 188) - the phraseology participants use to describe their lived experience (O'Brien, 1993) – justifies the appropriateness of focus groups as a method in phenomenologically-informed research, it is how focus group interactions offer a potential insight into the shared nature of these ways of talking, experiences, and the way participants share how they make sense of these experiences, that appealed to me (Wilkinson, 1998; Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). Focus groups thus felt filled with more

potential to capture “commonly held assumptions, concepts and meanings” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 189), fostering a collective identify, transcending individualism as individuals connect up narratives “first to each other, and then to wider social economic, cultural and political influences” (Johnson, 1996, p. 534).

Another advantage of focus groups emerges from the fact that respondents react to responses from other group members, either in agreement or disagreement, allowing them to hear perspectives and stories from each other, giving time for reflection as others speak, and the opportunity to formulate, add, elaborate, defend or modify their own insights as the discussion unfolds (Wilkinson, 1998; Stewart et al., 2007; Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009). This advantage is potentially twofold. Firstly, focus groups afford opportunities for checking and clarifying among participants, but also between the researcher and participants (Bradbury-Jones, et al., 2009). Secondly, data is not only enriched as a result of the participants sharing and reflecting on their experiences, but has the potential as the researcher observes multiple contributors, and the process of collective sense-making, including participant agreement and disagreement, to ‘bracket’ or ‘surface’ any pre-conceptions or assumptions that the researcher might hold.

The importance of this in shaping the final data collection for this study, but also my reflexivity as a researcher, was illuminated firsthand as I undertook a pilot focus group. Whilst I had acknowledged in shifting from my initial action research design that I was operating under some preconceptions and assumptions, my pilot focus group highlighted that even though I had made a research design change, there were still some assumptions that were shaping the research - mostly centred around taking for granted that definitions and understanding of terms were commonly shared: in the wider literature; between participants; and between researcher and participants.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the concepts of achievement and resilience had been significant initial influences on undertaking this research, and whilst I had made changes to the research design, initial focus group questions remained linked to some of the concepts that had instigated this research, with phrasing which focused on what factors students and tutors felt affected A-Level students’ achievement and/or resilience. The importance of conducting a pilot focus group in order to ascertain whether questions

needed modification (Wilkinson, 1998; Sohn, et al., 2017) was illuminated as it became apparent very quickly that the initial questions were problematic: participants repeatedly sought clarification or definition ("Do you mean…?"; "Are you talking about…?"); queried whether I was referring to specific scenarios ("Do you mean success in exams?") or identified that a term was not one they were familiar with (particularly in relation to resilience or academic buoyancy), and the flow of discussion or response was repeatedly stilted.

Having conducted the pilot focus group I felt a disconnect between how the focus group had unfolded in terms of both dynamics and whether the lines of inquiry created were in fact suitable to answer the research question and focus I had identified as important to me as a researcher. In discussing this with my supervisor, I identified that whilst the focus group questions were derived logically from what had inspired the research, they needed modification to ensure they resonated more closely with the inductive, exploratory design I had established, and which provides the opportunity to put previous understanding of concepts such as achievement, success and resilience "in abeyance" and foreground a "fresh look" (Crotty, 1998, p. 80).

What emerged from the pilot focus group through the participants' clarification questions was a sense that there was a specific direction being highlighted by my choice of terms, when really I was interested in exploring where participants' experiences would take me. Similarly, it also seemed that the phrasing of success and achievement were generating narrow channels of discussion linked to specific activities, time bound or 'static' time periods in the educational year (e.g. summative high stakes exam periods), and externally measured quantitative 'end goals' (e.g. qualification grades). Whilst these are inevitably significant measures and time periods in an A-Level students' educational journey, the pilot focus group felt prematurely limited to this. Subsequently I revisited what had originally interested me in Martin and Marsh's (2008) concept of 'academic buoyancy', as well as curriculum theory's question of 'what are we educating for?', and identified that Martin and Marsh's (2008) descriptions of the 'day-to-day' or 'everyday' experiences, the wider development of students, and how they *handled* these were what particularly stood out. This language suggested the sense of a more qualitative holistic journey over a

period of time, more aligned to what I was keen to explore as part of the research, but which the phrasing of pilot focus group questions had unintentionally not encouraged, even with prompts and attempts at probing follow-up questions.

As a result, and in discussion with my supervisor, the focus group questions were revised from asking specifically about success/achievement/resilience/academic buoyancy, and instead focused on 'progress'. Although initially this felt like playing with semantics, it was significant in repositioning the focus onto the participant, their journey, interpretations, perspectives and experiences, with 'progress' feeling less prescriptive, time-bound or loaded with the sense of an external, and potentially pejorative, measure. This was also an important shift as one of the key responsibilities of a researcher conducting focus groups, or any research at all that involves dialogue with participants, is to ensure that "humility, sensitivity, and respect" are at the heart of their approach, along with a "sincere desire to hear what their 'collaborators' say" in an atmosphere that ensures "safety, trust, and rapport" (Sohn, et al., 2017, p. 132). When tested again, the rephrased questions immediately increased the feeling of 'accessibility' for discussions; less clarification/definition was required, discussion flowed more freely and participants elaborated more in their responses. As a researcher I also felt I was positioned in a more "minimalist role" (Wilson, 1997, p. 214) than I had in the pilot focus group, and that the new phrasing encouraged more "unconstrained descriptions of participants' lived experience", and a focus on "whatever stood out in their perceptions" (Sohn, et al., 2017, p. 129).

3.6.2 Sample Selection

The process of choosing a sampling strategy is as essential to the success of a research project as decisions made around methodology and data collection tools (Cohen, et al., 2011), and participant selection requires integration into a study's overall logic (Campbell, et al., 2020). When identifying the potential sample, it was important to consider how to ensure the sample was accessible and valid in order to effectively answer the research questions, but also to establish clearly what was represented in the sample, in order to

establish the potential generalisability, or limitations of generalisability, of any findings to a wider population (Cohen, et al., 2011).

Whilst quantitative studies may often require statistically larger sample sizes (Cohen, et al., 2011), qualitative studies often (although not always) can employ the use of smaller sample selections, especially where the intention is less focused on breadth of understanding, but rather focused on studying the depths of a topic (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; Campbell, et al., 2020). There is some debate in the literature regarding 'suitable' size for a focus group, ranging from four to twelve people (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Stewart, et al., 2007), or as few as three (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008); however, whilst numbers differ, a common agreement is that the focus group's ability to answer the research questions is its primary consideration when considering sample size and participant 'makeup' (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). As this doctoral research is interpretivist in its nature, a smaller sample size is suited to its design, as I aimed to obtain "in-depth insights" from participants with a lot of experience in the topic (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008, p. 71); however, initially a challenge I encountered was defining how much/what data would be deemed 'adequate' for this research. Alongside views that data saturation is deemed adequate when no new categories, themes or insights are generated (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), it was useful for this study to think in terms of rich and thick data with regards to data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015), with this research taking the standpoint that data saturation is not about simply the quantity of the data (thick data) or just the quality of the data (rich data), but a consideration of both, and the aim to achieve a depth of data (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Acknowledging that this study was to take a smaller sample size meant it was also essential that the sample draws on those "most likely to yield appropriate and useful information" (Kelly, 2010, p. 317); in order to achieve this aim, I selected a non-probability or purposive sampling approach (Teddlie & Yu, 2007), often employed when using focus groups (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008), where the participants have been chosen based on my judgement of their typicality or possession of the characteristics I wanted to investigate, or the view that they are 'knowledgeable people' as a result of their professional role, expertise and experience (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 157), and which could

not be obtained as effectively from other choices (Maxwell, 2013). Whilst there is a view that such a small, purposive sample size may not be representative, and therefore comments and subsequent findings may not be generalizable (Cohen, et al., 2011), Sohn et al (2017) propose a counter-view, which I have adopted in this study as one measure of considering validity of approach and findings: that findings from educational research conducted using qualitative and phenomenological methodologies have transferability to wider populations and other settings by illuminating essential aspects and meanings of the phenomenon under investigation in such a way that resonates with other practitioners and students (Sohn, et al., 2017).

As the aim of this study is to explore the day-to-day experiences and perspectives of students studying A-Levels, focussing on their views of progress and the factors they consider to affect it, particularly in the first year, the student sample is therefore drawn entirely from first year A-Level students. However, having established the sample selection I was keen to ensure that I didn't take a bottom up approach (Bailey, 1994): identifying an 'appropriate' number of participants that would support validity, but which could then inadvertently bring other limitations, not only to the representativeness but also the richness of the research. Whilst acknowledging the varied discussion around the 'appropriate' number of participants which can, and should, vary dependent on the research questions, this research deemed 6 to 12 to be a productive focus group size (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Stewart, et al., 2007). This felt suitable for the exploratory, qualitative nature of the research; however, one of the key aims of my project was to try and understand as far as possible the experience of the wider A-Level student population, rather than specific subsets of it (e.g. the experience of A-Level Psychology students), which, dependent on recruitment approaches taken, could be unintentionally affected if number of participants was the only consideration. It was important, therefore, when considering recruitment approaches, to acknowledge that participant recruitment is potentially one of the most vulnerable and unpredictable aspects of the research process both in initial interest and opportunity for drop-out (Cohen, et al., 2011). I also did not want to exert any undue influence or power relationships to coerce participants to create diversity which paradoxically undermines the process ethically. It was therefore important to consider processes that could be implemented which gave more potential opportunity,

although no guarantee, for recruiting participants that were representative of the student cohort in a range of measures, e.g. gender, ethnicity, diversity of A-Level subjects being studied – all significant when considering research validity (Cohen, et al., 2011). The main step taken was the decision to send an open invite to all first year A-Level students outlining the focus and aims of the research and asking for volunteers to take part in focus group discussions (Appendix 1).

Whilst one of my central values throughout this research has been foregrounding a voice not frequently found in existing literature - A-Level students - I proposed at quite an early stage of the research project to have a second sample set: A-Level teachers. I felt it was important to incorporate the duality of voices on the topic of A-Level student progress, interested by the view that teaching and learning is "all about relationships and experiences" (Farrell, 2020, p. 1). Reflexivity at this point was essential as I scrutinised whether it was my own biases and assumptions about the significance of teaching staff that were favouring their inclusion, and whether the incorporation of anyone other than A-Level students was deviating from allowing "full and specific expression" of their "definition of the situation" (Merton and Kendall, 1946, p.545, as cited in Kelly, 2010, p.309), one of the dominant reasons I had chosen my explorative qualitative research design.

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, A-Level teachers emerged repeatedly thematically, even at the question-testing pilot focus group, and echoed the view from the literature that through purposive sampling the inclusion of specific groups of people can elicit different, important views about the ideas and issues in focus (Campbell, et al., 2020). This further resonated with the phenomenological approach described by Sohn et al (2017) which helped shape my research methodology – in particular their identification of "Others" (Sohn, et al., 2017, p. 127) as one of 4 key "existential grounds" of "human experience" (Sohn, et al., 2017, p. 126). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's philosophical perspective that "my own and other people's [paths] intersect and engage each other like gears" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p.xx, cited in Sohn, et al., 2017, p. 127), and that we spend our lives in "knots" and networks of relationships, Sohn et al (2017) stress the importance in their phenomenological research approach of giving "careful attention to other people who appear in participant narratives of lived experience" (Sohn, et al., 2017,

p. 127). The decision was therefore to include a sample of A-Level teachers. This decision also served as an additional 'bracketing' opportunity: by considering the viewpoints of other A-Level staff, it allowed me to give fair consideration to alternative interpretations (Elo, et al., 2014) that might differ or resonate with those from my own professional practice, or illuminate assumptions, preconceptions and interpretations that might otherwise go unquestioned in relation to my positionality. The same approach taken with students was therefore applied to recruiting the staff sample, as representativeness of the staff cohort was also important not only for range of experiences but also validity. All A-Level staff were therefore sent the open invite outlining the focus and aims of the research and asking for volunteers to take part in focus group discussions.

3.6.3 Data Collection – Process, Positionality and Ethics

The decision to open invitations to all first year A-Level students, and all A-Level staff, was made not only as a mechanism towards strengthening representativeness of the sample in relation to the wider population, but also as a result of steps taken toward 'deconstructing' my place in my workplace and research-site structure, with a view to taking a reflexive position with regards to issues of relationships, power and trust (Appleby, 2013). Cited as "the answer" to many challenges researchers face when undertaking research in their workplace (Appleby, 2013, p. 18), reflexivity and taking a stance of "subjective objectivity" (Donsbach & Klett, 1993, p. 53), is key to addressing the potential ethical and positionality issues a researcher who is both "insider and outsider" (Appleby, 2013, p. 18) might face during the course of their research, and particularly during the data collection stages. Humphrey (2007) advocates that researchers should recognise and "activate" the "hyphen" of insider-outsider research (2007, p. 11). By being reflexive, the researcher can address some ethical dilemmas, applying an "ethic of care" (Costley and Gibbs, 2006; Noddings, 1984, cited in Appleby, 2013, p. 19) by reflecting on how the research might affect research participants, and recognising that researcher-participant relationships can be "complex" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 90) and give rise to issues of power and trust that must be factored in to the research design. As a result of looking with a critical and questioning eye at their own workplace, researchers are put in a position of power over participants (Appleby, 2013) – in my case

this position of power was both as a result of being the person conducting this research, but also as a result of my professional position in the institution.

Whilst I had no direct teaching responsibility for any of the A-Level students, my role as a manager had to be considered for its perceived status. Similarly, it is also essential to acknowledge that I did have direct line-management responsibility for staff who volunteered to take part in the research. These factors were kept at the forefront throughout the research design, recruitment, analysis and findings stages of the research, and steps were taken to mitigate the potentially negative implications of these relationships. As Appleby (2013) outlines, power can bring with it influence and persuasion of participants; however, it is important to recognise that this may not be of a deliberate, coercive nature, but rather arising out of a level of trust, built over time as a result of working relationships and shared experiences between colleagues (Appleby, 2013). There are potential positives of these established relationships, for example, volunteering for participation, the possibility that participants might feel more able to share information in greater depth (Appleby, 2013); however, it was also essential that I reflected constantly on these factors when undertaking recruitment, data collection and analysis, ensuring that the research was undertaken ethically, and that participants were fully aware of their independent rights as research participants, regardless of my professional positionality, informed by BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018), which states that research should “maximise benefit and minimise harm” (p. 4).

Ethical guidelines stress the importance of taking an ‘informed consent’ approach in research, ensuring that those being researched know they are being researched, and what the nature of the research is (Silverman, 2014). As outlined in the previous section, an open invitation was sent electronically to all first year A-Level students and A-Level staff, including details of the research, its focus, and an outline of the commitment that would be asked of participants were they interested in volunteering. Deliberate actions were taken at this stage to mitigate potential issues of power linked to my professional role by making my researcher role explicit (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018) – all information contextualized me in my researcher role, as a UCLAN

doctorate student and researcher, with attempts to separate as far as possible from identity markers linked to my workplace and communication channels usually utilised in my professional role (e.g. e-mail address, job titles). Similarly, I was mindful that it was important to acknowledge that obtaining “true consent, free from pressure or influence” (Leeds Beckett University, 2014, p. 3) whilst impossible to guarantee, should underpin approaches taken, particularly for practitioner researchers where pre-existing relationships are often the channel through which participation is obtained (Leeds Beckett University, 2014).

As part of the recruitment design it was therefore essential to build in: opportunities for potential volunteers to seek clarification of anything that might inform their decision (e.g. pre-focus group briefing, researcher contact details for questions); the space and time for potential volunteer thinking and decision-making (Leeds Beckett University, 2014); as well as clear participant informed consent mechanisms, including thorough detail of the voluntary nature of its participation and that withdrawal from participation was available at any time, with no required reason or consequence (see Appendix 1-3). These were also verbally reiterated at the start and end of each focus group to ensure that participants were given the option to review and reflect on their participation status and rights at every stage of the process.

Whilst issues of pressure or influence have so far been related to power it was also important to consider and address other factors that might pressure or influence potential participants, for example, time/commitment and anonymity and confidentiality. Researchers should be mindful of the effort and time that participation can demand of volunteers, and consider the workloads and lives of participants (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). As well as outlining in advance the anticipated commitment if participating, it was also important that steps were taken to minimise logistics that might bring tension, concern or that might act as a deterrent from participating at all e.g. avoiding scheduling at times that would clash with timetabled study activity, or offering multiple focus group times to allow participants to select a time.

Similarly, anonymity and confidentiality is critical in ensuring educational research is being conducted with “an ethic of respect” and “trust” (British Educational Research Association

[BERA], 2018, p. 5), an area in which “explicit tensions” can be introduced or exacerbated particularly in practitioner research as a result of the researcher’s “dual role” (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018, p. 13). Cohen, et al. (2011) outline that there are challenges around preserving anonymity and confidentiality, and that there is “no absolute guarantee” (p. 91); in relation to this study, this is particularly relevant as a result of the small-scale ‘face-to-face’ nature of the multi-participant focus groups used, the purposive sampling approach taken, and the practitioner-researcher context of location/institution. Cohen, et al. (2011) also state, however, it is possible for researchers to still go “a long way down” the “path” (p. 91) of anonymity and confidentiality, and that the researcher’s position should be outlined clearly to participants (Cohen, et al., 2011). In this study it was therefore made explicit throughout the recruitment stage, and reiterated verbally at the start and end of each focus group that names and other identifying markers (e.g. in this study, where reference to an A-Level subject taught would easily identify the staff participant) would be disassociated from responses in the transcribing, coding, findings and write-up stages (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), and that recordings and collected data would be treated in accordance with data protection, stored securely, with password-protected restricted access for the researcher only.

3.6.4 Data Collection – Undertaking Focus Groups

It is important to note at this point that as the participant recruitment and data collection stage was about to take place, there was a significant contextual event that has been factored into this discussion: the COVID-19 pandemic. As I scheduled to roll out the recruitment invitations, the UK education system entered what has been described as a “swift and dramatic” lockdown (Sutcliffe & Noble, 2022, p. 1), where all education moved to remote, online learning, and where unprecedented changes were made to A-Level qualifications: external exams were cancelled and replaced by calculated/teacher assessed grades in the 2020 and 2021 academic series (Department for Education, 2020b; Department for Education, 2021b). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted therefore in the “first cohort of students in England to have grades awarded rather than being assessed through exams” (Bhopal & Myers, 2023, p. 143), who experienced a significant amount of their A-Level education taking place remotely, online, and where assessment

requirements underwent adaptation during the course of their study. It would be remiss of this study not to acknowledge and analyse its processes, data, and findings through a lens which recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic “disrupted virtually all aspects of human life”, breaking “rhythms and routines” and shattering “patterns and norms” (Zhao, 2020, p. 29); subsequently, there was a logistical impact for this study at the data collection section: recruitment and data collection, due to UK lockdown rules, would need to take place remotely and online. Just as “virtually all schools” were “paused” (Zhao, 2020, p. 30), so too was this study – a decision made in order to review proposed data collection methods and processes in light of these changes.

3.6.5 Virtual Focus Groups

It was important as part of my reflective journey to question whether virtual focus groups brought any different features or challenges when compared to in-person/face-to-face groups, rather that assuming that it was simply a location/format change that was taking place. Whilst in-person focus groups are not without their challenges (e.g. group dynamics, drop-out potential), Dos Santos Marques et al (2021) identify that there are technical, logistical and quality factors specific to, or enhanced by, the nature of virtual focus groups that must be considered: participant familiarity with online platforms used to conduct the virtual focus group; technical faults or participant skill level with technology; access to technology for participants; group dynamics, including researcher-participant dynamics, and associated ‘online etiquette’. Having reviewed articles by Dos Santos Marques et al (2021) and Johnson and Odhner (2021) and their recommendations for running virtual focus groups, it was also interesting to consider the view that the “virtual format was effective and offered advantages over in-person groups” (Johnson & Odhner, 2021, p. 258). For example, the online format arguably has benefits in terms of lower “participation burden” for volunteers (Johnson & Odhner, 2021, p. 258), and studies found that participants were more relaxed in their own homes – resulting in “deeper content and substance” (Dos Santos Marques, et al., 2021, p. 920). Similarly, whilst it was acknowledged that group discussions can be challenging in a remote setting (Johnson & Odhner, 2021), these are challenges that are also faced in in-person focus groups; ultimately, virtual focus groups when compared to in-person focus groups, were found by

existing literature to generate “similar themes and quality of data” (Dos Santos Marques, et al., 2021, p. 920). In both it is a case of ensuring steps have been taken by the researcher to carefully manage the process, set the context, drive discussion, engage participants, encourage an interactive conversation, and create a tone and environment where participants “feel comfortable and involved” (Dos Santos Marques, et al., 2021, p. 920).

To address some of the issues associated with virtual focus groups I decided to pause data recruitment and collection until the transition to online learning that was required as a result of COVID-19 lockdown had been allowed to embed both for students and staff. I then chose to use the same virtual platform that was being used for day-to-day teaching and learning to aid technical familiarity, as well as draw upon what had then become more established practices for staff, students and myself, e.g. undertaking group interaction and discussion online. I also reviewed the approaches identified in the literature as important to the effective running of in-person focus groups; in many cases these were still relevant, but occasionally required some enhancement to take into account the online format. For example, focus groups had been chosen precisely because of their focus on discovering the “attitudes, beliefs, concerns, behaviors, and preferences of […] particular groups of people” (Weare, 2013, cited in Johnson & Odhner, 2021, p. 258), providing an opportunity for open-ended discussion” where “participants can describe their thoughts in their own words, allowing us to collect opinions and experiences that we may not anticipate” (Johnson & Odhner, 2021, p. 258).

To facilitate this, a set of core open questions had been designed, to be explored through follow-up questions depending on participants’ responses (Johnson & Odhner, 2021). In both the in-person and virtual focus groups, these would need to be managed in such a way that preserved the valued flexibility and spontaneity of focus groups, structured to encourage participants to build on the responses of others, and encourage participation from all members of the group (Johnson & Odhner, 2021). To aid discussion, the core questions were visually displayed for participants to refer back to and follow-up questions were designed not only to explore in more detail a participant’s response, but also to engage and facilitate discussion/participants building on others’ responses, as well as

stay attuned to physical and non-verbal cues participants displayed, e.g. “Has anyone else had a similar experience?” or “I see you shaking your head. Do you have a different perspective?” (Johnson & Odhner, 2021, p. 260).

Advice from Johnson and Odhner (2021) regarding online ‘etiquette’ was factored into my online focus group design to enhance these considerations, e.g. incorporating the use of the ‘raised hand’ feature to allow for smooth dialogue and group dynamic; however, others also had to be considered in relation to participant comfort and context, for example, participants were encouraged to have cameras on during online focus groups, but it was recognised that not all participants might feel comfortable, be in a location where this was conducive, or in some instances, as was highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, have easy access to this technology at all times. Drawing on the work of Johnson and Odhner (2021) it was therefore this study’s goal to have every participant respond to every question verbally, and so focused primarily on building in clear ‘warm-up’ time at the start of each focus group, as well as preparing a series of follow-up and prompt questions such as, “We haven’t heard from [name] yet on this question. Do you have something to add?” (Johnson & Odhner, 2021, p. 259).

With these approaches established, the invitation to participate was distributed to all first year A-Level students and A-Level staff. As previously discussed, this study aimed to have a sample of 8-12 first year A-Level students and 8-12 A-Level staff. The first round of recruitment saw 4 A-Level students express interest, resulting in 3 attending an hour-long online focus group. The first round of recruitment for staff saw 8 staff express interest, all then choosing to attend one of two focus groups that had been offered to accommodate schedules. This resulted in two hour-long online focus groups, one with 3 A-Level staff in attendance, the second with 5 A-Level staff in attendance. The A-Level student number and representativeness was deemed too low and so, following the COVID-19 pandemic and return to full time face-to-face education and ‘traditional’ A-Level exams, a second round of recruitment was undertaken. This resulted in a further 7 first year A-Level students participating in an in-person focus group, bringing the total student sample to 10. As well as an increase in number, this also brought a wider representativeness of the A-Level student body in terms of A-Level subject studied, as well as other demographic

contexts. This was also satisfied in the A-Level staff sample, which had been reviewed against similar demographic contexts, as well as range of A-Level subjects taught, and factors such as range of teaching experience, all of which I had established as important to answer this study's research questions.

CHAPTER 4 - DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Data Analysis - Introduction

As Silverman (2014) observes, undertaking qualitative data analysis can feel “like exploring a new territory without an easy-to-read map”, especially when compared with what seems to be a “settled consensus” about good quantitative data analysis (p. 110). Instead there are a host of “competing approaches” (Silverman, 2014, p. 110) and multiple ways of analysing, and multiple possible interpretations of, qualitative data – which is “their glory and their headache!” (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 537). Rather than allowing this to become overwhelming, it is therefore important to recognize that there is no one correct way to undertake qualitative data analysis; rather a researcher should abide by “fitness for purpose” (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 537), and see data collection/analysis as the next stage in their conceptual framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), reflecting and extending the epistemological and methodological decisions which underpin the research.

Thus, data analysis is a series of choices made by the researcher about how they will interact with the collected data (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), and what the researcher will “do with those data” and how they will “conceptualize data, frame data theoretically” and “develop arguments based on” what they “see in and discern from” collected data sets (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 111). It is therefore important to be clear on the research purpose, as this not only influences the nature of the analysis undertaken on the data, but also how it is written up (Cohen, et al., 2011). As this study’s research question focuses on the experiences of first year A-Level students and A-Level teachers, and takes an exploratory, qualitative and interpretive stance heavily influenced by phenomenology, it was therefore essential that the data analysis approach facilitated its exploratory nature and placed an emphasis on keeping and presenting “the flavour of the original data” which stayed, where possible, “faithful to the exact words used” (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 539).

Qualitative analysis has been described as “cutting up data in order to put it together again in a manner that seems relevant and meaningful” (Harding, 2013, p. 4), however,

this does not mean the researcher has complete latitude in this process; instead analysis approaches taken must consider trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity, criticality and validity against which qualitative research will be judged (Kelly, 2010; Harding, 2013; Nowell, et al., 2017), and must possess a highly methodical, consistent and reliable approach (Watts, 2014), where the researcher keeps at the forefront of their awareness the choices made when analysing data and considers the implications of these choices (Harding, 2013). The following section subsequently outlines the approaches taken when organizing, interpreting and analysing data collected, as well as exploring how I applied thematic analysis to identify themes in data collected from focus groups; however, one of the most important developments in my research journey was ensuring that data analysis activity did not simply become "a repetitive mechanical task" but rather "a deeply reflexive process" (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). As Watts (2014) observes, whilst methodical systems of analysis are important, it is the contributions that the analyst makes that are often of "greater significance than the exact method employed" (p. 5), as the researcher is "the most important instrument" but often "the instrument that most needs sharpening" in qualitative research (p. 2). The following section therefore also charts the reflexive journey taken as I aimed to be self-critical (Kelly, 2010), and stay conscious of, and mitigate, analysis, findings and writing-up being shaped by my own context, preconceptions and interpretations.

As well as outlining how my data analysis design aimed to establish a "systematic and rigorous method" akin to "detective work" (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77), it also acknowledges one of the most challenging aspects of undertaking this study: the struggle to "find the story" (Mallette & Saldana, 2019, p. 1087) in the data, and hone the "qualitative analytic attitude" (Rapley, 2011, p. 274, cited in Silverman, 2014, p. 115) and research skills required to avoid a "safety-first" approach to analysis (Watts, 2014, p. 2) which would result in "bland description" (Watts, 2014, p. 2), rather than the "craftsmanship" or "art" that qualitative research has the potential for (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77).

4.2 Data Analysis Method

When exploring qualitative analysis, a common trend became quickly apparent: that this research is often viewed as complex, organic, flexible but also messy (Lester, et al., 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Rapley (2011, p.274, cited in Silverman, 2014, p.115) states that qualitative data analysis cannot be summed up by a "neat tag" or a "list of specific steps or procedures that have been undertaken", and instead it is best viewed as an iterative, non-linear process (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Cohen, et al., 2011; Lester, et al., 2020), where the analysis process is "loop-like" (Berkowitz, 1997, cited in Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77), and involves the researcher going back-and-forth, revisiting data in rounds or phases that overlap (Cohen, et al., 2011; Lester, et al., 2020). That is not to say that this messiness should be allowed to unfold in a chaotic way; in fact, the literature in this field shares the view that it is important that the researcher embraces this complexity and messiness, but with a methodical, systematic approach, as imposing a structure "creates a transparent process for both the qualitative researcher and (ultimately) the reader of a given research report" (Lester, et al., 2020, p. 98).

Another important learning from my research into qualitative analysis was understanding that data analysis and the development of theory should have a similar dynamic, interactive relationship, in what Nakkula and Ravitch (1998, cited in Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p.136) call a "dialectic of mutual influence": as the researcher revisits the data, asks additional questions, unearths new connections, leading to more complex formulations and a deepening understanding of the collected material (Berkowitz, 1997, cited in Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Similarly, my understanding of the 'timeline' of data analysis was also challenged by my reading, as I realized that not only does qualitative data 'merge' the analysis and interpretation process, but also the data collection and data analysis process (Cohen, et al., 2011). Consequently, rather than seeing the undertaking, recording and transcribing of focus group data as a "mechanical act" where "recorded words are turned into printed words" and fundamentally transactional in nature (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 128), a significant shift in my approach as a researcher came when I recognized that these elements are a "subjective and engaged one", resulting in "an

artifact" possessing "layers of interpretation", and serving "not as preparation for data analysis but data analysis itself" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, pp. 128-129).

My research also brought to the forefront the importance of recognizing that these stages also brought with them issues of subjectivity – not only in terms of any interpretation/themes identified, but also in terms of choices made in the transcription process. As Lester et al. (2020) identify, there are several types of transcripts that can be produced, linked to the researcher's methodology and purpose, and where choices are made about what level of detail to include. As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, cited in Harding, 2013, p. 50) note, these decisions, such as whether to include or exclude utterances such as 'um', subsequently impact the manner of 'knowledge' presentation in the transcript, and so it is essential that there is a consistent and transparent approach taken at each stage of the data analysis process. With this in mind I sought what Braun and Clarke (2022) refer to as a "map and compass" to help guide on the "adventure" or "journey of exploration and discovery, down unfamiliar and perhaps rarely used pathways" (p. xxvii); rather than a "fully-fledged travel itinerary" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. xxvii).

It was important, however, to preserve in my data analysis an approach that would embrace the "fluidity" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. xxvii) of qualitative data, facilitating an inductive approach that promoted researcher reflexivity and "self-examination of how research findings were produced and, particularly, the role of the researcher(s) in their construction" (Heaton, 2004, p.104, cited in Harding, 2013, p. 6). Stemming from an experience I had as I listened to the focus group audio recordings for the first time, where a phrase, image or "something" seemed to "reach out from the inert corpus" of data to "exert a kind of fascination" (MacLure, 2013, p. 228) and highlighted "the entangled relation of data-and-researcher" (MacLure, 2013, p. 228), I made the deliberate decision to manually transcribe and code data myself, rather than utilizing an external service or transcription or coding software that would have automated the process. This decision was fuelled by a desire to respect the "capacity for wonder that resides and radiates in data" (MacLure, 2013, p. 228), and the importance of being "attentive and open to surprise" (MacLure, 2013, p. 231), an experience that using software could have removed

from the researcher journey. Instead, by manually transcribing and coding data myself, I was better placed to “recognize the invitation” (MacLure, 2013, p. 231) to engage and experiment with the “order and disorder” (MacLure, 2013, p. 229) of data, so as to “animate further thought” (MacLure, 2013, p. 228), spark new connections and “see where that takes us” (MacLure, 2013, p. 231). Identifying that an important aspect that influenced this exploratory, qualitative study was the “understanding, interpretation and explication of meaning” (Watts, 2014, p. 4) from the participants’ perspectives, where it is the “participants’ views about the subject-matter”, and “their words and their viewpoints” that “must take priority” (Watts, 2014, p. 4), a data analysis method empathetic to this was crucial. Consequently, thematic analysis, described as a method with “an interest in patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4), was used in this study.

4.3 Thematic Analysis – Finding a Framework

As Braun and Clarke (2022) observe, although thematic analysis is presented often as a singular, homogenous method, there are in fact a range of different varieties and processes. Whilst they share the aforementioned “interest in patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4), there is diversity in implementation, therefore it is important to identify that this study has utilized what Braun and Clarke (2022) term reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA) (p. 5), which emphasizes the “subjective, situated, aware and questioning” (p. 5) role of the researcher, and where thematic analysis is a method where the researcher develops, analyses and interprets patterns from the collected qualitative dataset, via a systematic process of coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This study utilises Braun and Clarke’s (2022, p. 6) six-phase analytic process for data analysis:

- Dataset familiarization
- Data coding
- Initial theme generation
- Theme development and review

- Theme refining, defining and naming
- Writing up

Braun and Clarke (2022) reiterate the importance of seeing these as phases rather than steps, guidelines that are not “sharply delineated”, “linear” or “unidirectional” (p. 34); they stress the importance of developing a “qualitative sensibility” (p. 7), and, importantly and a source of some relief to this researcher, acknowledge that this type of analysis can be “riddled with emotional highs and lows, delights and frustrations” (p. 34). One of the biggest developments for me as a researcher was “getting comfortable with subjectivity and uncertainty” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 7); subsequently, the decision to undertake reflexive thematic analysis rather than other types of qualitative analysis was that it offers considerable flexibility, but also because it encourages “a desire for understanding that is about nuance, complexity and even contradiction, rather than finding a nice tidy explanation” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 7). The following sections outline the data analysis process implemented in this research in order to provide a transparent and reasoned account of how data has been analysed and resultant findings. It is important to make explicit that this research does not claim to have a “the truth is in there” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 40) approach to data and findings, and instead ultimately represents one possible interpretation of data “open to manifold interpretations of lived experience” (Ho, et al., 2017, p. 1757).

For clarity across the following sections, as participants have been anonymised through the use of tags to replace names, the below table identifies participant tags linked to whether they are student or staff participants:

S1– S10	First-year A-Level students
T1 – T8	Staff who teach or have taught first-year A-Level students

Table 4-1 - Table of participant tags linked to student and staff participants

4.3.1 Dataset Familiarization

The first stage of data analysis was dataset familiarization. Whilst Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase reflective thematic analysis process has been the overarching framework used in this research, it has also been informed by other concepts - such as:

- the Listening Guide (Woodcock, 2016), which calls for data to be 'listened to' multiple discrete times, honouring the "researcher-researched" relationship in a method that respects "the voices and experiences of the human beings in their studies" (Woodcock, 2016, p. 2)
- Watts' (2014) summary of researcher 'closeness' and 'distance' to the data (p. 3), and has included as part of the data analysis process, the active adoption of both a 'first-person' ('closeness') and 'third-person' ('distance') analytical perspective (Watts, 2014, p. 4)
- Gibson and Brown's (2009) three general aims of thematic analysis: examining commonalities from across a data set; examining differences such as individual cases or contrasts in the data set; examining relationships and how different parts of the analysis "fit together and contribute to an understanding of different issues and themes" (Harding, 2013, p. 5).

These concepts have informed different stages of the data analysis, findings and discussion sections to various degrees; however, it is pertinent to introduce them here as they significantly shaped the analysis from the outset of the familiarization.

As noted previously, the familiarization phase began as part of the transcription process, as transcribing the data enabled me to engage deeply with the content of the dataset and become familiar with the participants' perspectives, as well as to take note of my initial ideas or reactions to the data (Lester, et al., 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022). As observed in the literature, there are different kinds of transcripts, linked to the methodology and purpose of the study, and the researcher has important decisions to make (Davidson, 2009; Harding, 2013; Lester, et al., 2020) about what is included and excluded in the transcript. As this research is exploring the first-hand, lived experiences of the participants, it was important that the transcripts captured verbatim the words used by the participants, but also influenced the decision to include the consistent transcription of the following prosodic and paralinguistic features, non-verbal utterances and fillers: overlaps,

pauses/silences, laughter and utterances such as “um” and “mmm”. As Davidson (2009) outlines, the transcription process should be embraced as a selective one, but it is important that this selectivity is acknowledged and explanation given. The decision to include the above features arose from two methodological considerations (Davidson, 2009), the first linked to this study’s leaning towards hermeneutic phenomenology, that prioritises the participants’ own words and manner of expressing themselves. For example, as can be seen in the extract below, both during the focus group and the transcription process, this response stood out to me due to its combination of “humbling” and laughter:

> S9: “I’ve changed that by starting doing exam questions um cos I kind of refrained from doing them because they’re very humbling [laughs].”
>
> *Extract from Student Focus Group 2*

At the time it felt as though to omit the laughter was to remove something of potential interest in the participant’s expression, and so all the focus groups were reviewed to identify similar features, resulting in the aforementioned list. The second consideration was linked to the relationship between Gibson and Brown’s (2009) three aims of thematic analysis and the choice of focus groups as data collection method, and criticism in the literature that distinctive features of focus groups are often neglected (Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2009), namely, the markers of group discussion, group dynamics and participant interaction, as well as points of agreement, disagreement, elaboration or alternative perspectives. As can be seen in the extracts below, the inclusion of utterances and overlaps give visibility to these factors, and is a step towards identifying commonalities but also that voices or perspectives are not inadvertently ‘silenced’ or missed as a result of transcription choices:

> S1: “Mmm I’m not too sure because one time in…”
>
> *Extract from Student Focus Group 1*

> T1: “I’ve got to say the school that they came from maybe and their expectations of education based on um their school the reputation of their school and how they felt about school.
> T2: Mmm [Overlapping].
> T3: Mmm [Overlapping].” *Extract from Staff Focus Group 1*

As well as serving a content purpose, this approach to transcription also helped me to feel I was truly beginning to 'immerse' myself in the data and participants' perspectives – but also start to critically, and reflectively, engage with the data: key concepts in Braun and Clarke's familiarization phase (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Familiarization is defined by Braun and Clarke (2022) as the process of immersing yourself in active, deep engagement with the data by reading and re-reading the data (or listening and re-listening), and identifying "interesting or intriguing elements" along with "possible patternings" from across the dataset (p. 43) – aiming for "closeness and familiarity (immersion) and distance (critical engagement)" (p. 43). To help with what was initially quite a challenging balance, I repeatedly read and listened to the focus group transcripts using questions suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022) to 'practice' what they describe as "analytic sensibility" (p. 44), asking questions such as "How does the person make sense of whatever it is they are discussing?" and " Why might they be making sense of things in this way (and not in another way)?" encouraged me to take the more "inquiring and interpretive" stance (p. 44) required of qualitative research. Similarly, reading the data and making notes of my responses when asking questions such as "Why might I be reacting to the data in this way?", "What ideas does my interpretation rely on?", and "What different ways could I make sense of the data?" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 44) was an important part of my reflexive bracketing process. Recognising that whilst researchers naturally approach their research with pre-conceived ideas (Harding, 2013), this study was grounded in an inductive approach therefore it was important to use methods that encouraged me to move from the particular to the general, starting with what emerges from the data, rather than a priori knowledge and research.

The final recommendation that Braun and Clarke (2022) make in the familiarization stage and which was followed in this study, was the process of note-taking. My approach was to combine handwritten notes, drawings that made potential connections or ideas very visual, and colour-coded post-it notes around the printed data set; this served as a means of reflecting content, but also potential patterns, as well my responses and questions from across the whole dataset so that I was "heading into coding with an already-engaged, critically questioning mindset" (p. 47).

4.3.2 Data Coding

Where familiarization is described as “getting a lay of the land”, coding is the shift “into a systematic mode” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 49). As Watts (2014) identifies, findings from qualitative analysis of any kind are “an intellectual construction or interpretation” (Watts, 2014, p. 3) based on the questioning approach by the researcher and it is therefore important to take a systematic, thorough approach to coding (Watts, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2022). This study therefore took what Watts (2014) describes as a “concrete, nontechnical and straightforward approach” to coding that moves from the descriptive to the interpretive by using the “what/how” method (Watts, 2014, p. 5) combined with features taken from the Listening Guide approach to data analysis (Woodcock, 2016). Both of these place emphasis on an empathetic approach to data analysis, prioritizing the participants’ viewpoints and words rather than the researcher’s, complementing Heidegger’s phenomenological view that “dwelling in the language” (Ho, et al., 2017, p. 1757) is important to disclosing “the manifold meanings” (Ho, et al., 2017, p. 1759) of human experience.

Both processes start with the researcher focusing more on the descriptive ‘what’ that emerges from reading the participants’ accounts in the dataset – what the Listening Guide calls “listening for the plot” (Woodcock, 2016, p. 3), and guided by asking “What is the participant talking about at this point in the data/transcript?” (Watts, 2014, p. 6). I applied this approach through multiple readings of the transcripts, producing an initial list of descriptive codes from across the dataset with careful attention being paid to “emotional resonance; repeated words, phrases, and images; information and comments that jump out at the researcher; contradictions; omissions; and revisions” (Woodcock, 2016, p. 3) which could signal emerging themes, but also “what is meaningful to the informant” (Woodcock, 2016, p. 3), an underpinning priority for this research’s exploratory qualitative, stance.

Following this was the ‘how’ element of Watts’ coding system, combined with the Listening Guide’s ‘”listening for the I” (Gilligan & Eddy, 2021, p. 142), both of which further the researcher’s adoption of the “first-person perspective” (Watts, 2014, p. 7); as

described by the Listening Guide, this approach places all “concentration on the informant’s voice of the self” (Woodcock, 2016, p. 4) by consistently asking the question “How is the participant understanding or constructing what they are talking about at this point in the data/transcript?” (Watts, 2014, p. 6), and ensuring particular attention is paid to patterns, but also “variable or distinctive answers” (Watts, 2014, p. 6). Again, this was conducive to this research’s explorative qualitative stance, particularly when drawing on the use of ‘as-structures’ which are drawn from the work of Heidegger. An ‘as-structure’ provides a way of framing a concept so as to interpret it in relation to an existing understanding and thus “make explicit the perceived nature of the thing being understood” (Watts, 2014, p. 6).

The table below gives an example of a descriptive code and related ‘as-structures’ emerging from my data analysis; as can be seen, analysing and presenting the data in this way “constitutes a first act of interpretation” (Watts, 2014, p. 6), but also encourages the researcher to explore the phenomenon as experienced and communicated by the participants, and attempt to “put aside” any “personal assumptions and perspectives” (Watts, 2014, p. 7).

Code: Parents	As Stuctures
the fundamental elements of support are your parental network	…as motivators …as collaborators …as support network
Like your parents have like a certain view of what you should get	…as external judges ...as having expectations

Table 4-2 - Example of 'as structures' derived from thematic analysis

It was useful throughout this stage to constantly revisit as an underpinning principle Watts’ (2014) observation, based on Heidegger’s work, that interpretation, rather than “speculation or fabrication”, is the “cultivation of the possibilities inherent in the participant’s own understanding” through stringent ‘unpacking’ and microscopic scrutiny

of the dataset (p. 8). Another layer of coding implemented to enhance this scrutiny was to incorporate the Listening Guide's (Woodcock, 2016) elaboration on 'listening for the I' and further stage of "listening for contrapuntal voices" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2021, p. 142) – as well as attending to how the participant was understanding and constructing what they were talking about, this involved analysing the dataset and exploring "the ways in which an informant speaks of" themselves "in relation to others, such as 'you' or 'they'" (Woodcock, 2016, p. 5) but also "the various ways in which informants speak of relationships in their lives" (Woodcock, 2016, p. 6). Again, this was done through a systematic reading of transcripts and the production of 'as structures' linked to statements containing relevant pronouns or phrases denoting relationships, e.g. "I", "me", "we", "our", "they", in order to explore how participants spoke about their experiences in relation to themselves and others. As illustrated in Table 4.3 below, this iterative approach facilitated a more nuanced consideration of topics, which shaped the emerging themes of the study:

Code: Parents	As Structures	Emerging Themes
the fundamental elements of support are your parental network	…as motivators …as collaborators …as support network	*Companions in the Quest*
Like your parents have like a certain view of what you should get	…as external judges ...as having expectations	*New Terrain: Expectations and Perceptions*

Table 4-3 - Example of how themes emerged from 'as structures'

Whilst presented here sequentially, it is important to note that coding was undertaken in an iterative manner – the dataset was read comprehensively and repeatedly at each stage as I was conscious not to close off lines of exploration too early, and that previously analysed data needed to be revisited in light of any new codes or 'as structures' that emerged. Similarly, whilst I prioritized taking an inductive approach to data analysis, I did revisit my research question, aims and methodology at regular points to ensure I was

engaging in relevant “meaning-making” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 55), addressing my research question but not lapsing into “truth-seeking” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 55).

Ultimately, I aimed to take a coding approach which Braun and Clarke (2022) conclude is the process through which a researcher understands meaning in their dataset in different ways than they had previously, and gains insights that address their research question, whilst allowing the “widest scope for theme development in subsequent phases” so as to avoid “analytic foreclosure” – a superficial level of engagement that does not “realise the full potential of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 54).

4.3.3 Theme Generation and Refining

Following the coding activity, I then moved on to theme generation and refining, building “alliances and networks” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 78) between codes identified and exploring potential areas where there is “similarity of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 79). This was undoubtedly the most challenging stage of the data analysis process as I initially generated a range of working themes but found myself repeatedly falling into the trap of trying to “capture everything” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 88), leading to a list-like, fragmented approach. What resulted was a list of topics rather than themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which I felt represented the content of the data set but not the ‘spirit’, and which led to me reviewing my approach and my findings so far.

Embracing the view that theme development is a way of telling a “particular story about the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 88) finally led to a realization that my initially generated themes were leaning more towards the ‘what’ in the “what/how” method (Watts, 2014, p. 5) used as part of the coding phase, rather than ‘bringing to life’ how participants had talked. Fearing this went against the exploratory and phenomenologically-influenced underpinning I had established for this research, I revisited Braun and Clarke’s (2022) advice and realized the ‘story’ about the data that I felt was missing from my initial theme generation was in fact just that: the story of their experience that was held in the participants’ responses.

Consequently, whilst this study has predominantly utilized reflexive thematic analysis to shape interpretations and themes from the data, I also found myself drawn to exploring elements of discourse analysis and narrative inquiry as a result of particular phrases used by participants, or how they framed their responses. Particularly influential was the view that narrative inquiry has an “epistemological assumption” that “human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures” (Sinclair Bell, 2002, p. 207), that individual stories “do not exist in a vacuum”, are “shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives” (Sinclair Bell, 2002, p. 208), and have an “inherently temporal thread” which rise “out of past happenings” and point “to future outcomes” (Sinclair Bell, 2002, p. 207). When revisiting the coded data through this discourse and narrative lens, it finally felt that the participants’ lived experience was emerging more authentically in the themes, and that I was exploring the data codes at both a semantic (explicitly expressed) and latent (implicit/conceptual) level (Braun & Clarke, 2022) compared to the initial theme development that had stayed at quite a surface state. This approach, combined with drawing a visual thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2022)(Figure 4.1), enabled me to establish a theme structure from which to tell the story that has emerged inductively from the data.

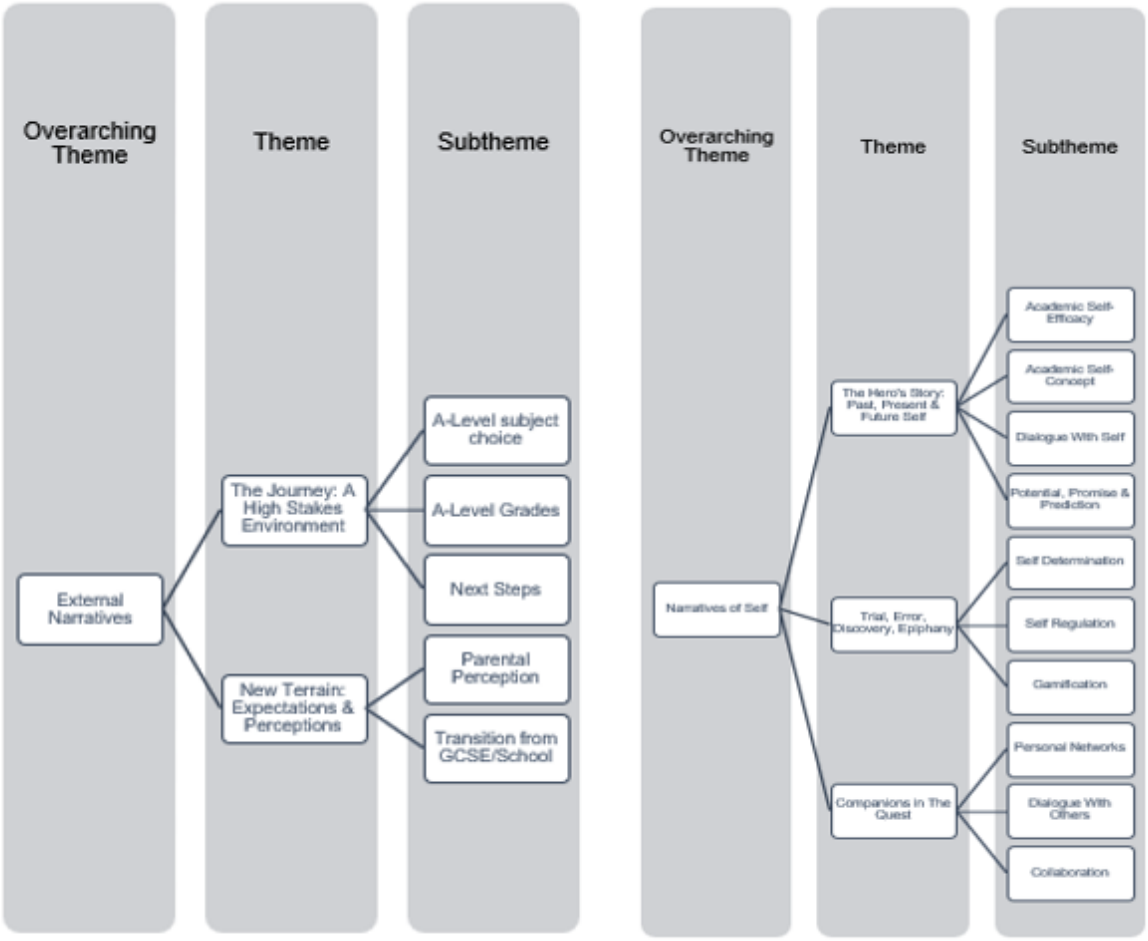

Figure 4-1 - Thematic Map

CHAPTER 5 - THEMATIC FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Thematic Findings & Discussion - Introduction

Chapter 4 outlines the approach to analysis taken. Chapter 5 now presents the interpretation and findings of that data, considered critically in relation to the aims of the study, extant literature, as well as identifying the contribution of this study to the field of research.

As Harding (2013) identifies, at each stage of the research design and implementation process, there is "no 'correct' way" (p. 176) of interpreting and presenting the findings, but a key consideration, and particularly relevant to this research's exploratory, qualitative design, is to try to represent the "views, ideas and experiences" (p. 176) of the participants. Subsequently, the findings of the data are evidenced via extracts from the focus groups, presented as transcribed and inclusive where relevant of prosodic and paralinguistic features, non-verbal utterances and fillers (overlaps, pauses/silences, laughter and utterances such as "um" and "mmm"), so as to foreground the voice of the participants; however, as "data do not speak for themselves", this is combined with my "analytic narrative" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 131) - my interpretation of the collected data. Conscious, however, that reflexivity is a crucial aspect of the findings phase, and so as not to present a one-dimensional analysis shaped dominantly by my own interpretations, this is then interspersed with connections to relevant literature and theory to situate the findings in existing research and theoretical debate (Harding, 2013).

It is important to reiterate here that this research does not come from a stance of "truth-questing" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 120), and that whilst potential gaps in the literature have been identified, the aim in this chapter is not to "show that [I] have found an empty cell in the spreadsheet of ultimate truth about the topic" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 120) and claim that this study fills it. Instead, this study, and this chapter in particular, uses Braun and Clarke's (2022) conceptualisation that this study contributes "something to a rich tapestry of understanding that we and others are collectively working on" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 120); inherent to qualitative research, and to the reflexive thematic

analysis methodology, is the fact that this study presents one possible “reading” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 148), influenced by my decisions and actions, and ultimately me as a researcher. The discussions in this and subsequent chapters therefore make explicit this meaning-making process, how the overarching themes, themes and sub-themes have been inductively reached through reflexive thematic analysis, are grounded in the participants’ language and intonation, and understood through existing research but also my own positionality as a practitioner-researcher. This chapter also presents how tenets from discourse analysis and narrative inquiry in the form of storytelling concepts and metaphor have informed this study’s conceptualisation of the lived experience of the participants central to this study’s research question.

5.2 Overarching Themes – Emerging Narratives

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the theme generation phase of this research was a challenging one, and rather than feeling iterative as intended (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Cohen, et al., 2011; Dangal & Joshi, 2020; Farrell, 2020; Lester, et al., 2020), felt cyclical or spiralling, and resulted in topics that felt too big, too narrow, or even worse, disconnected and unilluminating. Revisiting Braun and Clarke’s (2022) six-phase analytic process, I realised that in my initial attempts at the latter 3 phases (theme development and review; theme refining, defining and naming; writing up) I had inadvertently moved to a more ‘passive’ approach and that I needed to re-emphasise the “active, deliberate, and reflective” nature of my positionality - keep myself “visible” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 128) in the analytic process, and be “an active agent in the production of knowledge” (Trainor & Bundon, 2020, p.3, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 128).

I re-immersed myself in Braun and Clarke’s (2022) reflexive thematic analysis guide and identified that my challenge was arising from the fact that I had identified potential themes, in a way that could be considered “fully developed in their own right” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 128), but not yet in a way that told an “overall story”, where themes were woven together in such a way as to display and connect different strands (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 128). Reviewing the initially generated themes I acknowledged that there are “endless patterns we could focus on” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 198); reflexive thematic analysis,

indeed any qualitative analysis, is never ‘done’, and whilst the themes thus far selected were “in concert” or “anchored” to my research question, they were also to some extent “shackled” by certain aspects of it (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 198). Through these ‘shackles’ I was limiting the “scope” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 198) and losing a really important orientation of my research purpose: the lived experience of the participants, their perceptions and experiences of studying A-Levels.

Whilst Braun and Clarke (2022) identify that themes are the “core analytic concept” (p. 87) the researcher is aiming for in reflexive thematic analysis, interpretive depth and clarity can be aided by some additional structure. This study has used Braun and Clarke’s (2022) three levels - overarching themes, themes, and subthemes (Figure 4.1) – as a means of clarifying and organising initial themes, and identifying broader conceptual ideas that more closely ‘orientate’ the interpretation to an exploration of the lived experience of the participants, drawing on concepts that were more grounded in the participants’ phrasing and ways in which they reflect their social reality (Holley & Colyar, 2009).

This was a crucial stage in my journey as a reflexive researcher as I realised that trustworthiness and ethical soundness, whilst key components of the researcher’s responsibility (Holley & Colyar, 2009), also needed to extend to ensuring that my choices “position the text as an informed reflection of the participants’ reality” and are sensitive to “how individuals experience the world and the stories that result from those experiences” (Holley & Colyar, 2009, p. 680). As I revisited my theme work so far from this perspective, what stood out immediately was how frequently in my coding, note-taking and highlighting of the data were comments which I had linked in some way to storytelling and narrative, and yet which I hadn’t really captured in any of the initially generated themes. For example, the image below identifies an extract from my data analysis activity of one of the student focus group transcripts:

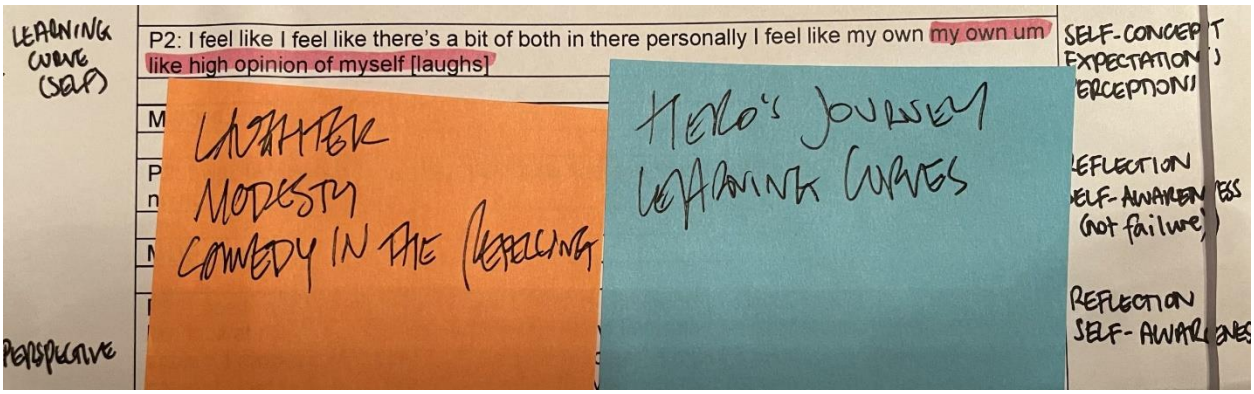

Figure 5-1 - Note-Making Example

Whilst some of the notes had made their way through into informing initial themes, e.g. 'self-concept' and 'learning curves', there were two notes that stood out that hadn't: 'comedy in the retelling' and 'hero's journey'. On reflection, I realised that I had attempted to reflexively but misguidedly 'bracket these out' as I feared they were drawing too much on what at the time I categorised into 'subject-specific' knowledge from my wider literature teaching background, and which I was worried I was imposing a priori onto the data. It was important at this point to stand back and question this. One of the deliberate choices I had made at transcription stage was to include certain features such as laughter as a means of not stripping the participants' responses of potential contextual 'flavour', potential meaning, and their experience; by bracketing out my notes on 'comedy in the retelling' and 'hero's journey', I was in danger of doing just that, as well as making myself less visible in the meaning-making by not considering things which had stood out prominently to me as I worked with the data.

What emerged from this reflection and a revisiting of all of the data was a more cohesive sense of themes that were 'woven together' into an 'overall story' that centred around narratives. This is conceptualised in the next section as a 'quest', drawing on Booker's (2004) work on plot, and Holley and Colyar's (2009) work on narrative and the construction of qualitative research, particularly their exploration of plot, character and focalisation as mechanisms through which researchers can understand and present findings to an audience. Within this 'quest narrative' emerged two overarching themes:

- External Narratives – how participants' experiences and perceptions of academic buoyancy whilst studying A-Levels were linked to external factors, expectations and perceptions
- Narratives of Self – how participants' experiences and perceptions of academic buoyancy whilst studying A-Levels were linked to their own actions, expectations and perceptions, and the dialogue they have with themselves and others.

From this, as detailed in the following sections, I contextualized the 'bigger picture' framework of the quest metaphor and recategorized and renamed themes so that they captured not only the focus of the theme, but also to try and give a sense of the *way* in which the participants had discussed their experience.

5.3 The Meta-Story: The Quest

As Yorke (2013) observes in *Into the Woods*, "storytelling has a shape" (p. xi), and is an "indispensable human preoccupation" (p. xviii). Booker (2004) argues that whilst human imagination on the face of it seems limitless, boundless, with infinite possibilities, it is clearly discernible that stories have underlying "continually recurring general shapes" (p. 19). These ideas were essential in the meaning making in this study, helping to conceptualise the experience of the participants through a metaphorical narrative framework within which individual themes were situated.

As aforementioned, whilst discrete themes had been identified and warranted individual exploration, there was an inherent interconnectedness that to ignore felt like I would lose a 'bigger picture' experience and perspective: the underlying 'recurring shapes' that formed the "nature of the road" (Booker, 2004, p. 19) of the participants' recounted journey. What resonated in particular during the data analysis stage was a sense that whilst there were clear 'topics' identified by participants as significant to the concept of academic buoyancy, they were expressed "not just as a fragmentary string of episodes and impressions" (Booker, 2004, p. 18), but rather with a sense of being integral parts of a 'complete' *story*, one which possessed recognisable narrative components.

This emerged from participants' direct phrasing and articulation of concepts, but also from what is reflexively acknowledged here as interpretation of a more latent nature, shaped by underlying patterns and ideas that emerged in my interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This resulted in the exploring and expressing of "complex concepts" (Steele, et al., 2022, p. 99) of the participant experience through the valuable tool of metaphor (Steele, et al., 2022) – in this case the metaphor of a quest narrative. As Steele et al. (2022) observe "connecting one familiar concept to another familiar one, resulting in the comparison between the two concepts" opened up "new possibilities and perspectives" (p. 99), an advantage being that metaphor enabled me to contextualize "the whole of interaction, the movement back and forth of the many facets that are important" (Davies, et al., 2022, p. 13).

The quest narrative metaphor emerged initially from phrases and concepts articulated by participants that I had incorporated into initial emerging themes, but which I felt in doing so only captured one component of their expression, and not fully their imagery or intensity:

> T4: "You know it is a two year journey you're embarking upon."
>
> S7: "No it's just because you know say you're out in the world people ask what did you get for your GCSEs what did you get for your A-Levels."
>
> S8: "Throughout the year just to help you to motivate you more."
>
> S2: "I feel like in the opening stages of your college year."
>
> T3: "A struggle."

Here vivid phrases echoed across both student and staff participants and evoked a sense of how the 'everyday' academic setbacks, challenges and pressures that denote academic buoyancy (Martin, et al., 2010) are conceptualized by those experiencing them. Metaphorical phrases such as 'journey', 'embarking', 'struggle', temporal phrases such as 'two year', 'opening stages' and 'throughout the year', and the reference to 'out in the world' suggest that A-Levels are experienced to some extent as a discrete 'world' with a built-in narrative timeline and tropes. In this world, college or the A-Level qualification is the 'realm' in which the "story is to unfold", and in which the "central figure or figures",

move from an “initial state” (e.g. transitioning from school/GCSE) into a “series of adventures or experiences which, to a greater or lesser extent, will transform their lives” (Booker, 2004, p. 17), centred on the “pull…towards some distant, all-important goal” (Booker, 2004, p. 83).

In Booker’s (2004) quest structure, this goal acts as ‘The Call’, the “visionary direction” termed (in similarity with T4) ‘The Journey’ (p. 83): the series of challenges, problems, victories or experiences facing the central figure in their ‘new terrain’ (which in itself is one of the challenges) as they pursue their goal. Again, participants’ language evoked these key tropes in their everyday academic experiences:

> S2: “Threw myself in at the deep end.”
>
> S2: “Comes at you pretty thick and fast.”
>
> S1: “And then you click the wrong one and then you realise you’ve clicked the wrong one and so that’s quite annoying but like I said it’s fun like you realise where you went wrong sometimes so that also helps.”
>
> S10: “Until [assessment] 5 and I got an A.”

The metaphorical ‘deep end’, the sense of things ‘coming at’ you ‘thick and fast’ balanced against the ‘fun’ and achievement after persistence of an ‘A’ in a formative assessment echo the duality that Booker (2004) identifies as inherent to ‘The Journey’ concept: the value of experiencing both ‘constriction’ and ‘respite’ as part of the narrative. This was a particularly illuminating aspect of using the quest metaphor as it enabled me to reconsider a disjunction in the data I had been wrestling with between phrasing and tone of participant responses. Previous research has described studying A-Levels as a potentially “inescapably stress-inducing and sometimes overwhelming experience” (Stubbs, et al., 2023a, p. 488), echoes of which appear in the data set gathered in phrases such as ‘disheartening’, ‘stress of the exam’, ‘pressure’, ‘frustrated’. There is no doubt, as existing research establishes, transitioning to and studying A-Levels is challenging (Wigley, 2004; Dziubinski, 2014; Dunn, 2019; Stubbs, et al., 2023a; Stubbs, et al., 2023b); as S8 articulates:

> S8: “It’s like a really really hard […] it’s a hard thing to do.”

However, it is important to acknowledge that this is in danger of meaning-making at a purely semantic level, and misses the nuance of phrasing and tone. Returning to an earlier point raised by Stubbs et al. (2023b), semantic interpretation needs to be carefully considered: S8's reference to 'really hard' is not necessarily negative in connotation, and whilst the previous list of phrases might appear to resonate with a potentially negative portrayal of the experience of studying A-Levels, I found this to be at odds with the overall 'feeling' that was being conveyed by participants. This is best illuminated by S8, whose identification of A-Levels as 'really really hard' is followed not by a request for *easy*, but by the statement:

S8: "You do need dips and drops at times."

Here the 'constrictions' of the A-Level journey are expressed not as things simply to be endured as a by-product of studying for A-Levels, but rather as desired, a necessity; the challenge of the journey to achieve the goal is as important as the goal itself - that buoyancy comes from balance. Similar is S9's statement:

S9: "They're very humbling [laughs]."

Again, if taken purely semantically, 'humbling' is defined as "to destroy the power, independence or prestige of" (Merriam-Webster, 2023) or "to cause to think more lowly of oneself" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023b); both conveying a potentially pejorative interpretation of S9's response. In juxtaposition, the laughter that immediately follows lightens this, and when contextualized not only within the rest of S9's responses, but across the data set, served more as one example to illustrate the lived experience as a reflective, developmental and personal journey; in quest terms, the process of gradual development to a "state of readiness" for the central figure (Booker, 2004, p. 85) – the narrative equivalent of academic buoyancy.

This development of a 'state of readiness' signposts another parallel that the quest narrative shares with the experience of studying A-Levels: the journey stage precedes, and prepares the central figure for, the 'Final Ordeals' (Booker, 2004, p. 83). This final stage comprises of a last series of tests, the biggest of all, before the final prize can be

secured – equivalent to the high-stakes terminal exams synonymous with linear-assessed A-Levels. This concept again had nuance in how it was expressed by participants:

> S4: “I think it’s very like all or nothing.”

S4’s choice of ‘all or nothing’ has echoes of the ‘gamble’ connotations linked with the phrase ‘high-stakes’, or the metaphor of “a completely different ball game” used by a participant in a previous study of A-Level students (Stubbs, et al., 2023a, p. 481). Both of these bring to mind the concept of game theory, played to win but where there is the risk of loss (Nalebuff & Brandenburger, 1997). Compounding a feeling of intensity and reflecting the ‘final ordeal’ concept is the fact that the ultimate victory or defeat rests, to continue the game metaphor, on playing 90 minutes, plus extra time, concluded by a decisive, high-stakes penalty shoot-out - where players must avoid the idiomatic ‘falling at the final hurdle’. As Nalebuff and Brandenburger (1997) observe, however, the game is “affected by perceptions – what the players believe” (p. 29); whilst there was an element of ‘risk’ that participants discussed surrounding the high stakes scenario, there was also a prominent sense of potential and optimism - rather than all to lose, it was all to play for:

> S9: “Yeah I kind of compare it so like say […] if I’m getting like a C now I think okay so I still have a couple more [assessments] left to try and bring that up to an A.”

Much like the final ordeals in a quest narrative, S9’s tone of optimism frames the future and final assessments as possibility – embracing them as the ultimate test, and suggesting buoyancy is influenced by belief. Not simply serving as a summary reflection of how they have performed so far, these final tests become the potential site of their best performance yet; as one staff member recounts a student saying:

> T8: “I am going to get an A* next year and I need you to work with me.”

Here T8’s comment illuminates another important focus point for this study’s findings, and one which served as an important point of reflexivity in my research journey. I realised I had been carrying assumptions that I expected classroom-based, teacher-led activities to be a prominent point of discussion around the topic of buoyancy. This was where the

Listening Guide's "listening for the I" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2021, p. 142) proved critical; what stood out to T8 in the student's approach, and what emerged repeatedly across the data set in the students' own direct comments, was the centralization of themselves, their own actions and ownership, their own beliefs about - and dialogue with - themselves, as a critical component in their buoyancy. As well as drawing on aspects of academic self-efficacy and academic self-concept (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003), theories of self-determination (Legault, 2020) and self-regulation (Chih-Yuan Sun, et al., 2017) were prominent in how participants talked about their experiences. These were expressed as individuality, independence and a culture of experimentation that extends beyond the classroom walls.

> S2: "A lot of work external to your classroom environment."
>
> S1: "Because then once I've done my work there I go home and I feel like I've still done quite a bit of work and I don't feel as much pressure to do work at home because I know I have done some."
>
> S8: "It'll be different for everyone."
>
> S9: "I've changed that by starting doing exam questions."
>
> S2: "I was like no no I'm not [laughs] […] I need to take a step back here."
>
> T5: "There is a kind of moment of epiphany in a student."

T5's statement stood out in particular, as the staff member's use of 'epiphany' struck a chord with language that students themselves used to describe their experience; phrases like 'realised', 'figured', 'occurred to me' linked repeatedly to moments of trial, error, discovery and subsequent buoyancy and positive learning experiences. The quest narrative and the concept of gaming activities known as 'side quests' are a common and popular genre and activity in the gaming industry (Griffin, 2020; Howard, 2022); here the participants' language brought to mind elements of 'gamification', where game thinking and the mechanics of game-play are used in a non-gaming context in order to motivate, problem-solve and enhance learning (Kapp, 2012). This indicated a reflective, iterative, 'gamified' personal development experience to academic buoyancy, spanning the affective and psychomotor domains (Guskey, 2012), as well as the cognitive aspects that

are often linked with high-stakes-exam-based qualifications – buoyancy is a journey of the self as much as a journey for the goal:

> S2: “The mental fatigue was […] astonishing.”
>
> S9: “I think it’s kind of like your willingness to put in the effort and like um like you said your motivation.”
>
> T5: “I truly believe it’s that confrontation with reality um is the big block […] in the first year of A-Levels.”
>
> T8: “I was going to say I think [for students] it’s like it’s been a bit of a crisis of confidence.”

Just as the hero of the quest narrative might face domain-spanning tests of strength, knowledge or character as indicated by phrases such as ‘mental fatigue’, ‘willingness’, ‘effort’, ‘motivation’ and ‘confidence’, so too will they face a variety of challenges and temptations (Booker, 2004) - both of their own and others’ creation:

> S1: “But like in GCSE it was so much more simpler.”
>
> S9: “Your parents have like a certain view.”
>
> S7: “This is a very different experience for me so I was kind of getting used to that.”

Here references to expectations and perceptions from parents, as a result of transition from GCSE/school, or in comparison to previous academic experiences and achievements, articulated the A-Level journey and academic buoyancy as being shaped by both external and internal factors (Van den Broek, et al., 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Finally, returning to T8’s earlier recounted student comment (‘I am going to get an A* next year and I need you to work with me’), a further shared concept with the quest narrative is illustrated: whilst individuality, independence and personal development are prominent in achieving the central figure’s end goal, it is not a quest undertaken in isolation. Companions and helpers in the form of support networks and relationships feature prominently (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Legault, 2020), essential for “positive assistance”, “periods of respite” and “crucial guidance” (Booker, 2004, p. 77). As articulated by

participants, parents, peers and teachers feature prominently in this companion/helper role – framing buoyancy as shaped by bonds:

> S2: “Establish that network […] to feed your ideas back off I feel that that’s going to be more beneficial as opposed to than to just having people fixate on their own individual ideas.”
>
> T5: “We pick them up when we see them floundering.”

In summary, with this overarching quest narrative metaphor I have aimed to contextualize the emerging areas of focus from the data set within the ‘bigger picture’, exploring how A-Level students’ academic buoyancy is conveyed as a simultaneously quantitative, publicly high-profile experience, but also a less tangible, intensely individual, emotional and reflective developmental journey. The remainder of the chapter explores the following emergent themes, relevant literature and findings in more individual detail:

External Narratives

- Theme 1 – The Journey: A High Stakes Environment
- Theme 2 – New Terrain: Expectations & Perceptions

Narratives of Self

- Theme 3 – The Hero’s Story: Past, Present & Future Self
- Theme 4 – Companions in the Quest
- Theme 5 – Trial, Error, Discovery & Epiphany

5.4 Themes: External Narratives – The Journey: A High Stakes Environment

The quest metaphor explores the overarching high stakes nature of the experiences of studying A-Levels and how these shape academic buoyancy; however, three sub-themes emerged that illustrated not just the high stakes nature of its terminal-exam structure, but

also linked to the selection of A-Levels, formative assessment grades, and future opportunities.

Of interest in exploring these themes was the parallel to a finding from previous A-Level research conducted by Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011). In this they note student experiences of transition to college and A-Level study can contain its troubles and problems; however, they also observe that these discourses, were "largely balanced by a more positive discourse of challenge, growth and achievement" and which is "barely accounted for in the existing literature" (p. 119). This is illustrated in the current study through discussions about the first sub-theme of the high stakes environment - the decision to study 3 or 4 A-Levels:

> S3: "I was under the impression you had to choose four […] it was from my friends and family when my sister did A-Levels she had to do A-Levels like four of them."
>
> S2: "Um just going back to what we were on about before briefly I think the viability of doing four A-Levels is entirely dependent on the four A-Levels that you pick […] Like in terms of the amount of content I feel like for me I picked […] three extremely heavy writing subjects and then [Subject X] which is obviously quite content heavy as well […] if you're picking four you need to you need to have a couple that aren't too heavily relying on creativity or extremely writing based."

Here S2 and S3 discuss some of the challenges faced when selecting how many A-Levels to choose – expectations of friends and family, misconceptions of what you *have* to study, the workload type and amount. As Dunn (2019) found in a study into student transition from GCSE to A-Level, where increased workload results in feelings of pressure or that a student is "out of their depth" (p. 26) a common affective result can be "self-critique", a questioning of ability "or suitability for A-Level study" (p. 26), or what is termed low 'Composure' in the academic buoyancy 5C model (Martin, et al., 2010). Whilst there were examples in this study that acknowledged workload management and confidence as a challenge of studying 4 A-Levels, there were also examples where this was viewed for its positives; rather than simply a buoyancy-eroding narrative of self-critique, what emerged was an example of Hernandez-Martinez et al.'s (2011, p. 119) "positive discourse":

> S1: "I picked four because I wasn't a hundred percent sure on which subjects I wanted to do like I'd rather pick four […] because I didn't know if I wanted

> to do […] [Subject X] and [Subject X] and I think if I'd chosen three I would have chosen [Subject X] but now I'm happy that I've chosen [Subject X] instead so […] So it was more just opening my options because I wasn't fully sure."
>
> S2: "I picked four because I want to experience these subjects and oh I'm interested in this area and originally I had eight nine different A-Levels I was considering taking I had to narrow it down I was like oh I'll do four."
>
> S2: "It was good to experience another subject and look at things from a different point of view in terms of how like the world functions."

S1 and S2's comments about 'opening my options', 'I want to experience' and 'it was good to experience' reflect the notion that individuals are "active participants" and indicate how "subjective engagement in practices" is a means of students "constructing their identities" (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011, p. 122). Beach (1999) refers to these moments as "consequential transitions" (p. 101), brought about by experiencing something new, and creating an acknowledged change in "one's sense of self" (p. 114). In this case, the experience of studying 4 A-Levels is conveyed as having a positive impact on students' academic buoyancy in spite of challenges through what they learned about their study habits and time management, interests or by gaining a different standpoint from which to reflect on things.

This is reinforced through similar discussions into the perceived high stakes environment focus on grades at A-Level, and the importance of both A-Level grades in themselves and of A-Levels to future opportunities. Grade outcomes, and assessment activities that generated graded outcomes, were referenced repeatedly as holding significant value for participants' experience of progress and as a factor in academic buoyancy:

> S8: "It's been C B C B."
>
> S9: "Like grade orientated or yeah like you go to College in the hopes of coming out with three A*s [laughs]."

As reflected in the literature review, A-Level qualification grades act as nationally and globally externally measured "achievement signals" (Bergbauer, et al., 2018, p. 10), and are viewed as significant both societally and individually, a "certified form of capital" (Mccarthy, 2022, p. 6). In a piece of research into GCSE and A-Level exam cancellations

as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Mccarthy (2022) concludes grade outcomes are "regarded as an end in themselves" (p. 6), shaping students' everyday experience of education in a way "inextricably bound to exams" (p. 3). This was illuminated in a number of participants' responses:

> S8: "So I think everything is very grade driven your grades are used to determine how well you're doing they're used to determine how good you've done."
>
> S7: "You know say you're out in the world people ask what did you get for your GCSEs what did you get for your A-Levels they never ask you a percentage they mean your grades."

Here, past and future-focused language of 'how well you're doing', 'how well you've done' and S7's observation that external people's measures reflect the short and long-term significance, both personally and publicly, that is felt around A-Level exams and associated grades. What emerged alongside this was the emotional component to academic buoyancy in relation to A-Level grades:

> T1: "A grade doesn't really give them anything to work with except joy or disappointment or relief."
>
> S7: "Well my grades I think some of them tanked like went down by a grade or two."
>
> T8: "A student who in her [first] year was constantly getting A's and then […] she got a B and she was absolutely mortified."

The scope of 'joy', 'mortified', 'disappointment', 'tanked' and 'relief', convey the complexity of emotions at play, and the fact that A-Levels are not just experienced as an objectively quantitative high stakes scenario, but an ongoing subjective, qualitative experience. T8's point emphasises this through the example of a student's response to receiving a B grade (a one-off at that point) having previously received A grades. Here the notion of relativity as a factor in academic buoyancy emerged, as demonstrated by S2 and S8's responses below:

> S8: "I think the same time the mock the [assessment] 4 I worked so hard […] I was two marks off an A but I didn't get the A."
>
> S2: "First couple of [assessments] um like scrape scraping an A by like a mark."

Here it is indicated that whilst grades are significant, there is more nuance to the ways in which they affect academic buoyancy – whilst for S8 the ambition is to achieve the A, and the frustration comes from being 'two marks off', S2 expresses a similar frustration despite achieving an A because of it being 'scraped' only by 'a mark'. The perceived security or quality of the grade therefore also becomes a factor, reinforced as S2 elaborates their progress was more reassuring through consolidation of grades, not grades individually:

> S2: "First couple of [assessments] um like scrape scraping an A by like a mark and I feel like I've consolidated that."

Here an interesting consideration is raised in relation to the Control component of the academic buoyancy 5Cs model (Martin, et al., 2010; Smith, 2020) – there is a benefit to buoyancy of students who take control not only of academic activities and outcomes, but also how they control their perceptions of outcomes to aid their buoyancy.

Whilst Mccarthy's (2022) perspective of A-Level grades as 'an end in themselves' is found in the data, their significance also emerged as compounded by the perception of them as a form of 'capital' that determines significant future opportunities:

> S9: "You hope that you just do come out with very good grades and then get to do what you want in the future."
>
> T7: "They might be extrinsically motivated in the fact that you know they've got this certain career and the grades that come with that career in mind."

S9 implicitly references the potential "fear appeal" (Belcher, et al., 2022) and impact that future-influencing grades can possess. This coincides with Mccarthy's (2022) research which outlines a range of criticisms that have been levelled at the high stakes qualification structure, such as narrowing of curriculum, teaching to the test, students becoming 'data units', and the fostering of instrumentalism, where students only learn what is needed to pass the test, and where competition and quantified output from terminal exams dominate. Returning to Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011), whilst participants articulated the significance of grades, exams, and the 'quantified output' aspect, there was also a positive discourse linked to these topics.

In the examples above, both S9 and T7 convey the motivational component, the optimistic 'get to do what you want' and 'grades that come with that career' expressing the career, economic and social door-opening opportunities that are only possible as a result of A-Level grades, as discussed in the Literature Review. This supports both the Confidence and Commitment findings of the 5C academic buoyancy model: the importance of positive beliefs about the future (confidence), combined with a passion and persistence (commitment to pursuing a long term goal) (Martin, et al., 2010; Smith, 2020). S4 also articulates that grades are achievement signals, but achievement has a broader definition in their experience than exams, knowledge and the pursuit of university places:

> S4: "I think sometimes I think it's just the grade like coming out and knowing after all that work you see that good grade and I think that's probably and also being able to get into uni as well."

For S4 the grades signal affective and psychomotor achievements – effort, hard work, persistence – with a sense of pride conveyed in 'after all that work'. As explored in existing literature (Dunn, 2019; Granziera, et al., 2022; Kritikou & Giovazolias, 2022), academic emotions (Lei, et al., 2018) are indicated here as shaping academic buoyancy, and reframing grades as significant but as markers of something holistic rather than just transactional. S8 and S10 reflect this in comments below through their use of aspirational language such as 'wanted', 'trying' and the potential-focused 'yet':

> S8: "I've wanted an A […] I've not had one yet [laughs]."
>
> S10: "I mean probably [assessment] 5 because I've been trying to get an A […] the whole year and just couldn't do it [laughs]."

Here academic emotions such as ambition and hope (Lei, et al., 2018) can be powerful influences of academic buoyancy even when conflicted by achievement based influences.

In summary, the *high stakes environment* emerges as a factor influencing academic buoyancy; however, coinciding with Hernandez-Martinez et al.'s (2011) findings, whilst in their stories participants acknowledged the intensity of the academic and emotional complexities and challenges, the public and personal nature of their experiences, they largely conveyed their experiences as opportunities to "exploit" the chance for "growth of

identity" and achievement, *as a result of*, rather than *in spite of*, the "challenges and demands" (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011, p. 119). Rather than "obstacles" (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011, p. 119) to their academic buoyancy, societal and academic demands that have emerged thus far are often reframed in relation to their benefits to buoyancy. As Holdsworth et al. (2018) found in their study into resilience and university students, "maintaining perspective" (p. 1843) was found to be an important component in allowing individuals to consider factors from "multiple angles which may either negate the issue, or provide alternate ways of viewing the issue" (p. 1843); as a result, and as encapsulated in that study's title, a student's ability to not just handle, but embrace and frame, the challenges of the academic environment saw them "not drowning, waving" (p. 1837) – academically buoyant.

5.5 Themes: External Narratives – Expectations & Perceptions

As identified in previous sections, the *high stakes environment* A-Level students are situated in is shaped by a number of external factors, e.g. policy-makers, exam boards, universities. These external factors contribute to a sense of the study of A-Levels being a publicly experienced one, which subsequently shapes academic buoyancy, as articulated by S2:

> S2: "Just sort of building off what S3 is saying yeah at the end of the day school college it's a public environment."

Another factor to emerge from the data that indicates their 'public' nature and the influence on academic buoyancy, is the theme of *Expectations and Perceptions* – particularly those held by parents/family, and those that emerge as a result of A-Levels being 'new terrain' - a key transition moment in a student's educational life.

5.5.1 Expectations & Perceptions: Parental/Family Expectations & Perceptions

There is a perspective in the literature that "there is probably no more critical and significant source of information about ourselves than other people's views of us" (Rosenberg, 1979, cited in Simonsmeier, et al., 2020, p. 709). The 5Cs academic buoyancy model and other sections of this study explore contradictions to this assertion – the 5Cs model and the concept of academic buoyancy as a whole is centred around students' perceptions and management of themselves; however, Smith's (2020) research of the 5C model noted a sixth 'C', Community, following findings in resilience literature about the role of wider factors such as parents, teacher, peers. Participant responses reflected this through specific examples where family/parent expectations in particular were significant influences on student experience of their academic buoyancy:

> S7: "There are some people who have to […] care for others like their little brothers and siblings."

S7 identifies the challenges brought by expectation for students to balance home responsibilities alongside studies, supporting findings in A-Level research by Stubbs et al. (2023b). More prominent in this study were the influences parent expectations can bring to students' academic buoyancy as a result of perceptions of A-Level grading and comparison to prior qualifications and student achievement:

> S5: "I think the parents thing as well it's graded differently here so you'll be going from all As in high school to then in College you might get Cs and Ds at first and like the parents don't understand that that's not actually that bad."
>
> S9: "Like your parents have like a certain view of what you should get or compare to what you know they get if they were doing what I was doing so if I don't do say if they wanted me to get like an A and I got a B or a C they'd just be disappointed because it's not what I should be getting basically."

This was an interesting point as it dealt both with the information on which these parent perceptions were based, but also how these perceptions made students *feel*. This in itself broke down into two aspects. As S5 and S9 express above, parents' perceptions of grading can lead to the student feeling like they have failed to meet others' expectations

(Stubbs, et al., 2023a), which can bring challenges to what the 5Cs terms as Composure (Martin, et al., 2010), e.g. feelings of anxiety. The second aspect, as indicated below, was parent perceptions based on workload, from which emerged a sense that students can feel misunderstood or misjudged, or as in Stubbs et al.'s study (2023a) that adults were "oblivious to their experience" (p. 486):

> S9: "I think parents […] don't understand how content heavy your A-Levels are they just think you've just got an easier life than them."
>
> S9: "They're working but they don't really understand how like demanding our A-Levels are […] they just think oh well you've got no excuse you just don't care enough when in reality it's just kind of how difficult it is."
>
> T6: "When it comes to parents evening and […] parents are like well I don't understand […] they've done eleven GCSEs and done really well and then they've come here they're only doing three."

References to 'easier life', and comparisons made between employed work and the work of study suggest that whilst grade-based expectations have an influence on buoyancy, so too do expectations that are based around perceptions of effort and hard work. This is especially the case where these external perceptions conflict with self-perceptions in which a student feels they are exhibiting carefully considered and productive academic responsibility, indicative of the Co-ordination (planning) element of the 5C model (Martin, et al., 2010). One such example is S8's contrasting perspective with parents surrounding time management and selection of work environment:

> S8: "For example if you have a day that […] starts at nine finishes at eleven they'd expect you to go home at eleven and they won't understand that you want to stay in College nine 'til four maybe to work and College themselves suggest that is a good idea but they would not see that as […] something that's good to do they would rather you come home engage in other things or do your College work at home."

This suggests that parent understanding of A-Levels, their structure, workload and how they are perceived in comparison to work experiences in their own life would be beneficial to support positive impact on students' academic buoyancy – avoiding feelings of misunderstanding or misjudgement. This resonates with findings that perceived parental

involvement influences academic buoyancy (Chen & Mok, 2023), along with Packer and Thomas' (2021) application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (1979). In their study of students transitioning to further education (Packer & Thomas, 2021), they located parents as a component of the student's *micro-system*, directly impacting on the student, but through collaboration with educational institutions and practitioners, their relationship and collaboration support the *meso-system* – where the independent micro-systems interconnect and influence each other. The potential impact on academic buoyancy of this meso-system construct is articulated by S8's experience:

> S8: "I think um a lot of it is down to […] communication with parents."

Packer and Thomas (2021) identified both student and parent positive feedback as a result of these connections, conceptualized as the metaphorical bridges that enabled students to traverse settings; this is reinforced by Brown (2018) who identifies interventions targeted at both parents and students, which address expectations *and* values, as having positive impacts. This notion of expectations and the role they play in 'traversing settings' also emerged in the data through a second sub-theme: *Transition from GCSE/School*.

5.5.2 Expectations & Perceptions: Transition from GCSE/School

As discussed in the literature review, experiences of transition are a significant and potentially challenging time for students (Packer & Thomas, 2021), but an area where there is a gap in research into the transition to post-16 provision, A-Levels and from the point of view of learners and practitioners (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011; Packer & Thomas, 2021; Stubbs, et al., 2023b). That it is of importance is clear from participant responses:

> S1: "Like in GCSE it was so much more simple so it is more in depth."
>
> T4: "It is such a step up […] I think it's maybe that change in circumstance."
>
> T5: "There is a natural jump up."
>
> T7: "I think for a lot of students they often seem to feel that A-Levels are like the natural progression from doing their GCSEs so they just kind of you know

> get on their A-Levels and they […] make a start and then quite a few have said then they've had a confidence knock […] um they then you know struggle with the transition."

As T7's phrase 'natural progression' and S1's comparative 'like in GCSE it was' convey, preconceptions, expectations and challenges that arise in the experience of the transition from GCSE/school to A-Level/college emerged as a factor in academic buoyancy. This is emphasised further by the escalating metaphorical scale evoked by T4 and T5's 'step up' and 'jump up', which in Deuker's (2014) investigation into sixth-form student and teacher expectations becomes a 'leap'. Illustrating Dunn's (2019) point that A-Level students' experiences at this stage of educational transition "are complex" (p. 24), two sub-themes emerged within the discussion around transition:

- the academic 'step up' from GCSE to A-Level;
- changes to 'personal systems' required to manage the social, structural and academic aspects of transition and level of study

<u>The 'Step Up' from GCSE to A-Level</u>

As articulated below by S8, and reinforcing T7's earlier comment regarding A-Levels being seen as the 'natural progression' from GCSE, previous research has identified a view that students largely have an awareness of a natural 'step up' in difficulty moving from GCSE to A-Levels (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011; Powell, 2017):

> S8: "I think […] before we came to A-Levels anybody that doesn't do A-Levels their understanding of it is that it's like a really really hard uh it's a hard thing to do."

T8, a staff member, reflects a similar idea as they paraphrase encounters with students and how they have conveyed their experiences after the transition to A-Levels:

> T8: "This isn't what I expected this is very different."

Other responses, however, suggest more of an unanticipated aspect to the ‘step up’:

> S2: “You tend you tend to take that hit coming off the back of your GCSE grades.”
>
> S9: “I think it kind of like was a bit of a shock.”

What was interesting, and which S8 encapsulates as they develop their point, was that academic buoyancy can potentially be impacted by this ‘step up’ whether the level of challenge was expected or unexpected; as S8 explains, it wasn’t until undertaking the experience of A-Levels that the challenge was fully realised:

> S8: “But you don’t actually acknowledge how hard it is until you’re doing it yourself.”

This reflects findings in the research that transition should be viewed as a “period of adjustment” that starts before the transition takes place, but which also might last until the student has acclimatised to “demands of the new environment” (Mcgee, et al., 2004, p. 13). Transition therefore should not be viewed as a “one-off process” (Packer & Thomas, 2021, p. 226), as all the demands to be adjusted to might not happen at once, or in those initial stages of moving from school to College. It also puts a focus on the experiential element of preparation for transition in order to support academic buoyancy – as S8 identifies, authentic experience was more beneficial to adjustment than information-based awareness.

There were also varied perspectives on what constituted this ‘step up’; what made studying A-Levels feel different to GCSE, and what was the source of the perceived increase in challenge:

> S9: “Content heavy.”
>
> S1: “I do [Subject X] you do stuff more in depth as well so you’re like woah you see all these new words and are like woah because enzymes you spend quite a long time on that but like in GCSE it was so much more simple so it is more in depth.”

S9: “How different the questions are asked compared to say […] like in [Subject X] the questions are asked so much different compared to how they are at GCSE and the mark schemes are so much more particular in what you say.”

S2: “Then you’ve got the different […] standard of marking.”

T7: “I think the challenge level increases […] you know like we’ve said it’s a lot more about your depth of knowledge and the way that you then articulate that knowledge.”

Similar to findings in existing A-Level research (Powell, 2017; Dunn, 2019; Stubbs, et al., 2023b) participants identified both complexity and scale of work as features of this ‘step up’. This was expressed in terms of amount of content, an increased expectation of depth of understanding and application of that understanding, as identified through a perceived complexity in mark schemes. As touched on in the quest metaphor section, participants also noted a related sense of increased pace:

S2: “Comes at you thick and fast.”

S4: “Um I think the speed that the content’s taught.”

They also identified factors that were important to managing this in order to keep academically buoyant and avoid being ‘overwhelmed’:

S2: “Stop and take it all in.”

S4: “Time to process.”

The benefits of identifying and dedicating time to not only physically manage their workload but also pause, process and reflect – the moments of respite in the quest narrative - were also conveyed as having wider benefits to buoyancy:

S1: “I have Tuesday afternoons and Thursday mornings off so now I can spend that time doing work for my other subjects […] it does make a difference especially if you use it to like your benefit because otherwise […] I’d do all my work outside of the normal college hours.”

S2: “Yeah I feel like the homework and the content is mitigated very well with having the blocks off […] you can just crack on with a bit of work and then mentally recover.”

Here S2's 'mental recovery' raises an interesting parallel between studying and sport – a topic which Calhoun et al. (2019) explore in their research into the generalisability of academic buoyancy from academics to athletics, and in which they note cross-overs between the experience of being an athlete and studying, e.g. fear of failure. Much like athletes have pre-and-post game training plans which incorporate essential rest and recovery periods, S2's comment suggests that academic buoyancy might benefit from a similar conceptualisation.

Another aspect of perceptions of this 'step up' are indicated as being a result of what on the surface might seem paradoxical, but which in fact reinforce the complexity and scale factors:

> T5: "It's just not that simple at A-Level and it's just the sheer volume […] I know they've got less subjects."
>
> T6: "And I think it links to like we were saying […] T5 I think about the extrinsic circumstances it's that thing as well that they've come and they've done eleven GCSEs and now they're only doing three A-Levels."

As T5 and T6 convey, and as discussed in the previous section by participants in relation to parent expectations, whilst there might be a perception of 'less' workload based on the numerical decrease in subjects studied from GCSE, this does not equate to an equivalent experiential reduction in workload, a point of clarification in wider perceptions to consider in order to prevent false comparisons affecting buoyancy.

As can be seen in the previous comments by S1and S9, the 'step up' for some students was intensified by the fact that it could be compared to performance in and perceptions of previous studies of the subject, a theme that Dunn (2019) found consistent in research with A-Level students; this is also reiterated by staff from their experience:

> T8: "I think that's been the challenge for especially I think in subjects that they probably feel like they know because they've done them at GCSE and then they come and do them at A-Level and they're like well […] this is very different to how it's been handled […] in GCSE."
>
> T2: "Because of the step up they're making […] a grade that they're not used to that can be it can have massive effects on their confidence."

In terms of buoyancy, S4's concurs that it felt 'worse' to get a grade lower in a subject studied previously:

> S4: "Um probably as I said in the most recent [assessments] […] [Subject X] it's always been my subject I did it at GCSE […] and that's always been my subject so then when I went down a couple of grades I think that […] it's worse."

Implicit in these comments is potentially the view that lack of familiarity or no prior study or experience of a subject might therefore be advantageous in terms of mitigating the challenges of a 'step up'; however, in counterpoint to this was T3's view that this brings a 'step up' of its own, and mirrored findings by Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011) into transition from school to college mathematics that even in subjects previously studied a lot of content was new:

> T3: "A different thing which I think affects first year progress is familiarity with the subject as they're coming in because I think for all of us to a greater or lesser extent they won't have done anything relating um to our subject at GCSE certainly nothing at all for mine so they tend to come in not knowing anything […] a whole suite of new concepts to get at in the new year."

This raises an interesting point – whilst there is often talk of the 'step up' from GCSE to A-Level on reflection this is often dealt with at the general level. In fact, and an important area of consideration in terms of supporting positive academic buoyancy, students might be handling multiple dimensions of 'step-up' based on the subject combination that they have picked, e.g. complexity and scale as well as starting point familiarity with the subject.

<u>'Personal Systems' – managing the changes in studying approach</u>

Linked to the perceptions of a 'step up' are subsequently the changes or developments this might require to what T1 terms 'personal systems': the attitudes, behaviours and approaches required in studying A-Levels. As T1 and T5 observe, the impact on buoyancy here is potentially twofold – academic skills-based challenges as a result of having to develop new, or adjust prior, study approaches, but also challenges that are

linked to conceptual notions of identity, a key transition aspect identified by Packer and Thomas (2021):

> T1: “Their um own personal systems may not be as developed and their skills sort of um flying on their talent wings if you like […] this mythical talent thing.”
>
> T5: “This belief that they were naturally good at the subject you know there’s this idea that talent and ability is natural and it’s ingrained in them […] it kind of contradicts the image they had of themselves.”

The skills-based ‘personal systems’ aspect was articulated in various ways by participants:

> S3: “Time management I think I spend too much time.”
>
> S7: “Your own kind of mentality of it […] there are people who are more driven to kind of work more […] like obviously now at College you can choose to either relax or put more effort in to it so I guess that’s the idea behind mentality.”
>
> T2: “Um it’s about maybe using the time effectively and going into the [study area] and doing the bits of work that they need to do.”
>
> T6: “To make that step up in their work and organisation of themselves.”

Factors such as mentality, effort, time management, choice of study location and organisation were all aspects identified by students and staff as areas that required attention as part of the transition from GCSE to A-Level. This suggests that as well as being viewed as an ongoing process, transition needs to be viewed for the cognitive, affective and psychomotor adjustments required to ‘personal systems’ in order to aid positive progress, experience and academic buoyancy.

As found in the research of Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011) and Stubbs et al. (2023a;2023b) another key theme to emerge from the ‘step up’ was an increased feeling of independence required at A-Level. This broke down largely into two aspects – social/structural or academic-related.

> T2: “In terms of like settling into the College environment.”

> T7: “More than anything is the […] students that then say that I have got carried away with the amount of independence.”
>
> T5: “They’ve come from a full timetable where their days are filled from eight forty five ‘til three thirty […] then they come to a smaller timetable.”

T2 identifies a point particularly relevant to this research – the college at which the research has been undertaken is an FE College rather than a sixth-form attached to a school; in terms of ‘settling in’ students at the college are managing a number of changes simultaneously (Wigley, 2004): a new institution, a new geographical and physical location, a new qualification type and level, and as T5 and T7 outline, day-to-day logistical factors that “interrupt routines” that students have established at school and to which they must “habituate” (Martin & Burns, 2014, p. 3). As T1 develops, this also brings with it associated social transitions as students progress from a wide range of schools in the area:

> T1: “The school that they came from maybe and their expectations of education based on um their school […] maybe you’ve come from a grammar school or a private school I think that things like the class sizes you’re used to perhaps students you’ve been mixing with before you come to […] college.”

S7 conceptualises this independence as ‘freedom’ and brings to life its positive aspects in terms of academic buoyancy (Stubbs, et al., 2023b) as it is something to be ‘enjoyed’, something ‘indulgent’, but also identifies that ‘too much’ can bring challenge:

> S7: “I think when you get to College you have a lot more of a sense of freedom and I think I was I guess I was indulging in it a bit too much […] I guess […] I don’t know just like in high school obviously you had very strict […] very restricted to leave the grounds […] This is a very different experience for me so I was kind of getting used to that I was enjoying walking around town during like free periods.”

A similar duality appeared in participant comments regarding an increased experience of academic independence:

> S2: “It’s predicated on a lot of independent work and a lot of work external to your classroom environment.”

> S2: “They do it in the independent time so […] it’s kind of like forcing you to put extra work in but ones that benefit you as a student because you’re putting the extra work in so you will do better.”
>
> S7: “I think especially in College now a lot of the work’s kind of left up to you […] I think a lot of it is […] quite independent […] a lot of it is up to you.”
>
> T3: “One thing […] I’ve noticed this year more is um the transition from school where […] a lot of their techniques for staying organised with the different subjects just um might be established by the teachers.”

S2 develops that it is important for this to be a purposeful academic independence, otherwise it could slip into ‘isolation’ – they identify the key to this being a support network, which will be covered in more detail in the theme of *Companions in the Quest*; it is noted here, however, to reinforce that independence, and having to adjust to it, was a largely positively viewed concept, reflecting findings in the literature into A-Levels that this ‘step-up’ signalled personal development and a move to a more adult-like learning stage (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011; Stubbs, et al., 2023b).

This returns to the aforementioned identity aspect of this section, and T1 and T5’s comments regarding ‘talent’ and ‘ability’. As well as developments in identity in terms of independence, participants identified that these perceived new ways of having to learn also have connotations for their sense of self in terms of academic self-concept: the mental representation a person has about their own abilities in academic domains (Brunner, et al., 2010; Simonsmeier, et al., 2020). This will be dealt with more fully in the theme *Past, Present and Future Self*, but is pertinent here, however, as T1 and T5 allude to challenges students face around their academic self-concept (their ‘talent’ or ‘ability’) as being a particular result of what Beach (1999) categorised as a lateral transition: where “an individual moves between two historically related activities in a single direction” (p. 114), in this case the move from GCSE to A-Levels.

T5 references first-year students experiencing a ‘confrontation with reality’ as the transition process sees them “assuming a new role – a learner in an FE environment” (Packer & Thomas, 2021, p. 213), and describes a potential buoyancy consequence witnessed in their professional practice:

T5: “It kind of contradicts the image they had of themselves.”

In discussing this topic, it felt important to take care not to represent, or imply that participants had represented GCSEs as objectively ‘easy’ or that A-Levels are where some more ‘authentic’ form of learning starts – this study is not an evaluative comparison of the two qualification types. It was in this point of analysis “an ethic of respect” (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018, p. 5), and Woodcock’s (2016, p. 2) call to honour the “researcher-researched” relationship in a method that respects “the voices and experiences of the human beings in their studies” was important – by not indirectly or unintentionally devaluing achievements, progress and the students’ academic journey so far. As research into student perceptions of studying GCSEs attests, participants share conceptually very similar perspectives on the ‘step up’, required skills developments and same ‘high stakes’ value and emotions involved in studying GCSEs (Rogers & Hallam, 2010; Brown & Woods, 2022); research of students making the transition to university study from sixth-forms and colleges finds an equally complex “significant leap” where they report a “need to adapt” personal systems to new learning challenges (Thompson, et al., 2021, p. 1399/1401). Instead, what emerged from this line of inquiry was a reinforcement of the literature that suggests to aid buoyancy, transition should be regarded as an “evolving process” (Packer & Thomas, 2021, p. 213), which needs to be considered from “a holistic, lifelong perspective” (Packer & Thomas, 2021, p. 212), and reflecting Smith’s (2020) findings that concepts linked to academic buoyancy (e.g. the 5Cs) often overlap and interweave.

Returning to the quest metaphor to illustrate, if we take a *micro* perspective, A-Level study can operate as a discrete quest narrative in itself; in the more life-long, *macro* perspective, SATs, GCSEs, A-Levels, university study become the lateral transition components of the student’s holistic quest. The ’image’ T1 referred to students possessing comes down in part to the fact that “mastery experiences in academic domains influence students’ beliefs of their own abilities in these domains” (Simonsmeier, et al., 2020, p. 709); arguably the achievement of GCSEs, externally awarded ‘signals’ of perceived mastery and which contribute to self-concept constructs, is ‘confronted’ or ‘contradicted’ by a shifting metric

of mastery as students progress to A-Levels. With this in mind, foregrounding the importance of an iterative approach in buoyancy models and interventions would seem to be beneficial; for example, locating the current 'stage' in terms of the 'bigger picture', adaptive to shifting contexts, and which encourage self-concepts that are framed on a continuum rather than causing 'contradiction'.

T5 articulates that there is a significant external 'narrative' that contributes this, termed earlier by T1 as the 'mythical talent', and supporting Dweck's (2006) work on the importance of possessing a 'growth' rather than 'fixed mindset' – that ability and skills are not inherent, but can be developed:

> T5: "I think there's a narrative of what achievement is and it stems all the way back through their childhood with their parents and primary school and high school."
>
> T5: "It's about sort of changing that narrative about how they overcome that kind of leap in what's required of them you know and trying to avoid it being a tough sink or swim environment."

T5's pertinent (and proactively-focused) metaphor raises an interesting notion about how deliberate actions could 'change the narrative' students are exposed to (and which is constructed externally around them). Rather than heightening the risk of a 'sink' scenario through a 'leap', which in both this and the previous section carries its definitional connotations of haste, rush or suddenness (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023a), the transition to A-Level could feel more like a controlled dive executed from the springboard of GCSE, and provide a stronger start to a more buoyant 'swim'.

In summary, these discussions around transition support Packer and Thomas' (2021) findings of the "value of listening to stakeholder voices in offering informed dialogue about what enables, supports and facilitates a successful transition process […] into post-16 settings" (p. 226); similarly, this study's findings echo their recommendations that transition support designed to positively impact academic buoyancy should be holistically focussed, incorporating the aspects that deal with the social, emotional and academic

implications of transition as identified by participants. Parallels are also to be found with their recommendation that whilst generic transition interventions might have some effectiveness for the collective, it must "be appreciated" (Packer & Thomas, 2021, p. 226) from an individual perspective as well; this is particularly relevant as a result of the FE nature of the college at which this research has been undertaken, due to its subsequent diverse range of schools and school contexts from which the incoming cohort transition, and as evidenced in experiential examples in participant responses.

The following sections move from focusing on the external narratives and factors that have emerged thematically as significant to participants' experiences of academic buoyancy to considering *narratives of self* – and further illuminate the "positive discourse of challenge, growth and achievement" (Hernandez-Martinez, et al., 2011, p. 119).

5.6 Themes: Narratives of Self – The Hero's Story: Past, Present & Future Self

One of the main aims of this exploratory study was to investigate the lived experiences of the participants; one of the key findings to emerge was not only how participants perceived their day to day academic experiences and what shaped their buoyancy, but how they conceptualised themselves in this experience. As referenced previously, a result of using the 'listening for the I' approach brought certain phrases to the forefront:

> S2: "You're like tripping yourself up for the first half hour […] it's just another contributing factor as to why you'd want to I don't know mitigate your own embarrassment almost."
>
> S10: "I'd be like oh I'll just do it later […] but I actually didn't so I just like put the pressure on myself a bit."
>
> S7: "And that's when I figured I was like I need to do something that will fix that [...] and I was like right if I keep working at this."
>
> S1: "Then you're like right I know I need to revise this topic."
>
> S2: "Personally I feel like my own my own high opinion of myself [laughs]."

Here references to 'tripping yourself up', 'mitigate your own embarrassment', 'own high opinion of myself' and conversational phrasing such as 'oh I'll just', 'you're like right I know I need to' gave the impression of an ongoing dialogue between the participant and

themself, and which plays a role in their academic buoyancy. This sense of self-dialogue evokes one of the central components of the quest metaphor: the presence of a central figure, the hero at the centre of the journey; the protagonist who makes choices, chooses courses of action, and in doing so, reveals more about who they are (Yorke, 2013), enabling them to shape, and be shaped by, their story along the way.

This self-dialogue reflects literature exploring the role that academic self-efficacy (the term Martin et al. (2010) equate to Confidence in the 5Cs) and academic self-concept (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003) can play in academic buoyancy, and how the courses of action that people choose can depend on how they construe themselves - the "subjective convictions" that are "heavily rooted in one's past" and can "play a determining role" in future development (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 2). This field of study is broad, and includes debate about whether the two constructs are in fact distinct (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003); this study has drawn on Bong and Skaalvik's (2003) conclusion that whilst they share similar features, they also possess distinct components, and uses their definitions of academic self-concept as "individuals' knowledge and perceptions about themselves in achievement situations", and academic self-efficacy as "individuals' convictions" about how they will be able to "successfully perform given academic tasks" (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 6). These concepts are echoed in S5 and S9's comments:

> S9: "If you do an exam and in the exam before you got really good marks and then you drop the same marks that's what I did like say I got five out of five in one question in [assessment] 4 and then I did the exact same question in [assessment] 5 and then I got zero out of five it's just kind of like that really disheartens you […] just makes you think […] you're going to do the same thing in the end of year exams."
>
> S5: "I held out a bit of hope that it would get better."

S9 indicates their academic buoyancy was shaped by self-concept, generated by different performances in two assessments and which resulted in the self-efficacy assessment that this could result in potential limited future performance. S5, in contrast, expresses positive self-efficacy, and a buoyant conviction for successful future performance through 'hope' for 'better'. Here S5 and S9's contrasting perceptions illuminate Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of *possible selves*, where participants' self-concept can be influenced by

the potential selves they could become, including the selves they would like to become, and the selves they are afraid of becoming. Markus and Nurius (1986) cite possible selves as being significant concepts not only for a person's current perception of self, but also because they function as incentives for future behaviour; as illustrated by S5, a future possible self acts as a motivating factor.

These comments also illustrate the 'time orientation' component to these concepts: self-concepts being past-oriented and created from students' historical experiences; self-efficacy perceptions future-oriented, confidence about forecasted future accomplishments (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Topics previously discussed highlight past experiences that can affect both self-concept and self-efficacy: *frames of reference* (social comparison standards against which to judge, e.g. GCSE grades); *reflected appraisals from significant others* (e.g. parent perceptions of grades); *mastery experiences* (e.g. formative A-Level assessments taken so far); *physiological reactions* (e.g. caused by emotional component of high stakes exams) (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). What emerged through the self-dialogue in the data set though was an interesting perspective on how participants perceived the role of themselves in relation to influencing their own self-efficacy and self-concept and how this could shape academic buoyancy:

> S2: "I think the main one that's going to have the biggest impact on somebody in the first year of A-Levels is going to be confidence [...] confidence to be outgoing […] and I would also say confidence in your own ability."
>
> S9: "Willing to keep improving and then if they've got like a top grade if we go back to grades it's like staying at that grade and trying your best not to drop down again and then also pulling your grades up in your other subjects as well it's like how hard you're willing to try to get […] something good out of your time at College."
>
> S2: "Be willing to talk to people."
>
> S8: "I also realise from speaking to my peers."
>
> S3: "I think the first two [assessments] are really like pivotal because I thought I did awful in my formals I thought I did awful but I did quite well and I think that boosted my confidence a lot."

As indicated above, and illustrating Bong and Skaalvik's (2003) finding that self-concept and self-efficacy are about "studying the self" (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 32), each

participant identifies their own actions, beliefs and emotions, and the process of reflecting on them, as a resource from which they fuel their own buoyancy. These "webs of significance" which are "spun" by the individual (Geertz, 1973, p. 311) support Nurjamin et al.'s (2023) findings that the skill of engaging in "dynamic evaluations of themselves" is an important part of students being able to "forge their own distinctive routes to achievement" (p. 1).

This focus on the importance of 'distinctive routes' also emerged from the data, illustrating that buoyancy is a highly individual concept as a result of the fact that, even if in seemingly similar scenarios, people can "arrive at drastically different" perceptions (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 24); this is demonstrated by participants through a difference in experiential perception of performance on formative assessments taken so far on the A-Level course:

> S8: "If you get three As and there's no room for like a learning curve again it's something a lot of people don't understand people that don't do A-Levels […] what I meant by learning curve is if you are just getting good grades constantly then you'll have no motivation to do better."

Whilst S9's earlier comment suggested higher performance followed by lower performance was a potential buoyancy knock, here S8 perceives achieving only good grades to be equally as emotionally affecting (Pitzer & Skinner, 2017). The phrase 'learning curve' also indicates a sense of needing sustaining over time – reiterating a central concept to academic buoyancy that it is about the 'everyday' challenges students face: here it is important to consider this as both the 'everyday' i.e. commonplace, and 'every day' i.e. the inherently ongoing nature of challenges students face throughout the timeline of their studies. This re-emphasises Nurjamin et al.'s (2023) comment that this process must be 'dynamic' and ongoing, and is demonstrated by S8 who, after commenting that successful ways of revising had been established, was asked if they would keep working in this way moving forward – to which they responded:

> S8: "Yeah unless anything else changes."

Here there is a sense that S8's academic buoyancy comes from *anticipating* and being *prepared for* the fact that future adjustments could be necessary, and that self-evaluation

benefits from being regularly undertaken, and change-ready rather than change-averse. This is a view shared by S2and S5:

> S5: “I agree with the point about pulling your grades up because in the actual mocks we did I panicked […] and I worked like super hard during the half term and then I got a C and it was just really nice knowing that the work that I’d put in got me that and then in my last one I got a B it’s nice to see the improvement.”
>
> S2: “You naturally see that dip and I feel like if you’re not prepared for that your confidence is going to dip slightly and it’s going to impact you further down the line because you’re just going to keep beating yourself up and fixating on that poor grade as opposed to actively improving it and feeding back off other people.”

S8’s earlier notion that getting something other than ‘good grades’, and S2 and S5’s comparisons of a ways of handling a situation, also indicate how the framing of mistakes and failure can be important to self-concept, self-efficacy and academic buoyancy (Kafer, et al., 2019). This reflects research by Duckworth (2016) into ‘grit’ (equated to Commitment in the 5Cs model (Martin, et al., 2010))– the combination of perseverance with maintaining a passion to achieve a long-term goal: being ‘gritty’ means you fall seven times but get up eight. In her work on psychological safety, Edmondson (2023) similarly proposes the benefits of reframing perceived failure as the “right kind of wrong” (p. 6), shifting from negative emotions around failure to “intelligent failure” (p. 10), where useful learning is generated from the process that advances the individual. Edmondson’s (2023) theory also makes an important distinction that echoes S8’s point that a learning curve resulting from challenges can play a valuable part in buoyancy: ‘intelligent failure’ brings valuable new information that “could not have been gained in any other way” (p. 16).

This sense of future time perspective (Fong & Kim, 2019), a person’s perception of the connection between present activity and future goals, emphasises that self-efficacy and self-concept contribute to self-enhancement, and the active choice of subsequent behaviours (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003), reinforcing academic buoyancy’s grounding in positive psychology (Martin & Marsh, 2008) – in the proactive rather than retroactive (Putwain & Wood, 2022). This supports recommendations in existing literature that researchers and practitioners explore approaches to helping students reframe potentially negative experiences and “form accurate yet optimistic self-perceptions” (Bong &

Skaalvik, 2003, p. 32), which enable them not only to take positive action, but to be able to evaluate these actions, and view them "as originating from their own authentic core self and desires" (Pitzer & Skinner, 2017, p. 17). Here a sense of the importance of autonomy emerges, which is further explored in the final two themes: *Companions in the Quest* and *Trial, Error, Discovery and Epiphany*.

5.7 Themes: Narratives of Self – Companions In The Quest

As identified in the quest metaphor, and in discussion so far, the hero does not undertake their journey alone – they are supported by companions along the way (Booker, 2004); the aforementioned sixth 'C', Community (Smith, 2020). Similarly, the student experience of their journey does not take place in a vacuum – whilst independence, individuality and self-evaluation are prominent factors, importance is also placed on S2's earlier-referenced concept of 'networks', without which they describe studying can be an 'isolating' experience, and impactful on their buoyancy.

> S2: "I feel like all the fundamental elements of support are your parental network your um your peers and obviously college I feel like you need to have a good amalgamation of all them in order to have proper success because otherwise you're just going to be I don't know at times a little isolated because you're not necessarily getting the support from all areas that you'd want."

S2 notes three 'companions' that were also identified across the data as being key components of buoyancy: parents/family, peers, and college/teachers. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) outlines that natural human inclination is toward growth, internalisation and that "humans act on – and are acted upon by" their environment (Van den Broek, et al., 2016, p. 1197). It argues that humans have optimal motivation when three psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Van den Broek, et al., 2016, p. 1196). Here, S2's comments convey the importance of relatedness – the need to feel connected to others (Van den Broek, et al., 2016), or how participants articulate academic buoyancy as a result of gaining the required "nutriments to function effectively" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 262).

> S1: “Yeah I think like having support outside of college is important as well because […] if I do bad in a test […] my mum will be like oh […] where did you go wrong and […] oh well at least you know what you have to do and […] you know where to like build on […] instead of just getting really mad at me because she knows I still tried.”
>
> S1: “If you’re lonely and don’t have any friends then you’re going to be like oh I don’t want to go to college I don’t know who I’m going to sit with at dinner or if I get a break I don’t know who I’m going to speak to at least like you know there’s people there that’s like a good environment good energy for you.”
>
> S7: “I guess like your home life as well.”
>
> S5: [about school teacher] “She’d always do […] revision over break and stuff that I’d go to and she made me really enjoy it.”
>
> S3: “I feel like [teachers] want to build you up if you get it wrong.”
>
> S3: “And the help from the teachers on things that I didn’t do well at was really good because I feel like I improved.”
>
> S1: “I think like your teacher and how supportive they are can affect it because I have really supportive teachers which […] help you and if you’ve done things wrong they’ll like show you where you went wrong and […] sometimes they’ll give me extra questions and they’ve also got those support Google Classroom groups to help people so giving that can […] make you more confident.”

Here participants express not only the different components that make up their support network, but also illustrate the different dimensions of academic and motivational support they find beneficial. This reflects Granziera et al.’s (2022) study of the relationship between teacher support and academic buoyancy, which found that support can be categorised into “instrumental” (resources and activities that support students to “solve academic problems and develop academic skills”) and “emotional” (p. 2) support, each of which served a distinct, important and unique role in academic buoyancy.

What emerged strongly in the data was the importance of this support both in and out of “formal learning” environments (Holdsworth, et al., 2018, p. 1846), i.e. activity where support and relationships with peers, teacher and family take place in more informal contexts – where there is a sense of *additionality* - are as influential as interactions in the classroom:

> S2: “I feel like the support of family members I feel […] is essential to just general academic success because if they make time for you to just help build you up.”
>
> S2: “Reassure you when things don’t go well and maybe help with an element of revision and just general support then that’s going to be an exceptional tool to just build you up and create that drive and motivation to keep on going and progress.”

S2’s use of ‘make time for you’ reveals the importance of what existing research terms “mattering” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p.163; Flett, et al., 2022, p.7); whilst there is an academic success component to why parental support is valuable, S2’s reference to ‘drive and motivation to keep going’ indicates that success for students has a broader definition (Flett, et al., 2022), and that mattering is a “vital resource” because it “strengthens a positive sense of self and agency” (Flett, et al., 2022, p. 10). This builds on findings by Kritikou and Giovazolias’ (2022) buoyancy research that identified support as a protective psychological factor and positive impactor when “strongly linked with feelings of hope” (Flett, et al., 2022, p. 10).

Legault (2020, p. 6) identified that “the manner” of support is also critical, a fact illuminated by S4 and S1:

> S4: “Um I think that friends’ motivations are a really big factor cos if you’re surrounding yourself by people who aren’t motivated it’s like its things like what they do for example if they’re going out more and all your friends they’re not very motivated they’re always going out you’re going to end up being like that.”
>
> S1: “Even in class […] you can just ask your friend what they got just to make yourself feel a bit better.”

Here S4 and S1 illustrate an important distinction between possessing a social network and what Stubbs et al. (2023b) identify as “meaningful friendships” (p. 77), which are an important part of students making a positive transition, enjoying and succeeding in their studies. Drawing on relationship motivation theory, what emerged from the data was a keen sense that relationships were essential to buoyancy, especially when they were “optimal” and “authentic”, and where “each partner supports the autonomy, competence and relatedness needs of the other” (Legault, 2020, p. 6).

Whilst parents and peers were identified as important, the predominant expression of this was linked to student-teacher relationships:

> S1: “Sitting down with her doing that helps us because you know she’s the teacher obviously she can help you with what you’re doing.”
>
> S3: “So my teacher like instead of just saying you did awful […] She helped me through the topic helped me to understand it and I got a better mark next time.”
>
> S4: “I think it’s like just being able to go to your teachers say I’ve done this […] question please can you mark it and I think there’s some teachers where it’s like they’ve like already explicitly said they’d be happy to […] mark stuff.”
>
> S5: “Well I know that if I’m […] doing any revision if I don’t get anything I can […] talk to them after lesson and they’ll help me understand it […] I had a talk with my […] teacher and she helped make a plan for over the half term and then I just like stuck with that plan every day.”
>
> S6: “More comfortable asking questions to and they’re more offering of […] support.”
>
> S7: “You can still go up to your teacher and ask I don’t understand this can we go over it and they will do that.”
>
> S8: “They run a lot of support sessions […] and within those you can receive one to one support.”
>
> S9: “I think that if um like you were saying if […] a teacher says that they’re happy to mark any questions you’ve got […] it will give like me more motivation to do more work for that subject because I know that the teacher will also put in um the effort on the other side as well.”

The responses from participants identify that the way in which student-teacher relationships can impact buoyancy has multiple dimensions: *interpersonal relationship*, where the student connects with *who* the teacher as a person (S1: ‘she’s the teacher obviously she can help you’); *substantive relationship*, the student’s connection with *what* the teachers says and the tasks they assign (S5: ‘she helped me make a plan’); and, *pedagogical relationship*, where the student connects with *how* the teacher communicates subject matter and tasks (S3: ‘instead of just saying you did awful’/S8:’They run a lot of support sessions’) (Martin & Burns, 2014, p. 7).

S5 and S9’s confident ‘I know that’ also illustrate the importance of relationships having “stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 500); this reinforces the findings from previous academic buoyancy

research where participants identified negative impacts, setbacks and challenges as a result of a lack of adaptability and flexibility from their teachers (Irwin, 2022), or "feeling ignored, patronised or cajoled" resulting in "communicative barriers" and "foreclosed opportunities" to make positive progress (Stubbs, et al., 2023a, pp. 486-7). This is illustrated by S8's example where the way study activities are given to students by the teacher open up opportunities for valuable - and valued - communication:

> S8: "It's at your own pace and […] it's a lot easier for you to understand what's going on and then when you go through it in class that's when you can ask any questions cos you'll have the questions ready beforehand so I think it's really useful in that sense."

As indicated by the proactive language used by participants here and in earlier comments ('you'll have the questions ready'/'sitting down with her'/'she helped me through the topic'/'being able to go to'/'I've done this…please can you'/'I had a talk with'/'asking questions'/'I don't understand this can we'), a strong concept to emerge here was the importance to student academic buoyancy of participation, collaboration and the sense of being involved in a *learning dialogue*. Rather than "passive acceptance" (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 78), didacticism (Friere, 1996), or a hindering culture of "giving directives or commands, using controlling language, providing answers, over-praising and spoon-feeding" (Kritikou & Giovazolias, 2022, p. 10), participants' responses indicated that academic buoyancy was positively impacted by an environment and relationships which were "sensitive and responsive to their needs" and would "help them navigate" uncertainty and challenge (Granziera, et al., 2022, p. 10). Rather than being passively navigated, an emphasis emerged on the student being an active collaborator engaged in constructive interactions (Dziubinski, 2014).

In terms of participation, an interesting point arose about relationships with peers, which echoes the tension introduced earlier by S1 and S4 and the different impacts peers can have. This emerged again in discussions about perceived in-class peer dynamics:

> S2: "Weight of judgement from your peers."
>
> S3: "Say you're asked a question and you get it wrong […] you feel like everyone's judging you."

As S3's phrasing of 'you feel like' suggests, students' perceptions of belonging (Goodenow, 1993) is significant, and reflect the view that individual morale is subject to, and a product of, group identification (Wigley, 2004). Existing literature discusses the fact that learning is as much social as educational, and "classroom climate" (Dziubinski, 2014, p. 470) where learners are experiencing "new social circles" (Packer & Thomas, 2021, p. 221) are critical sites that play a significant role in how a student feels themselves to membership in the educational environment (Goodenow, 1993). Whilst a lot of focus is given to the teacher's role in constructing that climate, here S2 and S3 identify that peers play as impactful a part. This is reinforced by S2 who discusses the positive impact a social, participatory classroom climate can have:

> S2: "I feel like that's helped me loads just the ability to speak and bounce off bounce ideas off people […] it pedals your motivation to do well."

Staff participants reflected on examples where the academic buoyancy of students appeared linked to participation as a result of positive peer relationships:

> T2: "Those students that maybe come in with a core of people they already know from school who can bed themselves a little bit more into the course I think that […] they've tended to be in and applying themselves um throwing themselves into the course a little bit more even things outside the classroom."
>
> T1: "It's the chemistry of the class the balance of the class."
>
> T2: "Groups who absolutely bounced off each they wanted to debate they wanted to throw themselves in a lot more […] the dynamic of the class […] can definitely have some impact."
>
> T3: "Their close friendship in class and the dynamic that they have egging each other on and supporting each other I think that has meant that both of them have pushed on further […] so a big thing is their […] own friendship."

This is reinforced by S1, who identifies specific activities they have experienced that have helped nurture this positive peer climate:

> S1: "I think at the beginning of the year you do those like introd- induction tasks when it's just silly little tasks but it makes it more of a calmer environment in the classroom because you know you're nervous […] I didn't know anybody in any of my classes."

> S1: “So I was […] nervous going into them but doing them it made it like calmer for me to speak to people […] it also helps you know different people’s interests and stuff like who you think you might get along with […] they have those enrichment clubs and even just in class we do those breakout rooms sometimes […] now I’m friends with them so it’s made it easier in college.”

This sense of “interacting cooperatively” and “building networks” (Holdsworth, et al., 2018, p. 1848) and their perceived positive impact on participation and subsequently buoyancy reflects the findings of previous research identifying enhanced student commitment fostered through participatory learning environments (Martin, 2009), as well as the recommendations by Packer and Thomas (2021) that time to meet fellow learners before starting at college was viewed advantageously by students, and that relationship development should be a “necessary focus” of transition activities (p. 225).

These “opportunities to connect” (Packer & Thomas, 2021, p. 225) were also important in student-teacher relationships, and returning to the value that S2 placed on the ‘amalgamation’ of a range of support sources in a student’s network, academic buoyancy was conveyed as being positively impacted when students had a sense of being part of an active and collaborative learning community (Dziubinski, 2014). T7’s repetition below of ‘guide/guiding’ emphasises this as a student-empowering perspective:

> T7: “Our job to use that feedback and things like that that we were talking about before to […] guide students towards how they then actually meet that challenge […] there’s definitely something for us in guiding students towards that challenge.”

Revisiting an earlier point – proactive language is used by students repeatedly in relation to their role in activities, making them the agent of their education (’I’ve done this…please can you’); role-and-knowledge makers rather than takers (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997). Previous studies have discussed the potentially limiting impact teacher-student power dynamics can have on buoyancy – power imbalance reducing meaningful engagement and the development of self-regulation skills (Shafi, et al., 2018); however, this study shared Dziubinski’s (2014) findings that there was in fact a “notion of teacher-student power balance” which enabled “teachers and students to engage in dialogue” (p. 475). Students’ positive experiences of this ‘dialogue’ emerged through the aforementioned proactive language, and were reiterated with direct references by staff:

> T3: “You’ll have a dialogue in the marking which is good.”
>
> T1: “I think it’s usually a combination of written feedback but with a follow up conversation.”
>
> T3: “Doing more small group one-to-one proper dialogue conversations with students.”
>
> T7: “I think you know it was opening up that dialogue a little bit that helped him get better […] I would kind of sit down with him and go through those questions so rather than just marking them […] instead we did it as individual live feedback sessions.”
>
> T8: “I want to know what you are doing and what you are thinking and having that kind of conversation.”
>
> T5: “When people make those absolute leaps it’s always the result of something more relationship based someone comes and has a chat with me you know.”

The impact dialogue can have on buoyancy is articulated by both staff and students as resulting in positives that span the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains; supporting findings from existing research, what emerged was a sense of appreciation of “clear, empathic, face-to-face communication” (Holdsworth, et al., 2018, p. 1847) which inspires confidence and open communication, and a “reciprocal, consistent, and dynamic relationship between individual and environment, resulting in developmental outcomes” (Bakhshaee, et al., 2017, p. 346).

As a form of feedback, this focus on a dialogue emphasises the benefits students identify of *personalised* feedback which not only guides their skills improvement and achievement, but also their psychological needs (Kritikou & Giovazolias, 2022); another important role as expressed by participants is its potential to help a student to “recognise their own role in optimising feedback use” (Shafi, et al., 2018, p. 418). This is reinforced by T1:

> T1: “A genuine ongoing part of a much bigger dialogue and I think it’s the dialogue between us as you know adults with them as young adults that’s really really important so I just echo what you’re saying really T2 that you know the tutor is the key player in that but it doesn’t always have to be the tutor that takes the lead.”

T1’s conclusion that ‘it doesn’t always have to be the tutor that takes the lead’ signals a key point under the theme of *Companions In The Quest*. Returning to the quest metaphor,

companions are essential for “positive assistance”, “periods of respite” and “crucial guidance” (Booker, 2004); however, when they take an “autonomy-supportive” role (Dziubinski, 2014, p. 470), the positive impact can be amplified, as learning is fostered as “participation, engagement, contribution, connection, experimentation, inquiry, reflection, identity” (Eckert, et al., 1997, p. 4). Returning briefly to self-efficacy and self-concept as an example, this power of a student ‘recognising their own role’ and ‘taking the lead’ adds a dimension to the possibilities and opportunities of the peer ‘network’; as well as having companions in their quest, they *become* a companion in *someone else’s quest* as their buoyancy serves as “a positive resilience source for peers” (Lei, et al., 2021, p. 620).

In summary, and as concluded in previous research, what emerged from the theme of *Companions in the Quest* were “energized students who feel like they matter” (Flett, et al., 2022, p. 27), and whose buoyancy and progress is shaped by supportive figures who encourage autonomy, development and discovery (Dziubinski, 2014), the focus of the final emerging theme: *Trial, Error, Discovery and Epiphany*.

5.8 Themes: Narratives of Self – Trial, Error, Discovery and Epiphany

The final theme to emerge from the findings is *Trial, Error, Discovery and Epiphany*. Along with academic self-efficacy, academic self-concept and relationship-based dynamics, participant responses indicated that self-determination theory (Legault, 2020) and the autonomy and competence aspects of self-regulation theory (Chih-Yuan Sun, et al., 2017) were also significant in academic buoyancy:

> S1: [referring to Kahoot the quiz tool] “And they do […] it as a bit of fun like they normally do it […] at the start of the lesson […] but if you’ve done badly well you might be like oh right this lesson might be hard then
>
> S1: “Yeah knowing where to improve and what you’ve done wrong so you can do it right next time.”
>
> S10: “I just started revising more [laughs] […] Like actually effectively as well because I used to be like oh just do it now but I’d get distracted […] But now I just focus in the [study area] and just make myself do it.”

As S1 and S10’s comments indicate, and supporting the Control and Coordination aspects of the 5Cs academic buoyancy theory (Martin, et al., 2010; Smith, 2020), it is as

much students' own *awareness* of the behaviours that they are adopting and choice to implement them that is as important to their buoyancy as the actions themselves; as self-regulation theory outlines, it is the participants' *active* engagement in the "learning process" that sees them "set learning goals, make learning adjustments and achieve goals by monitoring, regulating and controlling their cognition, motivation and behaviour" (Chih-Yuan Sun, et al., 2017, p. 717). Similarly, revisiting self-determination theory's central notion - the "fundamental humanistic assumption that individuals naturally and actively orient themselves toward growth and self-organization" (Legault, 2020, p. 4694) – is equally as prominent in participants' responses:

> S8: "Well we've done five [assessments] now and so I've trialled different […] ways of doing I tried flashcards I tried exam questions and from trying different things and putting some things together and just trying new methods of revision it finally occurred to me which one is working which one is useful so."
>
> S9: "I think also after my grade in October I kind of changed the way I revise and I just started doing I solely do flashcards for Biology and then now that I've done flashcards for all of the four topics for this year I've just moved onto um using like three percent of a tree [laughs]."

Here the psychological tenets of autonomy (the importance of feeling self-directed and free) and competence (feelings of effectiveness) that are central to self-determination theory (Legault, 2020) are expressed through S8 and S9's focus on autonomous experimentation (which gains additional emphasis through repetition of language such as 'trialled', 'tried', 'changed', 'moved onto'), as well as both the direct and implicit recognition of effectiveness ('which one is working', 'which one is useful', 'I solely do flashcards').

This reflects previous studies where A-Level students note "cultivation" (Stubbs, et al., 2023b, p. 79) of skills that impact positively on their buoyancy as *a result of* rather than *in spite of* challenges, as well as a widely established view in education that "mistakes are seen as natural elements of learning processes" (Kafer, et al., 2019, p. 731), where students perceive mistakes adaptively rather than maladaptively, evaluating them as having "function and usability" (Kafer, et al., 2019, p. 736). This can be seen in S9's comment below:

> S9: “Okay so say if I do flashcards like I’ve done them for all the different topics um you see the exam question and it’s asked in a completely different way than what I write down on my flashcards […] or it’s like an application question they’re asking you something that’s simple and if you asked me it like straightforward I’d be able to do it […] Then you mark it and you got like forty percent it’s just very humbling it’s a humbling experience [laughs].”

Here the ‘function’ of the perceived ‘mistake’ - the ‘humbling forty percent’ - identifies that whilst S9 possessed the knowledge and could operationalise it in one context (‘if you asked me it like straightforward I’d be able to do it’), what introduced the ‘usability’ was the self-regulatory process of *becoming aware themself* of the learning adjustments needed, as well as simultaneously processing the *emotional component,* in order to successfully operationalise it in a different context (‘the exam question and it’s asked in like a completely different way’). What stood out repeatedly in the data set was the *value* placed on such opportunities for the process of trial and error, discovery and epiphany, and the positive impact the firsthand, reflective experience of this had for buoyancy:

> S8: “At this point between the mock between [assessment] 4 and [assessment] 5 it just clicked that the way I’m revising is the right way.”
>
> S7: “And that’s when I figured I was like I need to do something that will fix that.”
>
> T7: [commenting on a student’s experience] **“**I think it was a challenge for her to think no I need to carry on working as hard as I’ve been working because if I work any less hard then I’m not going to do well and actually I think it was a challenge for her to see you know that she doesn’t work less hard but that she changed the way that she was working […] but actually she was seeing that her grades were getting better.”

As illustrated by the participants, this ‘discovery’ process is multifaceted – the above comments evidencing just some of the forms this experimentation might take: the type of activity (‘the way I’m revising’); the amount of work and focus of effort (e.g. T7’s account of a student’s changing perception that a reduction of work did not symbolise less effort but in fact more effective impact). S8 illustrated this further as they expanded on their comment to explain that not only had their experimentation between assessments 4 and 5 established the ‘right way’ to revise, but also:

> S8: “I found out exactly how to revise *for each of my subjects*.” [emphasis added]

This raised an interesting consideration that was echoed by both students and staff: that students might be engaged in multiple simultaneous trials and discoveries as a consequence of the fact that whilst they are studying an A-Level programme, this is comprised of three or four A-Level subjects which may have structural, content, and assessment similarities or differences. It also raised an interesting question of whether academic buoyancy sits at an holistic level (i.e. how the student manages the entirety of their study programme) or whether it has component parts: multiple buoyancies managed simultaneously.

Linked to this it is pertinent to note that it is possible for students at this FE college to study a wide range of A-Levels in an almost-unlimited combination. As T8 articulates, this itself can bring implications that might influence a student’s academic buoyancy and which they identified as an area where further investigation might be beneficial:

> T8: “Support for students that are working really interdisciplinarily […] a student who’s done Law Politics and Film and […] the skills are so very different and they’re honing those skills the same skills in Law and Politics constantly they’re doing those eleven hours a week and then […] [in Film] having to do something so very different and creative and interpretive […] they’re having to have those sort of different skills sets.”

This was also articulated by S3 as an area that was significant in their experience of studying A-Levels: one subject felt notably different from their others, highlighting what T8 referenced as the ‘interdisciplinary’ nature of their subject combination, the lived comparison of which illuminated different challenges for their buoyancy:

> S3: “One of them is a creative subject […] And that takes up a lot of time […] physically go places.”

Interestingly, S9 and T8 indicated that perceived similarity of subjects resulted in a cohesive approach to study which was beneficial for buoyancy:

> T8: “The same skills in Law and Politics constantly they’re doing those eleven hours a week.”

> S9: “For mine […] it’s all kind of just the same you learn the content you revise it you have an exam on it and then just repeat it with the next topic.”

S8, however, indicated there was more complexity to buoyancy than this; even though there was significant overlap in the subjects studied by S8 and S9, and the subjects are ones stereotypically externally viewed as possessing similar skill requirements, S8’s experience of studying those subjects was different – each identified as having a way of studying/revising perceived by S8 as individual to that subject:

> S8: “It’s different for every one […] but I know exactly how to [revise].”

Previous research has explored whether academic buoyancy is influenced by subject-specificity (Malmberg, et al., 2013; Martin, 2013). In this research it was found that students demonstrated a more “subject-general (trait-like)” (Malmberg, et al., 2013, p. 265) perception of academic buoyancy; their findings were that, regardless of perceived differences or the difficulty of studied subjects, “students held a relatively consistent opinion of their ability to ‘bounce back’ from academic setbacks” (Malmberg, et al., 2013, p. 265). This is illustrated by the differing experiences of S3, S8 and S9: buoyancy and perceptions of progress are the result of *identifying the successful way* of studying, whether that be the same for all subjects or different.

This was, however, an interesting topic in the data set which to reduce only to the above finding would be to miss some of the dimensions at play in how the notion of subject-specificity was discussed by participants:

> S4: “I think everyone has a favourite A-Level and I think it’s sort of the A-Level that you want to go down the degree route the one you’re just most interested in I think that you put the most effort in to that one really.”
>
> S1: “Because I like doing my subjects I don’t mind learning about it like you want to contribute and learn it so I think also just liking your subjects in general does really help.”
>
> S2: “Absolutely the feeling the feelings around the subjects you’re taking are essential in terms of how much of your time you dedicate to it just like your general enthusiasm within lessons which as S3 said will affect your contributions in class.”

Here S1, S2 and S4 identify that potential varying feelings about chosen A-Level subjects can bring a subject-specificity aspect to study approaches and buoyancy. Whilst feelings about cognitive difficulty/ease and performance success/failure in a subject play a role (as explored in the previous *External Narratives* sections), S4 indicates that these feelings also reflect pragmatic factors linked to the 'growth' aspect of self-determination - longer-term university and career goals linked to a particular subject bolstering feelings of buoyancy in the study of that subject. S1and S2 build on this, expressing that these 'feelings' influence an array of affective and psychomotor factors such as 'contributions', 'enthusiasm' and 'dedication'; here, the importance of feelings that inspire autonomy, competence and self-regulation, and therefore act as motivators for buoyancy, are once again reiterated. The complex nature of feelings and buoyancy appears frequently throughout the data set: having a favourite A-Level subject doesn't *de facto* mean better performance than in the others; success might not come just as a result of grades, but from enjoyment, participation and the willingness to invest dedicated time, or a link between the two. Buoyancy can also come from the simultaneous experience of seemingly paradoxical feelings, as S8 articulates:

> S8: "But I have stayed consistent now at a B […] it's been C B C B but in [assessment] 4 and [assessment] 5 it's the first time I've stayed consistent with two Bs which is…I mean I'm not proud of the B [laughs] but I'm proud of the fact that I stayed consistent."

Here, disappointment in a grade is outweighed by pride in consistency – revisiting the quest metaphor once more, the 'constrictions' and 'respites' of the journey and the subsequent developing of a 'state of readiness' are recognised as valuable in themselves, and keeping S8 buoyant.

The potential power of self-determination to positively influence buoyancy, in particular through experiences that simultaneously promote autonomy and competence, are explored in a further example of when perceived subject-specific differences have provided a firsthand comparison for S2:

> S2: "It's fine if you get it wrong because then someone's going to come in and contribute something else and then you can build off that like [Subject X] is a very subjective subject there's not necessarily a right and a wrong you don't have to be objective in your view and say well this is the facts you can

> take many different routes with it provided you work hard to give your explanation [unclear] you're going to be right and make that progress."
>
> S2: "Teenagers in general are quite opinionated for the most part we do have quite strong social and political opinions and opinions on ethics and religion […] and I feel like the influences of that the wider context of what happens in the world say if you're focusing on a novel published at a particular period of time or if you're focusing on influences on the modern day where examples of said event are present now I feel like […] that's just an extra base […] of information you can include and I feel like that's so much more beneficial […] it takes a little bit of the pressure off of getting the content itself down to the absolute fineries like within inches of correctness to some extent."

This revisits the notion of 'trial, error, discovery and epiphany'; here S2's reflections articulate the positive impacts of opportunities that put them at the centre, as an active 'shaper' of a journey that allows for difference and discovery. Not only does S2 express that subsequently this subject approach feels more effective, but also more 'beneficial' – as with S7, S8 and S9's earlier comments, here buoyancy comes not just from the reward of getting something 'right' but from a sort of 'epiphany' process, the awareness of and deliberate engagement in components of self-regulation and the learning process.

Whilst this discussion explores to some extent the existing findings on the subject-specific vs subject-general aspects of academic buoyancy (Malmberg, et al., 2013; Martin, 2013), it does not purport to have exhausted the topic; in fact it is an area in which further study at A-Level would be valuable. Instead, the focus to emerge from this discussion, and in light of the prominent theme of autonomous 'trial, error, discovery and epiphany' informed by the participants' lived experience, is instead on buoyancy and potential buoyancy intervention practices as a "dynamic process that reflects the interaction of the context and the individual" (Martin, 2013, p. 497), and through the concept of gamification (Kapp, 2012; Krath, et al., 2021).

A focus on gamification arose as a result of the intersection between the quest metaphor and the concepts of self-determination, self-regulation, autonomy, competence and the culture of experimentation that underpinned the lived experiences of the participants thus far in this section. As identified by Howard (2022), in a game design context, the word 'quest' operates as a '"middle term", a "conceptual bridge" that joins together different disciplines, such as education, psychology, literature and game design (p. xi). Similarly,

gamification is a term distinct from ‘game’, ‘serious games’, and ‘game-based learning’, which all denote contexts which incorporate “full-featured games” (Krath, et al., 2021, p. 1); instead, gamification refers to the “intentional use of game elements for a gameful experience in non-game tasks and contexts” (Seaborn & Fels, 2015, p. 17).

The idea of a ‘gameful experience’ in a non-game context featured in a variety of participant responses:

> S5: “If I’m outside the class and I’m going over something I can see something I don’t understand and I can come to the teacher after lesson […] and then say I don’t understand this can we go through it.”

Even though there is a potentially ‘quicker’ route to improvement which you might assume would be positive for buoyancy – asking the teacher – S5 articulates that this is a step that follows their own attempts: reminiscent of ‘taking turns’ in a board game, or making an attempt at a level in a video game then having the option to press the ‘restart level’ button. Similarly, S8 talks in terms of achievements:

> S8: “I might have an achievement after this session or somebody else might have one the week after.”

Here, the phrasing of ‘have an achievement’ evokes “game elements” (Krath, et al., 2021, p. 2), some of the “motivational mechanisms” (Krath, et al., 2021, p. 6) such as points, badges or levels built into games that reward or signify progress. S8’s reference to potential different temporal points of achievement for different people (‘I might […] this session […] somebody else might […] the week after’) also echoes features of gameplay: multiplayer board games often feature different achievement points and pace for their players (e.g. think Monopoly where players are making their way individually around the board, amassing property at different rates), and in the world of video games, one player might complete a level on the first attempt, whereas another player might need multiple attempts, where each attempt hones the skills required. This concept is articulated in numerous ways by S1:

> S1: “I think she just put extra work on and then once you had to get like a consistent grade to move out of the group so you stay in that group for as long as you need which is good.”

> S1: “It can help you progress better like doing those extra questions and getting the extra work.”
>
> S1: “She told us to make a flashcard on this answer and then for like two or three weeks later she’d always give us that question.”

S1’s comments reflect the findings of a systematic review undertaken by Krath et al. (2021) into research on gamification: that gamification can improve motivation (S1: ‘stay in that group as long as you need which is good’), learning behaviours (S1: ‘doing those extra questions’), as well as learning outcomes (S1: ‘get a consistent grade’). S1’s reference to ‘extra work’ and ‘two or three weeks later’ also indicate another finding of the review: gamification can be impactful in contexts where motivation “fades over time”, or where there is a requirement for “continuous learning” (Krath, et al., 2021, p. 14).

Krath et al. (2021) are clear to point out in their systematic review of gamification that in much research there has been coverage of “whether […] how and why” gamification works, resulting in their findings of a “great variety of 118 different theoretical foundations” (Krath, et al., 2021, p. 14), as visualised in the Literature Review, and which illuminate a complex picture. Howard (2022) cautions that “sceptics” might “doubt the worth” of games due to their fantasy settings (p. 9), recommending in similarity to Krath et al. (2021), that the field of gamification is an important one for cross-application into educational settings and future research in order to advance its effective application. Derived from Krath et al.’s (2021, p. 15) systematic review were ten principles of gamification:

> Through game elements such as points, levels, badges, quests, and many more, gamification can transparently *illustrate goals* and their relevance, lead users through *guided paths* to goal-oriented activities, give users *immediate feedback* and *reinforce good performance* positively, and *simplify content* to manageable tasks. The gamification mechanics can allow users to *pursue individual goals* and *choose between several different progress paths*, while the gamified systems can *adapt tasks and complexity* to the user’s abilities. Social gamification elements may enable *social comparison* and *connect users* to support each other and work towards a common goal.

These principles emerged as significant in terms of academic buoyancy across student and staff responses:

> S1: “I think even though it’s like on the board it can be quite competitive it still helps you because you know if it says on your phone you’re last place then you’re like right I know I need to revise this topic and if you’re in the top five you’re like right I know this topic quite well because sometimes I’ll do really well on the Kahoot but then sometimes I’ll be doing worse so I’m like right I know which topic I need to spend more time on.”

S1 in discussing the benefits of game-based digital quiz tool Kahoot, articulates the importance of *immediate feedback*, and which either *reinforces good performance* or which acts as a *guided path* to *illustrate goals/simplify content* to manageable tasks. It also draws on parallels to Howard’s (2022) work on quest game design, which stresses the importance of gameplay being “both ‘progressive’ and ‘systematic’” as well as “goal-oriented”, thus “creating a compelling storyline that will motivate ongoing play” (p. 6); as S1 describes, whether the outcome is ‘top five’ or ‘last place’, additionally linking to the social gamification principles identified by Krath et al. (2021), both result in academic buoyancy: a compulsion to continue to play.

The remainder of Krath et al.’s (2021) principles of gamification emerge in S8 and T5’s responses:

> S8: “I think because it’s different for every student everybody has a different realisation point or a different progress point it’s really difficult for the College to do that but they could do something that was like continuous I don’t know every week do something every month […] like a little event […] but I don’t think it can be tailored to every student because it’s different for everyone.”
>
> S8: “It is very different for everyone so one way will work for somebody else which won’t work at all for me.”
>
> T5: “I think that they’ve got to kind of almost relearn learning.”

Here S8’s response indicates the importance of being able to *pursue individual goals* and *adapt tasks and complexity* to the individual in relation to buoyancy, with an acknowledgement that interventions might not be tailorable across all students. Again, parallels to Howard’s (2022) work on quest game design emerge: “quests are about action that is meaningful to a player on the level of ideas, personal ambitions […] This is what sets them apart as an especially rich and important gaming activity” (p. xii) Just as *Pac-Man*’s attempt to “gobble all the white dots” (Howard, 2022, p. xii) is not considered

a meaningful quest, educational gamification must focus on meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003), placing “the emphasis on balancing meaning and action” (Howard, 2022, p. xiii) as evidenced in S7, T2 and T8’s responses:

> S7: “Even though it’s not three hours every day or something I’ll get something done […] I’ve watched a video or done a worksheet I’ve done something that’s the consistency so that that’s kind of my idea when I make proper progress.”
>
> T2: “Setting them mini targets and working through things step by step.”
>
> T8: “That sort of very goal orientated action planning.”

By focusing on “strategic actions” which have short-term and long-term “thematic, narrative, and personal implications” for the player, and incorporating feedback on these actions, the “outcome of one’s choices” becomes “strategically intelligible” (Howard, 2022, p. xiii). T5 reiterates this notion:

> T5: “I think that they’ve got to kind of almost relearn learning.”

Here T5 discusses the experience of studying A-Levels as being a bit like having to ‘relearn learning’; the students’ journey requiring “a complex quest system of intersecting, forking, and shifting “side quests”” (Howard, 2022, p. 9), but which ultimately leads them confidently to their goals. Here T5’s concept of ‘relearning’ learning reflects a challenge by Hernandez-Martinez, et al. (2011) to some practices that focus on making the transition for A-Level students smoother by making college and activities at college more like school; as they argue, and as is the way with many gamification models, it is the change, the ‘step-up’ and the associated increased challenge, that offers the sense of development, the ‘strategic intelligibility’.

Another important aspect is that this ‘meaning’ and the potential positive impact of a gamification framework on academic buoyancy, results from “performative activity” (Howard, 2022, p. 3) – the causing of events through deliberate cognitive and imaginative effort rather than passive observation or consumption (Howard, 2022). Here the players of the game can, as per Krath et al.’s (2021) principles, *choose between several different*

progress paths, and the importance of gamification puts the "primary focus on player action" so as to deliberately "complicate and enrich […] awakening the latent potential for variety and activity" (Howard, 2022, p. 10) This is further indicated by T5's identification of the importance of students being able to:

> T5: "Learn with initiative."

It is also emphasised with an almost cautionary comment from S8:

> S8: "It'll be different for everyone a lot of teachers won't realise they'll try and impose their own methods of revision upon you and think it'll work."

In summary, this reiterates once again a resonant message which has emerged from the lived experience of participants under the theme of *Trial, Error, Discovery and Epiphany*: self-determination and self-regulation play an important part in academic buoyancy. To return to the metaphorical quest, autonomy and experimentation, not 'imposition', are critical in the hero's journey, and their development, and self-development, of a 'state of readiness' where they are supported and empowered to navigate current or future trials:

> *I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship*
>
> *Little Women* (Alcott, 2008, p. 489)

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a synthesised summary of the main findings of my research study, drawing conclusions in relation to the research questions identified in Chapter 1. This chapter will also explore recommendations which have emerged from the key findings, designed to promote and support first-year A-Level students' academic buoyancy. These are recommendations that I consider relevant to furthering my own professional practice and context, but which will hopefully prove informative or useful to colleagues, and the wider education field, even if only as a result of the fact that they are shaped by the experience, perspectives and, most importantly, voice of students.

6.2 Summary of Findings: Emergent Themes

This research has addressed its central aims: to explore the concept of academic buoyancy, its influencing factors, including what promotes or challenges it, from the lived experience of first-year A-Level students and tutors at an FE college. In undertaking this exploration I wanted to establish what factors A-Level students and tutors perceived as influential in their progress and academic buoyancy, as well as to understand opportunities for intervention to support students' academic buoyancy, and informed *by* these crucial stakeholders.

The research questions at the heart of this research were:

- What are first-year A-Level students' and tutors' perceptions of the influencing factors in first year A-Level students' academic buoyancy?
- What are first-year A-Level students' and tutors' perceptions of what supports or impacts first-year students' academic buoyancy

In relation to both questions, it is clear from the findings that there are both external and internal factors that shape and support students' academic buoyancy. What also emerged from the findings however, is that this was a nuanced and complex matter – that factors

were not always clearly delineated as either negatively or positively affecting academic buoyancy. For example, a factor that might be a buoyancy 'limiter' for one student is operationalised as a 'motivator' for another (e.g. a dip in grades).

Whilst this study has explored the themes under notional 'external' and 'internal' headings, they are inevitably and inherently interwoven; this study has conceptualised this through the quest metaphor in order to illuminate each emerging factor's unique components, but also how they operate as part of an overall narrative. The quest metaphor has also been utilised to articulate how the 'terrain' which must be explored by students is formed from the combination of these external and internal influencing factors: quantitative, national expectations and measures; relationship dynamics; personal reflections. Similarly, the quest metaphor illuminates how academic buoyancy is perceived as a result of the 'constrictions' and 'respites', an embracing (rather than avoidance) of the challenges and victories along the way, including those brought by companions, and those brought by self. Ultimately, the quest metaphor also illuminates that whilst the study of A-Levels is the pursuit of an "all-important goal" (Booker, 2004, p. 83), that goal is not limited to qualification grades, university or careers, but has less tangible, more developmental dimensions: it is as much a journey of the self, where effort, persistence, hard work, problem-solving and autonomy are prized as just as precious. Finally, the quest metaphor reflects that the journey is as much an emotional as a cognitive one, influenced by past, present and future experiences, and where positive self-perspective, the reframing of challenges, and hope, optimism and the promise of potential are powerful sources of buoyancy.

The external narratives that emerged were shaped by both national, societal factors, but also more localised influences or as a result of direct relationships, and were expressed through the importance of A-Level grades, the opportunities that A-Levels were seen to unlock (e.g. careers, university), and the significance that decision-making around A-Level subjects possessed. Whilst a perception emerged from participants of a *high stakes environment*, where there was an element of risk and associated pressure (terminal exams, entry criteria requirements, the choice of 4 or 3 A-Levels) that form the setbacks and challenges of academic life, what was increasingly interesting as this study

progressed was that this *high stakes environment* was in itself a source of academic buoyancy. The challenges and high stakes format were largely presented through a more positive discourse of growth, challenge and achievement. Whilst the clarification of the areas that pose challenges was insightful, what emerged as important from this finding was the significance of how students frame events impacts upon buoyancy – for example, whilst there is evidence in the literature that the management of 4 A-Levels posed challenges that could have a deleterious effect on their academic buoyancy (e.g. self-critique), participants in this study had reframed this for its benefits: it allowed them to experience different avenues of interest; it enabled them to keep their options open; it had been a valuable insight into their own working practices. What emerged from this was the importance of supporting students to engage in practices that promote evaluation from a perspective that is accurate, optimistic and holistic. What also emerged was the importance of a future-time perspective – that strategies that might support students to forecast or hypothesise future events, not only for their potential challenges, but their opportunities and outcomes, may also be beneficial due to their conceptual link to academic buoyancy's proactive rather than reactive stance.

Another aspect of external narratives was the emergence of *expectations and perceptions* as an influencing factor on buoyancy. Here two points of significance were raised by participants: parents/family expectations and the impact of transition from GCSE/school to A-Level /college. In relation to parents, two points of interest were noted as influencing academic buoyancy: parents' understanding of the A-Level curriculum and its associated grading; and parents' understanding of the *experience* of studying A-Levels. Whilst in my previous practitioner experience I had encountered the former, it was the latter, and how students articulated it, that brought a refreshed perspective. Participant comparisons of their study day to their parents' workday, which they felt were equivalent in complexity, challenge, demand and responsibility, revealed a perception of disconnection between participants and parents when comparing their respective 'work days'. What emerged from this was a reaffirmed expectation from my practitioner experience – that interventions focused on communication and collaboration with parents is key, and that support to facilitate parents' understanding of A-Level study, both from an information (structure, content, assessment) but also an experiential perspective (the workload,

cognitive, affective and its psychomotor demands, its parallels to their own lived experiences, e.g. employment) are valuable in supporting students' academic buoyancy.

This is linked to another significant *expectation and perception* identified as an influencing factor on buoyancy: the transition from GCSE/school to A-Level/college. Whilst the 'step up' in complexity and scale is a well-documented aspect facing first-year A-Level students, nuances within both the concept of transition and academic buoyancy emerged as part of this exploration. For example, there may in fact be 'dimensions' of 'step-up' happening simultaneously, e.g. a 'step up' caused by comparing A-Level study with previous GCSE study in a subject, but also a 'step up' caused by the fact that there has been no prior study of a subject. As well as adjustments in complexity, standards and subject knowledge, participants also explored logistical adjustments, again signposting the complexity of educational transition. In this instance, participants at this FE college reported that transition required adjustments to 'personal systems' as a result of complexity of study, but also changes in study location, timetable, travel, social groups, pace, as well as increased independence. Here a return to academic buoyancy as a holistic concept emerged, indicating the importance of pre-transition and transition activities that focus on authentic experience of A-Levels, as well as support to effectively conceptualise and manage the multiple skills, knowledge, behaviour and emotional dimensions of transition. Of particular interest to this researcher was also the comparison that emerged between studying and sport as participants talked about 'mental recovery' and time to stop and process and its benefits to academic buoyancy. This is illuminated in the quest metaphor as the important function of 'respite', and where academic buoyancy intervention potentially shares parallels with approaches synonymous with the world of sport, where there is a deliberate, crafted balance between practise and performance, rest and recovery, the physical and the mindset.

In addition to external factors participants' viewed as influencing academic buoyancy, the topic of transition also raised internal factors – factors which I consider to have emerged as prominent in the findings of this study. In terms of transition this was illuminated by exploration of identity and sense of self-related concepts raised by issues of academic self-concept where A-Level students' current experiences are shaped by how they

compare themselves to perceived past mastery. What emerged from this discussion was the importance of pre-transition and transition interventions which focus on conceptualising evaluations of self being as viewed on a continuum – rather than the 'step up' to A-Level from GCSE generating a 'confrontation' within a student's self-perception, they are situated in a 'bigger picture' narrative, where current or future challenge is in fact a springboard not a 'leap' into the deep end.

Alongside academic self-concept, academic self-efficacy and the importance of internal narratives and beliefs, or the dialogue students engage in with themselves, were significant in their academic buoyancy. What emerged from this discussion was the importance to academic buoyancy of strategies and approaches that encourage students to 'study the self' and engage in ongoing dynamic self-evaluations. This is beneficial to academic buoyancy for a number of reasons. It encourages a reframing of concepts such as 'failure', promoting instead 'intelligent failure' (Edmondson, 2023, p. 10), valuable exactly because information gained could not have been gained in any other way. It also reflects that whilst general, group-focused interventions to support students have their place, there is also an inherently individual aspect to academic buoyancy, illustrated in this study by very different reactions to seemingly similar scenarios, and by a fundamental ethos of the importance of autonomy that ran throughout the findings.

Self-determination (autonomy, competence and relatedness) and self-regulation were significant in shaping academic buoyancy. Students expressed the importance of having an agentic role, where they are not just active participants, but discoverers and shapers of their own development and success; they may be guided by their quest companions (teachers, parents and peers) along the way, receiving instrumental and emotional support, but the most valued 'networks' are those that promote collaboration, a learning dialogue, and are autonomy-supportive. A number of considerations arose from this. Firstly, academic buoyancy was 'optimally motivated' when relationships made students feel like they 'mattered'. An important point to emerge in the findings was that this applied at peer level as much as in parent/teacher dynamics, and that consideration of maximising opportunities to forge strong peer dynamics pre-transition and in the initial stages of transition had been a positive influence on academic buoyancy. Another

interesting point to emerge was that participants articulated really clearly the positive impact that collaborating with their peers, learning from them, bouncing ideas off them, had had for their own buoyancy; however, what was less evident was whether they perceived themselves as a positive resource for the buoyancy for others - encouraging learners to recognise the important role that they can play in their peers' development could further contribute to a buoyant climate and collaborative learning dialogue.

Additionally, the importance of an agentic role on academic buoyancy was articulated through the significance participants placed on autonomous experimentation: where they could individually and independently seek out, or where teachers encouraged, opportunities to learn through trial, error, and discovery – and importantly removing 'imposition'. Participants evoked through their experiences the potential significance of maximising opportunities for, and the use of, concepts and elements of gamification in both formal and informal educational contexts (i.e. class time and independent time). Participant discussion echoed the importance of putting the primary focus on the player, deliberate 'step ups' and complications, and visible and intentional blending of meaning and action, so as to encourage a compulsion to continue playing – the gaming industry's equivalent of academic buoyancy.

6.3 Summary of Findings: Academic Buoyancy and 'The 5Cs' Model

Whilst not a hypothesis or framework-testing driven study, it has been shaped by Martin and Marsh's (2006) work in which they proposed the 5C model. As can be seen from the diagram below, the emergent themes, sub-themes and linked concepts discussed thus far map largely to the 5 factors identified as being predictors of academic buoyancy. This diagram also illustrates that these concepts are interwoven – themes emerging from the findings that 'fell between' the 5Cs in terms of how they can impact buoyancy. As can also be seen by the diagram, this study also supports Smith's (2020) subsequent work on academic buoyancy which notes the addition of a sixth C - 'Community'; prominent in this study's findings was not only the influence that external perceptions and expectations can have in shaping academic buoyancy, but also the importance participants placed on a network of people that supported them in their journey. Not only do they act as guidance

and emotional support, but also as people to 'bounce off', learn from and in doing so further shape their journey of academic and personal development. This study also supports both Martin and Marsh (2006) and Smith's (2020) recommendations that this is a useful framework around which to design, develop and implement academic buoyancy-focused interventions.

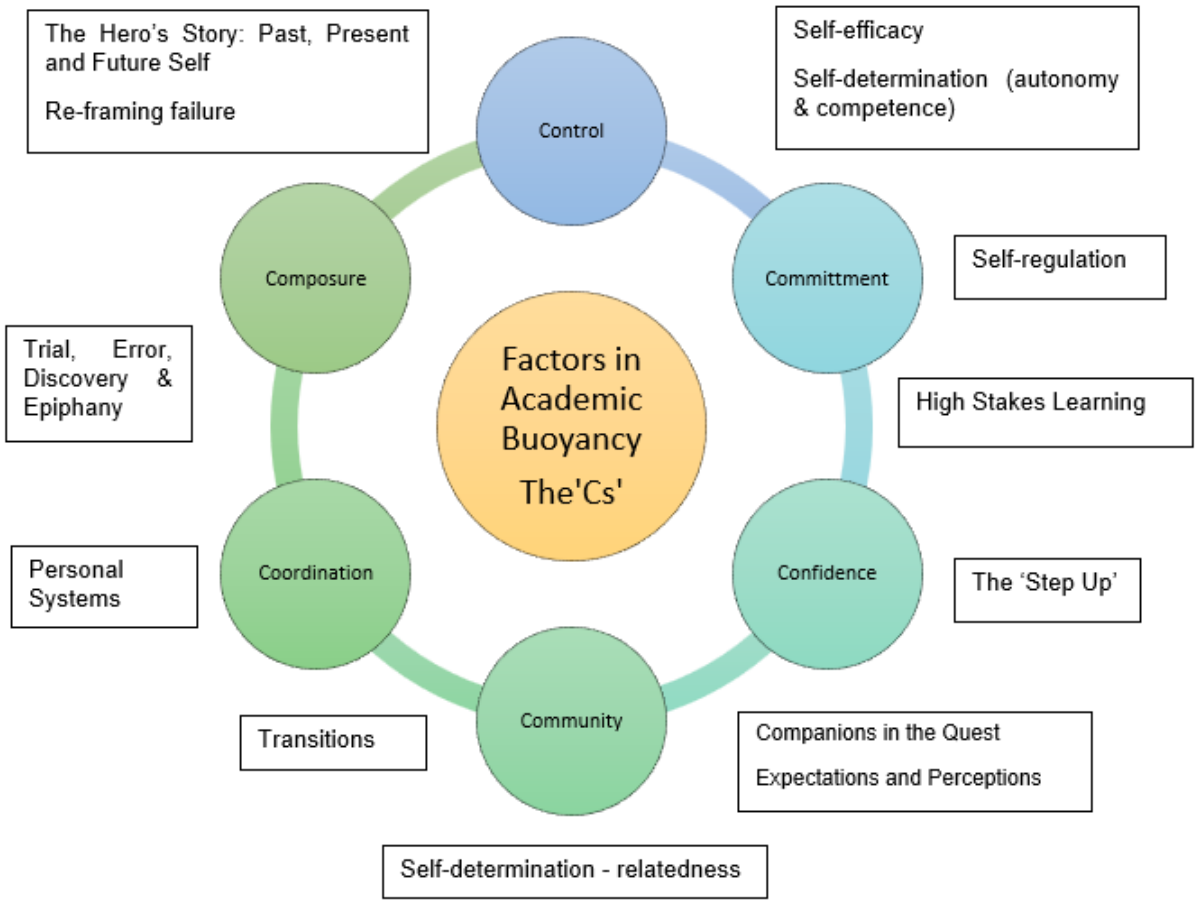

Figure 6-1 - Thematic mapping to existing theories of Academic Buoyancy - Martin and Marsh's 5Cs (2006) and Smith's 6th C (Smith, 2020)

I did, however, feel that two concepts that emerged powerfully from this research, whilst they could be absorbed into the existing 'Cs', would benefit from being more explicitly and discretely articulated in any model of academic buoyancy: Continuum and Curiosity.

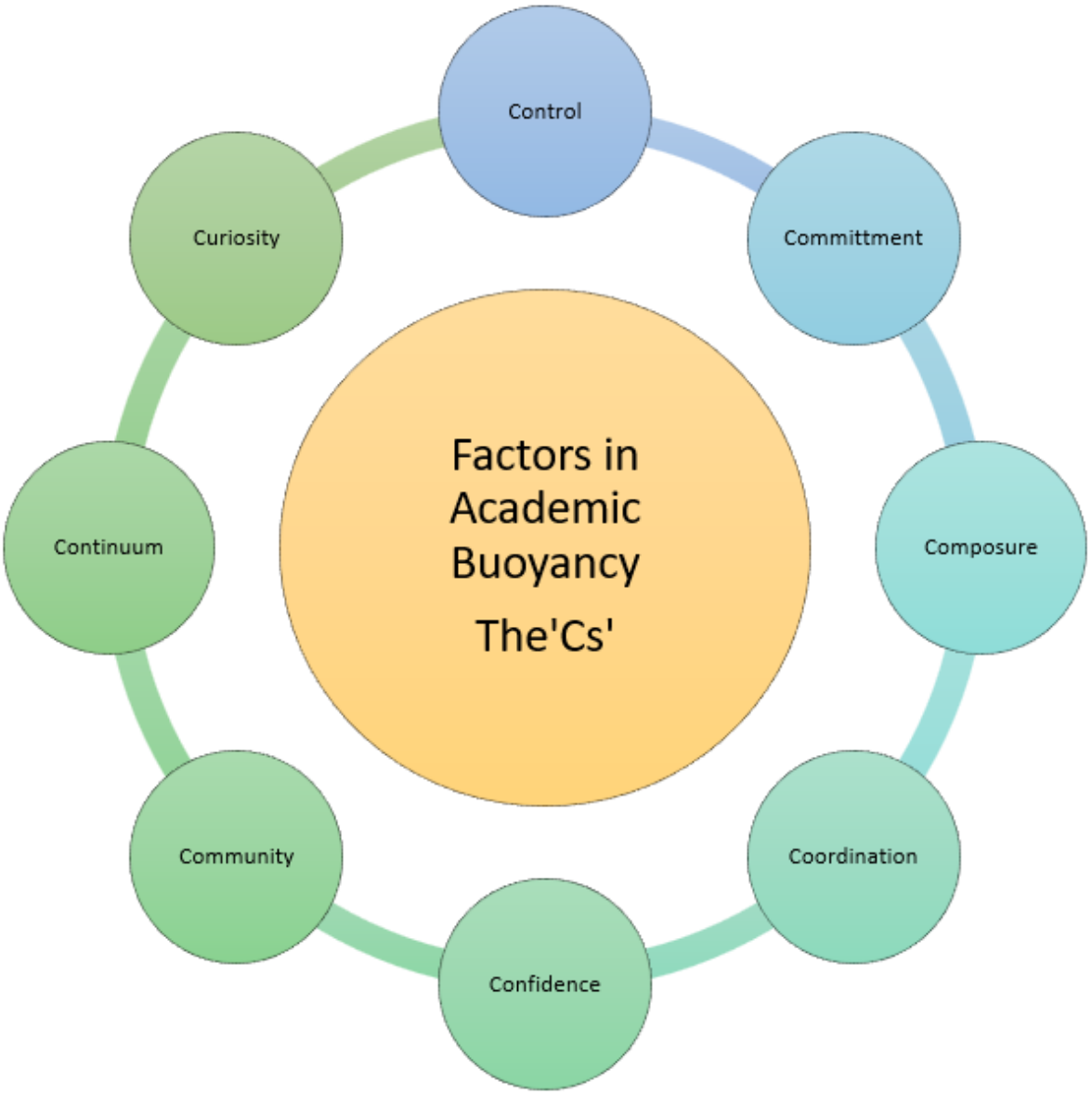

Figure 6-2 - Proposed 8C model for Academic Buoyancy

The decision to recommend these two 'Cs' as discrete has been informed by both *what* participants said and *how* they articulated it – driven ultimately by my underpinning aim to give a sense of the 'authentic' lived experience of the participants. The concept of 'Continuum' was influenced by the prominence that factors of transition had in the narratives – that academic buoyancy was influenced by how A-Levels were positioned as a *transition from* GCSE/School but also as preparation for *transition to* participants' next steps. Whilst it would be easy to locate this under aspects such as 'Control' or

‘Commitment’, this felt that it lost some of the nuance of the participants’ experience. In particular, if absorbed under other categories I felt a sense of it being a *transition by* was lost – in danger of not reflecting the personal, individual development that participants evoked so strongly. Similarly the concept of Continuum recognises that a factor in academic buoyancy has temporal elements to it – it is shaped by past, present and future considerations; it also emerged from the findings that academic buoyancy has an iterative and ongoing component, where regular evaluation and recalibration, alongside a ‘state of readiness’ for potential future adjustments has positive impacts. An additional aspect is that students are on a continuum in their journey between the external, public influencing factors and their own internal, personal factors; it was interesting to consider that they are also on a continuum of support – theirs is both a highly individual, independent journey, but also one undertaken collaboratively. It is a journey in which they have both starring role, and potentially play a fundamental role in someone else’s journey. It is therefore proposed that interventions that encourage students to conceptualise the continuum that they are on would be beneficial in supporting academic buoyancy. It also foregrounds considerations for practitioners and institutions about when opportunities for intervention for academic buoyancy might be operationalised and optimised, e.g. pre-course, transition to course, ongoing throughout the course, as well as considerations around sequencing of potential interventions and support.

The second proposed addition to the model – ‘Curiosity’ - and interventions that encourage students to develop and implement a ‘state of curiosity’ to support academic buoyancy, are also shaped by some of these factors, in particular the aforementioned focus on reflective, evaluative individual development. Again, it would be easy and relevant to absorb this concept under an existing area of the model; for example, students taking ownership of their learning, or demonstrating implementation of effective learning behaviours in order to influence their outcomes, could arguably be categorised under the original notion of ‘Control’. This study, however, makes the case that to categorise it in this way would minimise and thereby be in danger of undervaluing what emerged powerfully from participant responses. This study argues that ‘Control’ does not adequately account for how participants reframed concepts such as failure, illuminated

the importance of autonomous experimentation, and foregrounded their empowerment as questioners and shapers of their own path and identity.

The importance that was placed by the participants on the experience and benefit of curiosity and curiosity-related concepts (e.g. trial, error, discovery and epiphany), and the spirit in which they articulated the significance of curiosity on their experience when studying, evoked a strong sense of what has been referred to as “the desire” or “appetite” for new experiences, learning and knowledge (Bjerknes, et al., 2024, p. 51), and brought to light that curiosity is “a fundamental” but “all-too-often neglected element of what it means to be a human being” (Grossman & Jackson, 2020, p. ix). Rather than, as found in some research, curiosity being something that “waxes and wanes” (Engel, 2020, p. 86) or which becomes lessened “with increasing age” (Bjerknes, et al., 2024, p. 60), by proposing a distinct category of ‘Curiosity’ in the academic buoyancy model, this research contributes to the understanding of the importance of concepts such as curiosity and wonder “as a counterweight to an educational culture that favors specific ways of learning” or that tends towards a perceived “correct answer” (Bjerknes, et al., 2024, p. 52). This study therefore builds on literature that explores the importance of promoting curiosity as something “ubiquitous and robust” (Engel, 2020, p. 88), that “contributes not only to learning, but also motivation for learning” (Bjerknes, et al., 2024, p. 59), and should be purposefully celebrated and cultivated throughout a person’s education and life.

6.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis contributes to the field of academic buoyancy research, but also the field of A-Level research; whilst the focus of the research was on these topics, it also explored the experiences and perspectives of first-year A-Level students, an area identified in the literature as where further contribution would be beneficial. Whilst there are numerous studies into both academic buoyancy and A-Level qualifications, there are less which focus on the voice of the A-Level student and their lived experiences. As A-Levels are often viewed as one of the most ‘high stakes’ and significant transitions in a UK student’s education, indeed their life, this study adds to the extant literature, with a view to

presenting these experiences and perspectives in a way so as to hopefully inform pedagogy that can enhance the experiences and outcomes of transitioning to, and succeeding in, the study of A-Levels.

This thesis has demonstrated through its overarching quest metaphor, as well as through its detailed exploration of emerging themes, not only the key factors A-Level students and tutors perceive as influential to academic buoyancy, but also how their study 'journey' is experienced and articulated, the 'narratives' that A-Level students operate within and around, and how they situate themselves within these narratives. In this way, this thesis contributes to the literature a voice that is less prominent in the well-established discussion that usually happens *about* A-Levels and A-Level students.

In terms of both academic buoyancy and A-Level research, prominent discussions are around the 'high-stakes' nature, and a focus on the 'setbacks' and 'challenges' of academic life; whilst these are often discussed as something to be 'bounced back' from, or 'overcome', this thesis contributes to literature that provides a reframing of these notions: rather than something to be overcome, or avoided, these concepts are welcomed, embraced – even requested and relished. This thesis also proposes the foregrounding of two additional 'Cs' to add to the six 'Cs' identified in previous models of academic buoyancy (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Smith, 2020): Continuum and Curiosity.

Finally, by foregrounding the significance that participants placed on curiosity and curiosity-related concepts such as trial, error, discovery and epiphany, this research also contributes to the literature a counter-narrative to the aforementioned 'bitter media debate' that often surrounds A-Level study and A-Level students. By taking an explorative, inductive approach this study has captured the articulated experience as more than high stakes and societally perceived signals of achievement, pass rates and pressures, instead shining a light on what emerged as a far more positive, agentic journey for students. This research contributes to the educational discussion that explicates the value and power of curiosity in teaching and learning research, pedagogy and practice, where there is not just "room for curiosity" to "exist alongside" (Martin, 2021, p. 528) policy and qualifications – a sort of secondary concern or by-product - but where it is purposefully and prominently provided space to "blossom" (Martin, 2021, p. 528) and the

educational experience is one which has at its core the “need to feed a hungry mind” (Martin, 2021, p. 526).

6.5 Summary of Recommendations

Several recommendations are made based on the findings of this study to support and promote academic buoyancy:

- The design and implementation of academic buoyancy intervention strategies should take an holistic approach, with a consideration of each of the ‘8Cs’. Based on this study’s findings, particular emphasis would be beneficial on strategies which incorporate all of the ‘Cs’ to encourage students’ development of and use of ongoing dynamic self-evaluations, reframe ‘failure’ for its learning potential, and foster a ‘state of curiosity’, experimentation and autonomy.
- Consideration should be given to the design and implementation of learning and teaching activities, as well as curriculum sequencing, in order to explore opportunities for, and use of, concepts and elements of gamification in both formal and informal educational contexts (i.e. class time and independent time). For example, learning activities both for in the classroom or for independent student work could be designed to embed all or elements of Krath et al’s (2021) ten principles of gamification.
- Communication and collaboration with parents/guardians (both pre-A-Level study and when on programme) should support parents’/guardians’ understanding of A-Level study, both informatively (e.g. content, grading) and experientially (e.g. cognitive, affective and psychomotor demands), including the core concepts of the 8Cs and related strategies through which to support students as they study A-Levels.
- Transition should be viewed as a multifaceted concept, where students may be simultaneously managing different ‘types’ of transition in the move from GCSE to A-Level, or school to college. Pre-transition and transition activities that promote the authentic experience of A-Levels, as well as supporting students to manage

the multiple skills, knowledge, behaviour and emotional dimensions of transition are recommended. To emerge in particular from this research was the importance of pre-transition activities (in addition to activities early in the academic year) which maximise opportunities to forge strong social *and* study dynamics with peers.

6.6 Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges that, as is the case with all research, there are limitations inherent to its findings. The small-scale nature of the study and its location at one FE college may mean that findings are not generalisable to other contexts; this study acknowledges that there needs to be caution not to over-claim wider representativeness even at institution level. This study also acknowledges that the qualitative, inductive nature of the design has methodological and design limitations, many of which are addressed in Chapters 3 and 4. One noted here is that whilst every effort was made to recruit participants from a breadth of A-Level study, the recruitment of 10 A-Level students does mean that potentially interesting avenues of exploration, comparison and experience across A-Level subjects are likely limited. Another aspect to consider is the focus-group method of the data collection – whilst every effort was made to ensure all participants had a voice and shared their experience, focus groups by their nature are subject to dynamics that influence the flow of discussion as well as the topics discussed, and which alternative methods of data collection (e.g. interview) may enable more depth in exploring an individual's experience. These identified limitations have informed the following suggestions for future research.

6.7 Further Research

Following on from this research, I have identified several areas that could be of interest, and benefit, for future exploration. These reflect not only points that have emerged from the findings, but also acknowledged potential limitations of this research.

This study was undertaken with a small sample size, at one FE college, therefore it would be interesting to replicate it with more participants. A larger sample size could be advantageous for a number of reasons such as validity and generalisability, but also: potentially more A-Level subject-level scope; further exploration of whether there are any subject-specific or subject-combination differentials; further exploration of the comparative experiences of students studying the same subjects. It would also be interesting to conduct similar research at different times in the academic year to see whether the relative timepoint at which the student is evaluating/reflecting on their academic buoyancy reveals similar or different experiences.

It would also be useful to explore if experiences and perceptions of first-year A-Level students and tutors are replicated across other FE colleges and contexts. Similarly, it would be interesting to explore first-year and second-year A-Level student experiences of academic buoyancy – both comparatively and longitudinally, i.e. as well as comparing first-year and second-year perspectives, it would be interesting to pursue a two-year study where participants are interviewed in their first year and their second year and whether/how academic buoyancy varies over time.

In addition, future research that compared first-year A-Level academic buoyancy to other first-year cohorts in the same FE college would also be interesting to explore – I would be interested to investigate whether students pursuing different post-school educational pathways express similar influences on academic buoyancy, or whether any factors are unique or more prominent to A-Levels.

Finally, based on the prominence of autonomy and experimentation that emerged from the findings, future research which contributes to literature on gamification specifically in an FE context, would be of interest to explore. I have noted this an area of recommendation in terms of personal practice application that will be taken from this study; however, this was an area that particularly captured my interest in relation to potential future research. Reflecting on the experience of this thesis and the invaluable insight gained from participants' perspectives and conceptualisation of their experiences, this would be an area that would be illuminating to explore from both an explorative

qualitative perspective similar to this study, or as an action research project, with an emphasis on student-informed development of practice.

6.8 Concluding Thoughts & Reflections: The Researcher's Quest

To conclude, it seems pertinent to return to the quest metaphor which proved essential in capturing and conceptualising the participants' lived experiences – their challenges, triumphs, and, most inspiringly, the spirit with which they approached both. In exploring their quest, I have been undertaking a quest of my own; a doctoral journey, a "long journey" (Elliot, 2022, p. 1659) with "multiple possible routes capable of branching out in different directions" (Elliot, 2022, p. 1652), with challenges and excitements, and a cast of companions (supervisors, colleagues, family) supporting me along the way.

As Elliot (2022) observes, doctoral study is not just one of high academic expectations, but a "transformative learning experience" (p. 1653); as articulated by the participants in this study, my learning journey, like theirs, has been one of 'relearning learning' and reflection, at times 'humbling' but ultimately motivating not in spite of its complexity but because of it. Whilst I would be disingenuous if I did not say my experience echoed Bencich et al.'s (2002) observation that "at the beginning of the dissertation research process, doctoral students cannot see the end, nor can they imagine how they will get there" (p. 289), my biggest learning curve was realising that in fact that was going to be one of the most beneficial aspects – that the unknown and unmapped nature (Elliot, 2022) of the journey would be the source of its most interesting aspects. Most reassuringly, is that though this is conceptually the end of this research thesis, I am energised by the fact that it instead feels like a beginning. A concept that I found challenging to adjust to initially was falling repeatedly into the research trap of assuming I was "truth-questing" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 120); the fact that this research thesis and its explorative qualitative approach have raised further avenues of exploration reflects the ethos of continuous learning that has inspired my career in education for 18 years.

Whilst many of the developments to my personal and professional practice have come as a result of research topic and design factors – e.g. exploring new topics, content and

theory, new ways of designing and undertaking qualitative research – some of the most significant have come from what I have learned about myself. I enjoy the 'messiness' of the process, although I did not fully anticipate how integral both the academic and emotional components were to undertaking research and being a researcher (Baker, 2021); a little like the participant who noted that, until you actually study A-Levels you don't appreciate what they are really like, it was not until I really engaged in examining my role in the research, what I thought and felt about my chosen topic, what were my "values, assumptions and blind spots" that I was bringing to this project (Baker, 2021, p. 356), that I could really begin to interact with the data in a truly authentic way.

Another point of development was "occupying and navigating" multiple positions and "multiple subjectivities" (Baker, 2021, p. 356) as a practitioner researcher, but the biggest challenge in this respect came from an angle I hadn't anticipated – that a longstanding interest in narratives and storytelling would be a source of researcher identity tension, as I initially tried to 'bracket out' that aspect of my background, misidentifying it as a bias that I was trying to impose on the data. Instead, I realised on reflection, that bracketing it out was just an imposition of a different kind – a "critical incident" (Halquist & Musanti, 2010, p. 449) in my research journey, and which had a significant influence on the concepts and presentation of this research, but also in terms of the potential implications for directions in my professional practice.

One of the most significant moments of reflection and development came from consideration of the researcher-participant relationship. Viewed as a source of potential power imbalance, and with "asymmetric roles" (Raheim, et al., 2016) between researcher and researched, this was a source of challenge for me as I wanted to uphold a tenet of exploratory, qualitative, phenomenologically-influenced research by "honouring the participants' own words" (Chandler, et al., 2015), but was also aware that any representation and interpretation can only claim so far, and ultimately reflects one interpretation, from the positionality of the researcher. I would like to conclude this study, therefore, by thanking the participants who gave their time to this research. To be able to explore directly with participants their firsthand experiences was invaluable to this

research, but also in shaping my development as a researcher, and the direction of my future practice.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Example Invitation to Participate

RE: invitation to participate in Academic Buoyancy research project

I am a researcher at the University of Central Lancashire and am contacting you to invite you to take part in a research study focusing on **resilience, growth mindset and academic buoyancy of A Level students.**

The study aims to find out A Level students' experiences and perceptions of the factors that influence and affect their progress, improvement and achievement during their day-to-day study of A Levels. I hope to use the information from this research to find ways to help A Level students improve their resilience/academic buoyancy and go on to achieve well in their A Level programme.

If you take part in this study, you would be involved in a small focus group which would involve answering questions about your own experience of A Level study, and the things that influence/affect your progress. For some participants, this will be followed by a second focus group to explore some of the discussion points arising from the first focus group in more detail.

I understand that you may not have been involved in research before and might have further questions about taking part in a research project. There will be an initial pre-meeting for anyone who responds to acknowledge interest in taking part in the research project, which will give you the opportunity to find out more detail; or, please feel free to contact me on the details below if there is anything you would like to ask.

If you are interested in taking part in the research project, please return the tear-off slip below to the highlighted address **by Wednesday 1 March 2023.**

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Crossley

I wish to attend the **introductory meeting/take part** in the research project (please circle which statement best applies to your interest at this stage).

Name:

Contact telephone number:

Contact e-mail address:

Please return to: sjcrossley1@uclan.ac.uk

Appendix 2 – Example Invitation to Focus Group

I am a researcher at the University of Central Lancashire and am contacting you to invite you to take part in a research study focusing on **resilience, growth mindset and academic buoyancy of A Level students.**

The study aims to find out A Level staff and students' experiences and perceptions of the factors that influence and affect their progress, improvement and achievement during their day-to-day study of A Levels. I hope to use the information from this research to find ways to help A Level students improve their resilience/academic buoyancy and go on to achieve well in their A Level programme.

If you take part in this study, you would be involved in a small focus group which would involve answering questions about your own experience teaching and/or tutoring A Level students, and the things that you think influence/affect A Level students' progress. For some participants, this will be followed by a second focus group to explore some of the discussion points arising from the first focus group in more detail.

I understand that you may not have been involved in research before and might have further questions about taking part in a research project. Please feel free to contact me on sjcrossley1@uclan.ac.uk if there is anything you would like to ask.

If you are interested in taking part in the research project, there will be focus groups to join on Microsoft Teams at the following times:

Wednesday 8th April 2020 2.30-3.30pm

Thursday 9th April 2020 2.30-3.30pm

Please note, you only need to attend one of these times, the focus group will last approximately 1 hour, and will involve answering questions about your own experience of A Level teaching/study, and the things that influence/affect student progress.

Please find attached to this post a participant information sheet, including a consent form for you to remind yourself of some of the key information about the research project, as well as your rights as a research participant. Please take the time to read this to make sure that you are comfortable with the research project and are happy to take part in the focus group. **Please e-mail me through a completed copy of this form in advance of the focus group to sjcrossley1@uclan.ac.uk**

I would like to thank-you for your valuable support with this study.

Appendix 3 – Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form

Participant Information Sheet

Research Project: Academic Buoyancy – Experiences and Perceptions of A Level students and staff of factors influencing/affecting A Level student progress and achievement.

Introduction

I would like to invite you to participate in this project, which is concerned with the things you think influence and affect A Level students' progress and achievement during the first year of the A Level course. I am also interested in what you think would help improve A Level students' academic buoyancy – the day-to-day resilience an A Level student needs to progress and achieve well in their A Level studies.

Why am I doing the project?

The project is part of my doctorate at the University of Central Lancashire. It is hoped that the project could provide useful information for students, teachers and A Level professionals as a whole about factors affecting A Level student progress and achievement, with the aim of using the findings to develop strategies to help students improve their academic buoyancy and achieve well in their A Level studies.

Why have you been invited?

You have been invited as you are currently either studying, recently completed or teaching/tutoring on the first year of the A Level programme.

What will you have to do if you agree to take part?

Return the attached consent form to me via e-mail provided so that I know you are interested in participating.

Next steps:

1. Attend a focus group, which will last approximately one hour long, during which I will ask you a series of questions for you to discuss as part of the group. There will also be opportunity to write your responses if you wish to do so.
2. Once the data from this focus group has been collated, you may be invited back to participate in a smaller focus group, to explore in more detail points of interest from the first focus group.

How much of your time will participation involve?

Participation will involve one focus group lasting approximately one hour, with some participants potentially being invited back to a second focus group to explore points from the first focus group in more detail. There will also be a de-brief meeting if you wish to attend after the final focus group, lasting approximately 30 mins.

Will your participation in the project remain confidential?

If you agree to take part, your name and specific identifying details will be anonymised and kept confidential to those involved in the research. Your responses to the focus group questions will be similarly anonymised and coded when transcribed so that personal details are not identifiable. You can be assured that if you take part in the project you will remain anonymous.

What are the advantages of taking part?

You may find the project interesting and enjoy answering questions about your study experiences. You will also be contributing valuable first-hand experience and perceptions about your own experience of A Level study, which, once the study is finished could provide useful information in helping develop approaches/strategies to help improve A Level student academic buoyancy, progress and achievement.

Are there any disadvantages of taking part?

You will be discussing your personal experiences and opinions of A Level study with other people in the focus group which you might not always find comfortable.

Do you have to take part in the study?

No, your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You are not obliged to take part, you have been approached as an A Level student/staff member with a view that you might be interested in taking part; however, this does not mean you have to.

If you do not wish to take part you do not have to give a reason and you will not be contacted again. Similarly, if you do agree to participate you are free to withdraw at any time during the project if you change your mind. Participation or non-participation is in no way linked to your progression/studies at College.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated _____.	□
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	□
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	□
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	□
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	□
6.	I understand that participating in this research has no link to my progression on my studies	
7.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	□
8.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	□
9.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	□
10.	Select only **one** of the following: • I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised. • I do not want my name used in this project.	□ □
11.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	□

Participant:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Researcher:

_____	_____	_____