

EVERY ADOLESCENT MATTERS:

**Listening to Young People in English Secondary
Schools**

SUSAN DAVIES

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

University of East Anglia

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

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ABSTRACT

Every Adolescent Matters – Listening to Young People in English Secondary Schools

Student voice has a significant international role since all young people have a right to be heard. In addition, the positive impact on learning and mental health has recently been confirmed. The voices of children and young people, globally, have reported that adults do not hear them. This omission can lead to some young people being invisible and unprotected. To ensure that the voices of all students are heard, secondary school education incorporates student voice programmes and initiatives, and the Office for Standards in Education regularly assesses the provision. Whilst the concept of student voice is familiar to education practitioners, definitions vary widely leading to confusion. A key aim of this research inquiry was to examine student voice and the impact on the lives of adolescents in schools. The significant concept of student and adult engagement links to student voice and can impact on its efficacy. Societal attitudes towards adolescents have meant a diminished and deficit image which leads to poor outcomes for students. Consequently, the reframing of adolescence was a key aim of this research inquiry.

This research inquiry was undertaken from a person-centred and humanistic perspective. A qualitative research design and methodology aligned with this positioning and ethical practice was adhered to throughout the research process. Four secondary schools and one university were recruited for participants with the additional challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic necessitating creative solutions when schools were closed. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews to capture the voices of adolescents and adults regarding their perceptions of the experience of adolescence and the challenges and benefits of school. Data analysis followed an interpretive approach aligning with the person-centred philosophy of trust and respect for the individual. Researcher reflexivity was important to avoid bias and to respond appropriately to the data as it unfolded, with an awareness of the significance of the researcher within the data.

The main findings indicated that young people were competent and self-aware. They critiqued classroom practice and provision for mental health offering pragmatic solutions. They asked to be considered as individuals, rather than as a homogenous group, and to be respected and treated fairly. This thesis contends that reframing adolescence, through student voice, contributes to a timely and updated understanding of this significant period of development, which can inform education policy and practice bringing improved educational outcomes for every adolescent.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE – Research Aims and Questions	1
1.1. Introduction	1
1.2. Rationale	4
1.3. Research Aims	6
1.4. Core Research Questions	7
1.5. Student Voice	9
1.6. Context – the schools	10
1.7. Adolescents and Their Lives in Secondary School	12
1.8. Student and Adult Engagement	14
1.9. Summary	14
CHAPTER TWO - Literature Review	16
2.1. Introduction	16
2.2. Adolescence	18
2.2.1. Definitions of Adolescence	18
2.2.2. Discourses on Adolescence	20
2.2.3. Reframing Adolescence	22
2.3. Adolescents in School	25
2.3.1. Adolescents and Peer Group Relationships	25
2.3.2. Adolescents and Mental Health	26
2.4. Student Voice	28
2.4.1. Defining Student Voice	30
2.4.2. Promotion of Student Voice	31
2.4.3. Problematisation of Student Voice	32
2.4.4. Adolescents' Perceptions of Student Voice	34
2.4.5. Political Influence of Student Voice	35
2.4.6. Summary of Student Voice Discourses	35
2.5. Student and Adult Engagement in Secondary School	37
2.5.1. Adolescents' Perceptions of Student and Adult Engagement	37
2.5.2. Involving Young People	38
2.6. The impact of the school environment on young people	38
2.6.1. Educational Policies Regarding Student Mental Health	39

2.6.2. The Person-Centred Approach to Education	41
2.7. Summary	44
CHAPTER THREE – Framing the Research	47
3.1. Introduction	47
3.2. The Conceptual Framework	47
3.2.1. Adolescence	48
3.2.2. Student Voice	48
3.2.3. Student and Adult Engagement in Schools	49
3.2.4. Person-centred Approach	50
3.3. Summary	51
CHAPTER FOUR - Research Design and Methodology	53
4.1. Introduction	53
4.2. Qualitative Research Design	55
4.3. Data Collection	56
4.3.1. Recruiting Schools	58
4.3.2. Context	59
4.3.3. Recruitment of Participants	60
4.3.4. The Role and Positioning of the Researcher	61
4.4. The Process of Interviewing	63
4.4.1. Ethical Considerations	64
4.4.2. Interviewing the Adolescents	65
4.4.3. Interviewing the Adults	70
4.5. The Covid-19 Pandemic	72
4.5.1. Data Collection Solutions	73
4.5.2. Online Interviewing	74
4.5.3. The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdowns on Young People	76
4.6. Data Source Triangulation	77
4.7. Data Analysis	78
4.7.1. Management of the Data	78
4.7.2. Approach to Data Analysis	79
4.7.3. Thematic Analysis	79
4.7.4. Coding	80
4.7.5. Analytical Memos	81

4.7.6. The Researcher in the Data	81
4.7.7. Responding to the Data	82
4.7.8. Adolescent Speech	82
4.8. Research Ethics	83
4.9. Summary	85
CHAPTER FIVE – The Adolescents’ Responses	88
5.1. Introduction	88
5.2. The Experience of Adolescence	90
5.3. The Benefits of School	94
5.4. The Challenges of School	96
5.5. Outside of School	103
5.6. Student Visions for Change	105
5.7. What Matters to Adolescents	106
5.8. Summary of Key Findings	107
CHAPTER SIX – The Adult Participant’s Responses	112
6.1. Introduction	112
6.2. The Adult Participants	114
6.2.1. Adults’ Experiences as Adolescents	117
6.2.2. Working with Adolescents	118
6.2.3. Adults’ Positioning within School	119
6.3. Adults’ Perceptions of Adolescence and Adolescents	120
6.3.1. How Adolescents See Themselves	120
6.3.2. Adults’ Perceptions of Adolescence	121
6.3.3. Societal Perceptions of Adolescents	122
6.4. Student Voice and Participation	123
6.4.1. Adults’ Perceptions of Student Voice	123
6.4.2. Adult Framing of the Schools’ Response to Needs of Adolescents	125
6.4.3. Adults’ Assumptions about Adolescence	127
6.4.4. A Divided Population	128
6.4.5. Adolescents’ Participation in School	128
6.5. The Challenges for Adolescents as Perceived by Adults	129
6.5.1. The Constraints of the English Secondary Education System	129
6.5.2. Pressure on Adolescents	130
6.5.3. Transitions	130

6.5.4. External Influences	130
6.5.5. The Influence of Social Media and ‘County Lines’	131
6.5.6. Amenities and Activities Outside of School	132
6.6. The Benefits and Challenges of School for Adolescents as Perceived by Adults	133
6.6.1. Student and Adult Engagement in School	135
6.7. School Support Systems	135
6.8. Adult Suggestions for School Changes to Meet the Needs of Adolescents	137
6.9. Summary of Key Findings	138
CHAPTER SEVEN –Converging and Diverging Views of Adolescents and Adults	142
7.1. Introduction	142
7.2. Convergences – Key Areas in which Adolescents and Adults Agreed	142
7.2.1. The Experience of Adolescence	143
7.2.2. In School	143
7.2.3. Outside of School	145
7.3. Divergences – Different Perceptions of Adolescents and Adults	146
7.3.1. Student Voice	147
7.3.2. Student and Adult Engagement	149
7.3.3. School Support	150
7.3.4. Identity	150
7.3.5. Peer Group Relationships	151
7.3.6. Social Media	151
7.3.7. Future Visions	152
7.4. Summary	152
CHAPTER EIGHT – Discussion	155
8.1. Introduction	155
8.2. The Experience of Adolescence	155
8.3. Adolescents in School	156
8.3.1. Transitions	156
8.3.2. Challenges in School	157
8.3.3. Peer Group Relationships	157
8.4. Student Voice	158
8.5. Student and Adult Engagement	159
8.5.1. Adult Expectations and Priorities	160

8.6. Adolescents Outside of School	160
8.7. Reframing Adolescence	161
8.7.1. Societal Attitudes Towards Adolescents	161
8.8. The Covid-19 Pandemic – Impact on Learning and Research	162
8.9. Summary	163
CHAPTER NINE – Conclusions	165
9.1. Introduction	165
9.2. Reviewing the Literature	166
9.3. Framing the Research	167
9.4. Data Collection	167
9.5. Summary of Key Findings – the Adolescents’ Responses	168
9.6. The Adults’ Responses	170
9.7. Recommendations from Young People and Adults	172
9.8. Reflections on the Research Inquiry	175
9.9. Potential Contribution to Knowledge	177
9.10. Future Research	178
9.11. Summary	180
APPENDICES	184
Appendix 1 – Interview Questions for Young People	184
Appendix 2 - Field Notes Dryden Academy Autumn Term 2019-2020	185
Appendix 3 - Fieldwork Progress Chart Sept 2019- Dec 2021	193
Appendix 4 – Analytical Memo 2021	194
Appendix 5 – Interview Questions for School Staff 2019	195
Appendix 6 - Letter to Headteachers 2019	196
Appendix 7 - Introduction Session in Schools 2019	197
Appendix 8 - Poster for Student Recruitment	198
Appendix 9 - Progress of Data Collection 2019-2021	199
Appendix 9a – Introduction to Student Participants	200
Appendix 10 - Process of Thematic Analysis 2022	217
Appendix 11 - Coding on Interview 7 – Dryden Academy	218
Appendix 12 - Transcription Interview 7 - Dryden Academy	242
Appendix 13 – Consent Forms and Information Sheets	258

• Young Person Consent Form	258
• Information Sheet for Parents and Young People	259
• Information Sheet for School Staff	260
• Parent/Carer Consent Forms	263
• Participant Consent Form – School Staff	264
Appendix 14 – EDU Ethics Approval Letter 2020-21	265
Appendix 15 – Research Journal 2020-2021	266
Appendix 16 – Table of Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic	270

REFERENCES 271

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLES

Table 1 – Confident Characterisation Discourses of Adolescence	24
Table 2 – Student Interview Participants at Secondary Schools and University	66
Table 3 – Adult Interview Participants at Secondary Schools	70
Table 4 – Student Visions for Changes in School	106
Table 5 – Adult Participants and their Narratives as Reported by them	116
Table 6 – Adult Framing of the Schools’ Responses to the Needs of Adolescents	126
Table 7 – Benefits and Challenges for Adolescents Inside and Outside of School as Reported by Adults	134
Table 8 – Diverging Views of Adolescents and Adults regarding Adolescents in School	145
Table 9 – Recommendations for Policy and Practice Regarding Adolescents in Secondary School	174

FIGURES

Figure 1 - Positioning Adolescence in the Life Span of an Individual	20
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CHAPTER ONE

Research Aims and Questions

1.1. Introduction

Chapter One presents the aims and rationale of this research inquiry and introduces the core research questions. It opens with an autobiography, presenting my professional background and the development of my beliefs and values. The context is significant to my role as a researcher and is included here to provide an appreciation of my individual positionality and how it connects to my research.

My own vivid memories of being a teenager informed my decision to research adolescence:¹ as an adolescent my longstanding beliefs and values were formed by my experiences at the time. I can remember being bullied by a group of girls whom I thought were my friends, which led to an awareness of group dynamics and how fragile peer group relationships could be. Following on from this were other experiences and intensive reading of literature about minority groups, which led to a belief in the individual and a valuing of others. One intention, through this research inquiry, was to *'make sense and order out of the phenomena of subjective experience'* (Rogers, 1961, p.23). The justification for foregrounding my autobiography, is that self-disclosure can explain interpretations (Roulston, 2010) and demonstrates self-awareness. My professional experience of working in schools in past decades, contrasts sharply with current educational practice. This can be both an advantage and a disadvantage since past theories and practices can be perceived as outdated. However, I have attempted to embrace current ideas and improved practices in schools whilst aware of traditions that have become outmoded and ineffective. My professional training and practice are presented below with an acknowledgement of *'conceptions of self, ethics and politics as a starting point for inquiry'* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p.19).

I trained as a teacher in Liverpool in the 1970s where I studied drama and youth leadership and then worked briefly as a secondary school teacher in London and Norfolk. After a short spell teaching in the United States, where I witnessed the practice of School Guidance Counsellors, I trained as a

¹ The following terms are used throughout the text, according to the context, and whenever the sense is deemed interchangeable or for ease of reading: adolescence - the period of time when a young person experiences puberty; adolescent - the young person who is experiencing adolescence; and young people - a generic term for adolescents. The term 'youth' is also used in the literature for young people and is used in the text when referencing other studies. The term 'children' is commonly used to include all people under the age of 18-years of age (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2002). However, in this thesis the term 'children' is avoided unless used by another author, as are the terms 'child' and 'childhood'.

counsellor in education at Reading University. Through an eclectic training, my personal preference was the person-centred² approach of Carl Rogers (an American psychologist, therapist, and educator) and it is this approach that influenced my work practice. Rogerian theory was innovative for the respectful and positive focus on the individual (Kirschenbaum, 1990). Rogers believed in *‘The potential of humans to experience agency and opportunity in their lives, to feel responsible for self, to have both courage to look within and beyond themselves, and to act purposefully’* (Barrett-Lennard, 2003, p.114). This powerful statement has informed my personal and professional life. However, I am aware that *‘in some countries person-centred scholars and therapists are regarded as naïve enthusiasts from a former age’* (Thorne 2013, p.65). Rogers points out that the person-centred approach is not averse to the education trend for *‘back to basics’* (2014, p.63) but accepts the need for basic skills, with a view that co-operation between student and teacher is important. It was encouraging to find that the person-centred approach to education is still being discussed, particularly the pioneering work of Fielding (2004, 2010, 2012, 2021) whose advocacy for radical education reform engages with the person-centred framework. An important link is made concerning the individual and learning which is summed up by the view that meaning is inherent in an individual (Rogers et al, 2014). This suggests that listening to and attending to individual needs enhances learning. The person-centred approach puts learners at the centre of education and is considered relevant to national education policies in countries such as New Zealand (Adamson, 2022) which has a highly diverse population and aims to prioritise children’s interests.

Rogers approach to teaching and learning is presented here since it encompasses the rationale and focus of this research inquiry and to clarify for the reader the value of conducting this research through a person-centred lens. Rogerian theory significantly regards individuals as capable with the important addition that *‘the self is not a fixed entity but a product of the person’s response to experience’* (Thorne, 2013, p.29). I was interested to hear how the experiences of young people in schools could have impacted on their development. The concept of student voice is recent and was not recognised when I was at school, and that this could provide a reframing of how adolescence is perceived. Rogerian theory viewed schools as *‘locked into a traditional and conventional approach which makes significant learning improbable if not impossible’* (Rogers, 1969, p.5). This statement, some decades on, is still relevant, and reflects my own positioning regarding the current educational policy of academisation. This important context, which impacts on the mental health of young people according to critical assessment, will be expanded upon in a later chapter (Chapter Four). Child or person-centred education continues to be relevant to pedagogy and is a significant component for those who propose radical change to the current education system (Fielding, 2011). A practitioner

² The term person-centred developed from Rogers ‘client-centred’ therapy (2003). In this thesis I have used person-centred when child-centred could also be used, to refer to young people.

from the 1930's, John Macmurray highlighted the significance of relationships and care which need to be at the heart of education (Fielding, 2012) echoing the Rogerian approach. Murray also considered agency, identity and community which formed the core of his education philosophy (Adamson, 2022). Educational reform has been underway in the schools of New Zealand, with an emphasis on the person-centred approach over corporate success (ibid).

My professional work with adolescents included those young people who were in the care of the local authority. Due to the consistently poor educational outcomes for this cohort, a virtual School for Looked After Children was set up in the county where I worked in the 1990s. The aim was to raise awareness of issues surrounding the education of children in care and to offer guidance to schools. My advocacy role as Education Co-Ordinator involved developing positive engagement with individual adolescents and supporting them, wherever possible, in school. Some of these young people had been permanently excluded from mainstream education and labelled as 'juvenile delinquents.' I observed how many individuals had faced significant transitions in their lives and struggled to cope with these challenges. I found that their unique qualities were apparent despite the challenges they faced. Many adolescents I met were recognisable as '*a person of notice*' Stake (1995, p.1) who had been overlooked by the education system, receiving only minimal education, in part-time education units, and leaving school without academic qualifications. What I heard from young people was that adults who worked with them in schools, had not listened: they had not listened to a Year 10 boy who wanted to explain why he had got into trouble in school; they had not listened to a Year 11 girl who wanted to do art in school because that would help her express herself at a challenging time in her life; and they did not listen to many of the young people who found themselves in part-time alternative education, with little chance of returning to mainstream school with their peer group and friends. A recent document from government entitled '*Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever-increasing exclusions*' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018) demonstrates that there has been some recognition of the damage done by permanent exclusion.

This research inquiry follows a trajectory begun in 2000 with my Masters' degree for which I interviewed a small group of adolescent boys permanently excluded from school for transgressions such as drug dealing. From this group emerged rich data reporting their thoughts and feelings about exclusion and how it had impacted negatively on themselves and their families. It was clear that their voices had not been heard by adults. Throughout the research process they were thoughtful regarding the harm that they perceived had been done by their removal from fulltime education. The outcome of that research inquiry gave me the impetus to listen to the voices of a different group of adolescents, a more random sample of ordinary young people at school. The findings confirmed that young people

know more than adults often give them credit for and that they want to be listened to and to be taken seriously.

1.2. Rationale

The teenage years are an exciting time, full of learning, new opportunities, and new experiences. Young people are enthusiastic, creative, and open to new ideas. Most enjoy their teenage years to the full (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p.3)

Some 7% of British teenagers have tried to kill or harm themselves. (Layard and Clark, 2014, p.213)

15-year-olds in the UK had the lowest average life satisfaction in Europe (The Children's Society, 2024, p.4)

The three quotes above are presented together here to illustrate contrasting statements and research findings regarding the lives of adolescents over two decades. They highlight differences in the experiences of adolescents and a trend towards increasing unhappiness amongst some young people. The government statement portrays adolescence as a time of hope and positivity, while, in contrast, the second and third quotes give evidence of the extent of self-harm and attempted suicide amongst some young people and the low overall wellbeing and happiness of 15-year-olds in the UK. The 13th annual report, The Good Childhood Report, on the wellbeing of children and young people in the UK (Children's Society, 2024) found that 11% of children and young people reported low wellbeing, the lowest since their research began in 2009/10. These diverse sources reflect the experience of being an adolescent and, most importantly, highlight that there has a downward trend in children and young people's wellbeing. The key aim of this inquiry was to acquire an updated understanding of adolescent experience, by amplifying the voices of adolescents, in order to acknowledge their individual needs. The voices of adolescents have been overlooked by the education system, as argued in the introduction to this research inquiry, and by the evidence from the Good Childhood Report quoted above. One significant finding, relevant to this research inquiry, was that the report findings highlighted school as '*an area of concern for children's wellbeing.*' (ibid, p.7).

It has been recognised that there is an absence of young voices, in particular '*their experiences and perspectives*' (Pearce and Wood, 2019, p.5) which was evidenced in the literature search (Chapter Two). This revealed that much of the research on young people's voices is specific rather than seeking adolescents' general opinions and views. Many projects focussed on specific areas within pedagogy and often around minority groups of adolescents: young women living in poverty (Raphael, 2015) and the sexual exploitation of young people with disabilities (Franklin and Smeaton, 2017), as

examples. This research inquiry simplified the key research question to, in essence, ‘what is it like to be an adolescent in an English secondary school?’ and was addressed to a small mixed sample of students from Years 7 to post-Sixth form in four ordinary English secondary schools and one university. The aim was to hear student voices from a random group of young people and to explore how opportunities for student voice may impact on their lives.

The research inquiry was designed to hear adolescent voices through small group interviews and to examine their everyday lives as reported by them. The significance of the voice of the child is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – Article 12 (1989) which states: *‘Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously’*. The last part of this statement is paramount to this research. Not only was the intention to create an opportunity for young people to talk about their *‘views, feelings, and wishes’* but I wanted to demonstrate that their views would be taken seriously by reporting, as authentically as possible, what they said.

An understanding of the lives of young people and how they feel can be gained through examining studies of childhood (Greene and Hogan, 2005). Similarly, reports from children’s charities have shown that a considerable proportion of younger people, those aged 10-15-years old, said they were unhappy (The Children’s Society, 2019). The recent survey of 3,270 children, aged 10-15-years old (The Children’s Society, 2022), found that self-image was important for boys, some of whom were unhappy with how they looked, and that young people were conflicted about relationships with their peer group. The ‘culture’ of school and feeling safe, were two of the most important aspects which cause anxiety for some children, leading to a notable change in children’s levels of happiness at school (ibid). At a later age, it was found that a third of young men, aged 16-17-years old, reported how unhappy their lives were (Smyth, 2013).

Exam pressure has been a major issue for young people recently according to data gathered by The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2018). The number of children using the Childline telephone helpline service to talk about the pressure of exams and receiving counselling has increased. Some young people reported difficulties with sleeping and said they had felt depressed and stressed about their ability. Other young people said they had no-one to talk to about these issues (ibid). This evidence, from young people themselves, highlights the need for opportunities to be created in schools to listen to all student voices.

In order to gain a new understanding of the lives of adolescents, it was important to acknowledge that their unique experiences qualify them as a credible source of information (Raby, 2007; Doda and Knowles, 2008; Strom and Strom, 2014) since this demonstrates trust in their voices and can encourage their participation. Adolescents have important things to say about issues which concern them, evidenced in my MA research study (Davies, 2001) which involved secondary school students who had been permanently excluded from school. The young people cited a lack of fair discussion with school staff which they perceived as a significant factor in their removal from school. The data showed that blanket sanctions from staff were unhelpful and damaging to the individual students. They reported that their families were adversely affected by the exclusion. Part-time education was provided, leaving them inactive and disengaged from the everyday lives of their peer group. If these young people had been listened to by school staff other solutions could have been explored with better educational outcomes.

1.3. Research Aims

The key aim of this qualitative research inquiry was to examine the experiences of adolescents in English secondary schools, as reported by them in order to gain an updated understanding of how young people perceive their lives inside and outside of school and to consider the significant role of student voice and how it impacts on young people. For a balanced picture of how young people experience life in school, the voices of adults who work with them were also heard to reveal a distinct perspective and to uncover common and divergent views between the two groups. The voices of adolescents were captured through small group interviews. The adults who work with them in school were asked in individual interviews how adolescents appear to deal with the changes inherent in this stage of their lives. Adolescence is a critical time in a person's life with the move away from childhood but not yet into adulthood (Sawyer et al, 2018). This formative period can present challenges for some young people. Three key reasons for listening to adolescent voices are: to understand more about their everyday lives; to learn from their viewpoints and perceptions of how education works for them and how it can challenge them; to hear their suggestions for improvements; and to acknowledge and appreciate their contributions by updating current knowledge for teachers and policymakers. The voices of all the young people were taken seriously and their practical suggestions and recommendations for school changes are presented in Chapter Five.

A key task for the research was to *'provide a voice for individuals not heard in the literature'* (Creswell, 2013, p.102). There is a vast literature about adolescents written by adults, but I wanted to

hear the young people talk directly about their experiences. The adults who work with them in school were asked how they viewed their schools' positioning of student voice within the institution.

Common and stereotypical societal views which are held by some adults cannot adequately represent the experience of being an adolescent and it is important to look beyond these negative assumptions to hear what young people think and feel (Lesko and Talburt, 2012). An additional aim, therefore, was to reframe adolescence in order to find a new understanding of what the experience of adolescence is like for young people. Reframing how adults view this age group could lead to a more realistic picture highlighting the positive attributes of young people. The voices of adolescents as reported in the findings have created a new image of young people: one which chimes with Rogerian theory, that there is the potential for agency and opportunity (Barrett-Lennard, 2003).

1.4. Core Research Questions

The core research questions which emerged from consideration of the above aims are detailed below:

Question One: How do young people talk about their experience of being an adolescent in an English secondary school?

Question Two: How do schools acknowledge the voices of adolescents and what impact does this have on young people?

Question Three: What do adolescents tell us about their lives outside of school in their communities and how does this impact on their lives inside school?

Question Four: How do the adults who work with adolescents in school, articulate the day-to-day experiences of their students and what is their perception of adolescence? How do adolescents perceive adult attitudes, both at school and outside school, towards them?

The research questions above were designed to record the views of young people, as adolescents, regarding their experiences of secondary education (Research Question One). The wide-ranging discourse on the significance of student voice became evident through interrogation of the literature

which led to an amendment to the original Research Question Two to include current thinking on the impact of student voice. Both the challenges and benefits of life at school were explored. Including the voices of adults who work with young people in schools was important as it added to the dimension of how others perceive adolescents with an aim at reframing current discourses on this age group. As has been stated young people have articulated the pressures that they experience from the school examination system through surveys from national children's charities (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2018; The Children's Society, 2022). This research inquiry was designed to hear a range of adolescent narratives about daily life in a secondary school – both academically and socially.

Examining how schools position student voice (Research Question Two) provided a perspective on the importance and priority afforded by school management to the views of adolescents and was in contrast to the perceptions from young people themselves. Some of the students reported that they were unaware of initiatives for student voice, despite adult voices making claims that the same schools were well resourced with a variety of opportunities. This gap in perception between the adolescents and the adults is discussed in Chapter Seven. The impact on students regarding how their schools regarded their positioning is significant since it suggests a level of trust in the views of young people or otherwise. Without their voices being heard, young people can feel overlooked and forgotten (Davies, 2001). The role of student voice is significant since it emphasises how much, if any, regard is given to adolescent's views by their schools and consequently how much trust is afforded to the opinions of young people. Student voice is influenced by the engagement between adults and young people and this was acknowledged by the inclusion of the final question (Research Question Four) below.

By examining how adolescents spend their time outside of school, a holistic picture of adolescence can emerge (Research Question Three). This picture can provide a balance to the negative assumptions held by some adults. Prejudicial views and deficit perceptions of adolescents (Lesko, 1996, 2001; Lesko and Talburt, 2012) can be damaging to the image of adolescence. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two (Literature Review). Young people talked about a range of activities they engaged with outside of school: from sports, to attending church and going to youth clubs, and described the benefits of meeting a different group of individuals. At home many of them had hobbies they found helpful for relaxation: reading, drawing, and origami, were all mentioned with an understanding of the benefits of regular physical activity and taking part in sporting events (see Chapter Five).

The perspectives of education professionals who work with adolescents (Research Question Four) were important to capture to provide an understanding of this age group (Fraser et al, 2004).

Reframing adolescence relies on new, updated understanding of the experiences of young people and a positive, rather than deficit, discourse (Lesko, 2001). The data shows that adults gain much satisfaction from working with adolescents, while others can empathise with the stresses faced by this age-group. The adults' adolescent lives were reported as different on some levels from the current experiences of their students; however, some adults could recognise the challenges. A few adults criticised their own schools where support was reported as unavailable when needed and where they were not consulted (see Chapter Six).

1.5.Student Voice

Student voice is regarded by recent UK governments as a key aspect of education. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) assesses how school staff listen to young people, as well as how the schools deal with the personal development of students (Ofsted, 2019). Examination of the role of student voice and student participation within schools (May, 2005; Noyes, 2005; Clarke et al, 2011; Langford, 2016) has provided examples of projects which involve young people but appear to be focussed on an agenda that is adult led. I wanted to find out what issues the students raised for themselves, both those that challenged them and their perception of the benefits of school. It was not clear how student voice was positioned in the schools in this research and whether young people are consulted appropriately. Unrealistic claims have been made for the inclusion of student voice (Czerniawski and Kidd, 2011) and consequently, a key task of this inquiry was to ask young people directly if they felt 'heard' by the staff in their schools and consequently what impact it exerted. It was important to hear the perspectives of school staff to understand how student voice was positioned within their schools. An additional consideration was whether historical theories and discourses regarding student voice continue to relate to current educational practice (Holquist et al, 2023). This key issue is expanded upon in Chapter Two (Literature Review).

The following quote regarding the concept of voice encompasses the rationale for this research inquiry: *'Giving people a voice is not just about rights and entitlements to talk and express views, rather it is an active process of communication involving hearing, interpretation and construction of meanings that is not limited to the spoken word'* (Watson et al, 2012, p.112).

1.6.Context – The Schools

Some understanding of the current English education system which forms the backdrop for the young people in this research is necessary to provide a balanced context. Recent changes in educational provision in England with the promotion of the academisation system (explained in more detail in Chapter Two) means that schools seem to bear little relation, in many ways, to those of previous decades whilst at the same time echoing the practice of schools of the early 20th century particularly with regard to the curriculum. The 20th century curriculum was almost identical to that of 1904 and has been described as a '*middle-class creation*' (White, 2007, p.8). In contrast, the current system in English secondary schools, which has been described as a model of '*corporatisation*' (Gann, 2021, p. 1) employs promotional school websites for parents, has introduced the concept of British Values and Character Education on the curriculum, and is managed by Principals rather than Headteachers. The concept of British Values in schools was introduced in 2013. There was a belief that common values were being marginalised by some minority groups. This led to government guidance on the promotion of British Values in schools (Ofsted, 2014) when it became a duty for schools to promote a set of values regarding democracy, freedom, and tolerance towards different belief systems. Importantly, with reference to this research inquiry, it was suggested that this would ensure that all students were heard (Department for Education, 2014). There was some evidence of the significance of this recent change to the curriculum when I was undertaking data collection in schools and observed posters displayed in most classrooms which listed the main tenets of British Values. The current education system in England is perceived by some authors as '*education for a competitive market society and a growth-based and consumption-led economy*' (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.18).

The English education system appears to be part of a climate of market consumption since schools use their own websites to promote the opportunities and strengths of their schools' philosophy and practice, for an audience of parents. Similarly, large posters outside school buildings promote results from Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) and academic grades which I observed when I approached one of the secondary schools used in this research inquiry. However, '*it is strange that pupils have not been seen as consumers worth consulting*' (Ruddock and Flutter, 2004, p.75) and it is suggested that young people are traditionally excluded from the '*consultation process*' (ibid, p.86). More recently this has changed to include students in consultation groups such as School Councils. The data shows, however, that not all young people qualify for such groups. As discussed in Chapter Two (Literature Review) some student voices can be seen as more privileged than others and valued differently (Graham et al, 2018).

Ofsted has recently taken a different approach by assessing how school staff listen to young people, as well as the personal development of pupils (Department for Education, 2019). Similarly, recent statutory guidance for sex education (DfE, 2019) looks at changes to the curriculum. Within the guidance, which was compulsory from September 2020, it states that the curriculum should be designed ‘*in line with pupil need, informed by pupil voice*’ (ibid, p.40). The focus appears to be on the development of ‘*responsible, respectful, and active citizens*’ (ibid, p.218) rather than encompassing the physical, social and emotional development of individual young people. Developing kindness, integrity, generosity, and honesty is cited as a major aspect of this curriculum leading to a mix of morality, sexual health, relationships, and values. Whether the needs of young people will be met by this new curriculum, is not yet clear. Recognising that student voice is an essential part of curriculum design will, however, be an improvement for all young people.

A recent addition to the English school curriculum is character education, which claims to develop resilience in children (Lickona, 2004) and was initiated with the aim of supporting wellbeing in schools. Critics of the practice link it to positive psychology, focussing on measuring subjective wellbeing rather than examining the environmental factors which might lead to issues of wellbeing (Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014). Positive psychology can be seen as a ‘*new science*’ taken up enthusiastically by successive English governments (Bates, 2017, p. 2).

Recent educational changes in English secondary schools have been described as ‘*prescriptive*’ (Doddington and Hilton, 2007, p. xiii) which contrasts with the person-centred approach to education introduced in the previous chapter. To highlight the significance of this philosophical position a brief outline is given here. Carl Rogers (1965) was the founder of the person-centred approach to therapy, then named ‘client-centred’. The approach consists partly of specific attitudes and behaviours towards individuals: acceptance, genuineness (or congruence), empathy and trust. These characteristics were important for the therapist and client relationship and were subsequently found to be appropriate for adults working with children. One core belief of the person-centred approach is that most individuals are self-aware and understand what needs to be done to benefit their own development. Consequently, the person or child-centred approach to education affords trust to students (Dasein, 2017). This is a significant consideration when working with adolescents. The person-centred approach respects students with the result that ‘*in classrooms where teachers showed empathy, congruence, and respect for students, the students showed enhanced problem-solving skills, asked more questions, were more involved in their learning, had higher levels of cognition and showed greater levels of creativity*’ (Merry, 2006, p.89). A pioneer in the concept of emotional education argued that relationships and

care need to be at the heart of education (Macmurray, 1957) which aligns with the person-centred approach and is an important element of the drive for radical change in education (Fielding, 2012).

1.7. Adolescents and Their Lives in Secondary Schools

Adolescence can arrive for some young people at a significant period of transition between primary and secondary schooling. This transition was reported as problematic by some participants with the physical size of a secondary school, compared with a primary, cited as overwhelming. Young people have reported being unhappy in school due to pressure from exams and testing (Children's Society, 2019). This led to recommending an annual measurement of young people's well-being (ibid, p.36). The quantitative survey appears thorough and well devised yet there is a lack of detailed responses from young people. In fact, the authors suggest that *'further qualitative work could be undertaken to redevelop those questions with high 'don't know' responses'* and that adults must listen to children and young people in order to *'harness their enthusiasm and radical energy for change'* (ibid, p.10). This latter characteristic was evident in the responses of the adolescents in this inquiry and is presented in later chapters.

A downward trend in young people's wellbeing, as evidenced by the data from the Children's Society above, may be influenced by a rapidly changing society (Layard and Dunn, 2009, p.108). These authors point to the evolution of family life, as well as rapid changes in technology, including social media. One of their recommendations is that schools assess students' emotional development using standardised 'profiles' for emotional wellbeing. A concern would be that any additional assessment of young people in schools could bring unwarranted pressure. Tick-box exercises may not build an accurate picture of how an individual is feeling whereas a qualitative approach could yield finer detail. It needs to be acknowledged that some students might prefer a more anonymous approach, such as a survey.

The pressures on young people in school are compounded by external factors. One particular area of concern, both outside and inside school, for many adults is the role of social media: this can have a push/pull effect on young people as it is central to their everyday lives and a significant part of their development (O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). There is a complex relationship between adolescents and social media (Valkenberg and Piotrowski, 2017). Cyber-bullying, which targets young people at times when they may be alone and without support, impacts adversely on adolescent mental health (Richards et al, 2015).

The English government promotes the improved mental health of young people in schools through the implementation of a range of initiatives, which are often short-term and managed by external consultants, and Ofsted assesses schools' performances (DfE, 2019). In the United States, where positive education practice is perceived as making a difference to the mental health of students, some programmes have been assessed as limited and '*imposed without the care to consider existing values within communities*' (White, 2016, p.4). Other projects have been deemed flawed due to a lack of accounting for individual differences amongst students (Coulcombe et al, 2021). One critic of the English government response suggests that:

Critical evaluation is necessary in order for researchers and educators committed to social justice to challenge the influential idea that emotional well-being should be a prominent educational goal and to resist the diminished images of human potential that underly it. (Ecclestone, 2007, p.455).

This view aligns with the person-centred approach since a danger of a '*diminished*' view of individuals (ibid) is that it can result in a lack of trust in the potential of adolescents and consequently lower expectations. The above quote echoes a question regarding adult perceptions of adolescents: '*In what forms have youth been imagined, endowed with meaning, and problematised?*' (Lesko and Talbert, 2012, p.1). Regarding adolescents as problematic is unhelpful, however, '*It is difficult to challenge a strong consensus that governments must intervene in a worsening crisis of emotional and psychological well-being*' (Ecclestone, 2012, p.464). This suggests that there is a narrow line between providing support for mental health and enabling the individual student to find ways of dealing with personal issues. One group of Sixth-Form participants in this research suggested improved ways of supporting their mental health which demonstrated their knowledge of and insight into the issue (see Chapter Five).

However, during 2020 the English education system was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the government was obliged to intervene, which it did by closing all schools throughout the country during a period of lockdown. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on schools and research is discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

1.8. Student and Adult Engagement

This significant concept has an influence on student voice (Fielding and Moss, 2011) and on the mental health of young people which are core elements of this research as presented above. The

relationship between adolescents and adults who work with them in schools is paramount to their voices being heard since young people's views can be ignored (Spencer and Tinsley, 2008). There are benefits for student voice from trusting relationships between students and adults (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012) and this was evidenced through the data with some participants praising individual teachers who had made a difference by supporting them. It was important to examine whether this significant relationship was recognised by both students and adults as this could give an indication of the positioning of adolescent voices within a school (Research Question Two).

1.9. Summary

This chapter presents the rationale for capturing the voices of adolescents reporting their experiences inside and outside of school. A major charity found that some young people reported being unhappy at school (The Children's Society, 2022). The most recent report from this charity was quoted at the beginning of this chapter with the overall finding that 15-year-olds in the UK had the '*lowest average life satisfaction in Europe*' (ibid, p.4) and that 11% of children and young people were found to have low wellbeing. The recommendation is for children to be positioned at the heart of government policies is even more critical with the Society pointing to a recent change in the political landscape in England and calling for '*political parties to put children at the heart of the next government*' (ibid, p. 5). After a short time in office, the new Labour government has created a Children's Wellbeing Bill (Prime Minister's Office, 2024) and a Child Poverty Strategy (Prime Minister's Office, 2024) which the Children's Society view as '*opportunities to tackle some of the challenges faced by children and young people*' (Children's Society, 2024, p.5).

A third of young men, aged 16-17-years old, had also reported being unhappy about their lives (Smyth, 2013). The Childline telephone helpline service received higher numbers of users (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2018) with reports that there was nobody to talk to (ibid). The concept of student voice has been widely discussed in the literature yet there appeared to be no clear consensus on definition. Discussions on efficient implementation in schools for the benefit of young people are ongoing (Chapter Two).

As has been noted, negative societal views can affect the perception of adolescents with damaging stereotyping. The person-centred education approach aims to balance these misunderstandings, with a clearer understanding of the needs of young people. Rogers (1980, p.115) describes '*definable climate of psychological attitudes*' to help young people to flourish in school. '*Classrooms should be places where the emotional and intellectual lives of children and young adults should be given equal value*'

(Merry, 2006, p.83). Such a climate would facilitate an unconditional, positive regard towards students. The Children Act (1989) states that the welfare of the child is paramount and '*If we want to provide a more beneficial environment in school... we need to dig deeper into human relationships to find out what motivates the behaviour of children, ourselves, and others.*' (ibid, p.17.1) One response to this call to '*dig deeper*' could be to offer more opportunities for student voice in schools.

The next chapter examines the literature relevant to the core themes of this research inquiry and relating to the key research questions: adolescence, student voice, student and adult engagement, English education, and societal attitudes towards adolescents. The significance of student voice and its impact on adolescents in schools is highlighted through discussion of the key discourses focussing specifically on how young people's voices are heard within schools on issues that relate to them: school organisation, the curriculum, peer group relationships and mental health.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter presented the rationale and aims of this research inquiry which examined the experience of adolescents in English secondary schools, as reported by them, to gain an updated understanding of how young people perceive their lives. This chapter explores the relevant literature on adolescence and student voice. Empirical work and key academic theories are discussed with reference to the conceptual framework (detailed in Chapter Three) and the core research questions which were presented in Chapter One. The research questions explored adolescents' experiences of education and how student voice is positioned within a school. Adult perceptions of the experiences of adolescents were a crucial element of the inquiry and studies of teacher responses to student voice and the significance of the relationship between students and adults have been examined.

The views of young people have been widely researched for specific studies, focussing on, for example, adolescent girls and their views on physical education (Fisette, 2013), young women living in poverty (Raphael, 2015), young people with disabilities who experienced sexual exploitation (Franklin and Smeaton, 2017) and students' views of learning in schools (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018). These examples illustrate some of the critical issues relating to student voice that have been examined. However, this research inquiry did not focus on one particular aspect of adolescence or a specific group of adolescents, but rather examined what issues were reported by some young people in English secondary schools with the aim of understanding their perceptions of education. The literature examining adolescence was plentiful and work was selected which offered new or revised knowledge about young people and their experiences in secondary schools. Some historical work plays a significant role in constructing an image of adolescence (Hall, 1904; Winnicott, 1965) and was compared with current conceptualisations.

The literature covering this research inquiry is wide-ranging, from several disciplines. It was not possible to review all the literature available, and attention was focussed on debates regarding adolescent voices in secondary schools. Literature relevant to the key aim of understanding adolescents in school was interrogated for clarification with particular reference to Research Question One: 'How do young people talk about their experience of being an adolescent in an English secondary school?' The link between the school environment and mental health within a performative

education system, is a key issue and a significant focus of educational policy (Department for Education, 2018).

This literature review discusses the following themes:

- Adolescence and the reframing of adolescence
- Adolescents in school
- Student voice
- Student and adult engagement in secondary school
- The impact of the school environment on young people
- The person-centred approach to education

I chose to focus my gaze through the lens of the humanist person-centred philosophy of Carl Rogers (1945, 1965, 1969, 1980, 1983) and have selected work that examines this approach as it applies to current education practice. The person-centred approach to education complements the concept of student voice by positioning young people at the centre of the research, demonstrating a respectful and trusting attitude toward them, and highlighting the importance of their views.

In the process of conducting this research inquiry, I encountered work which examines societal attitudes towards adolescents (Lesko, 1996, 2001; Lesko and Talburt, 2012). Lesko's aim was to reframe the deficit image commonly applied to this age group (ibid). This work forms a relevant strand of the review and is discussed further in section 2.2.below. Deficit assumptions of adolescence have reinforced a negative belief of this stage of development, with adolescents judged as a homogenous group, rather than as individuals (Sadowski, 2021). As noted above, some theorists have attempted to overturn an established and longstanding diminished view of adolescence with an aim of reconstructing the image of young people (Lesko 1996, 2001; Lesko and Talburt, 2012).

This chapter explores theories and practices which underpin research into student voice. One argument for exploring the role of student voice in connection with the research aims, is to assess the impact on students and teachers (MacBeath et al, 2018; Hill, 2020). According to some theorists, the relationship between students and teachers is paramount to positive outcomes in schools (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006; Fielding and Moss, 2011). An appreciation of the '*inter-relationality in all human encounters*' (Watson and Emery, 2012, p.224) suggests that young people cannot function in isolation and highlights the significance of interpersonal relationships.

The chapter begins with an examination of definitions of adolescence. The terms adolescence, adolescent, young person, youth, children and childhood can be employed differently and often appear interchangeable. The specific usage in this research inquiry was explained in Chapter One to make it clear for the reader. A further aim was to examine adult perceptions and to highlight significant discourses relating to Research Question Four: ‘How do adults who work with young people in school, articulate the day-to-day experiences of their students?’ (Chapter One, section 1.4).

2.2. Adolescence

The starting point for this section is an examination of definitions of adolescence. A definition of adolescence is important since opinions vary as to the characteristics of this stage of development, which exists between childhood and adulthood (Smith, 2016). The confusion in defining adolescence can be problematic (Hendry and Cloep, 2012) as it complicates the image of adolescence. Earlier theorists focussed mainly on the physiological growth and development of adolescence (Hall, 1904; Winnicott, 1965) whereas recent definitions extend to dealing with behaviour and mental health. Biological causation is challenged as limited since societies vary in how adolescence is defined (Clark-Kazak, 2009) and acknowledges other significant influences on adolescence, such as societal norms and practices.

2.2.1. Definitions of Adolescence

Adolescence: Middle English via Old French from Latin adolescere ‘grow up’
Concise Oxford Dictionary (1995, p.18)

Adolescent: between childhood and adulthood – (ibid)

The definition above positions the period of adolescence between childhood and adulthood. The root of the word adolescence means ‘grow up’ which reflects its perception as a stage of development, rather than a static period. The transitional nature of adolescent is a common perception (Smith, 2016; Busso et al, 2022) yet the age at which childhood ends and adulthood begins is contested. The end of childhood was viewed as 12-years-old (Erikson, 1968) but recently reverted to an upper limit of 10-years-old due to the earlier emergence of puberty (Hendry and Kloep, 2012). An age range of 10-24-years of age fits into the ‘*popular understandings of this life phase*’ (Sawyer et al, 2018, p.223), which acknowledges that views of adolescence are based on what is most discussed. The expansion of the age-range is due in part to societal changes, such as later education, marriage and parenthood which has led to a ‘*fragmentation of adolescent transitions*’ (ibid, p.37). By this, it appears that the authors are suggesting that the experiences of adolescents comprise several transitions: school, family, and in society. Any definition simply based on age can serve to reduce people to infants who have gone beyond their childhoods, particularly in different cultures (Clark-Kazak, 2009). This is a significant

reflection, since it highlights how adolescence is positioned in different communities. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge that the term ‘child’ is perceived and understood differently throughout diverse cultures with social factors as a significant element (ibid). The socially constructed nature of age, societal norms and rites, within local cultures, means that there cannot be one simplistic definition (ibid). This variation needs to be considered within our culture, too, since some adolescents take on roles within their families which constitute adult responsibility, such as young carers.

These definitions are complex since an individual’s development is influenced by a range of environments and conditions. Confused discourses can create a negative image of adolescents (Graham, 2004). One term in common use is ‘teenager,’ from 13 to 19-years of age, which suggests that teenagers are in the process of becoming adults, rather than being acknowledged as unique individuals (Mayall, 1994).

The role confusion experienced by some adolescents has been viewed as a significant trait (Hendry and Kloep, 2012) caused possibly by transitions as mentioned above and developmental changes. This development can be ‘*accompanied by some degree of turmoil, anxiety and instability*’ (ibid, p.13). The term ‘*some degree of*’ is relevant since it highlights the issue of individual experience. A realistic perspective is that ‘*Individual trajectories are unique and somewhat unpredictable*’ (Hendry and Kloep, 2012, p.1) which aligns with the person-centred approach and highlights the importance of student voice. Accepting young people as individuals of worth by listening to their views can be productive: ‘*the more the teacher is able to see the world from the pupils’ perspective, the more likely the teacher is able to help*’ (Gatongi 2007, p.209).

Considering the above variations of definition, for this research inquiry I adopted a model spanning the years 10-21-years-old to match the ages of the young people who were recruited for interviews. I separated them into three distinct periods: early adolescence 10-13 years-old, middle adolescence 14-17-years-old, and late adolescence, 18-21-years-old, following Steinberg (2017). The figure below illustrates a positioning of adolescence in a person’s lifespan. The age-range was chosen for its relevance to this research inquiry, aligning with the year groups in English secondary schools, from Year 7 (11-12-years-old) up to Sixth Form (16-17-years-old) and, due to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, at university (18-21-years-old).

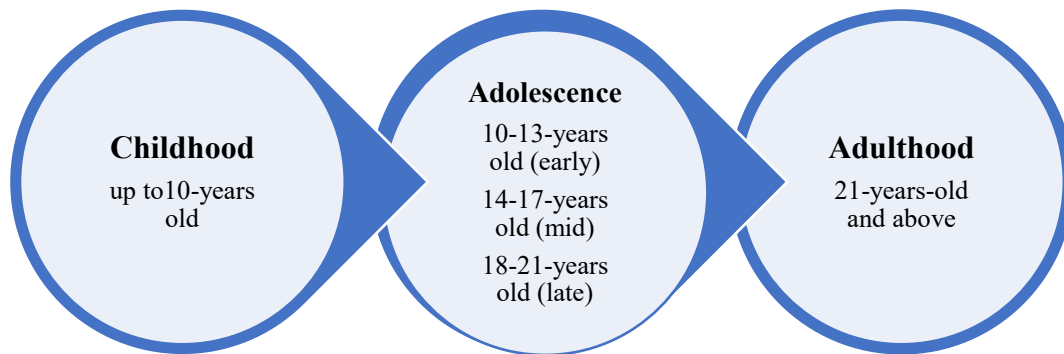


Figure 1: Positioning Adolescence in the Life Span of an Individual (after Steinberg 2017)

Definitions of adolescence include the physical and emotional development of individuals at puberty. Part of this development includes dealing with unresolved conflicts which have been described as a feature of this age (Smith, 2016) at a time when identity matters (Smyth, 2013). The concept of identity for adolescents and how it can become a challenge for some young people (Erikson, 1968) has more recently been interpreted as the ongoing process of lived experience (Sadowski, 2021). Problematising natural processes is unhelpful in understanding adolescence, however, the range of emotions and changes experienced by adolescents are now perceived as part of a significant developmental process (ibid).

2.2.2. Discourses on Adolescence

A wide range of perspectives on adolescence exists within a continuum from ‘*extremely biological*’ to ‘*extremely environmental*’ (Steinberg, 2017, p.8) which encompass theories on developmental stages and the significant role of the adolescent environment. The environment in this inquiry is primarily the secondary school in which adolescents spend much of their time and which is examined in section 2.6. below. On close examination the discourse around adolescence is complex. Historically, adolescent behaviour has been described as: conflicting with parents, experiencing changing moods, and taking risks (Hall, 1904). Hall was credited with introducing ‘*the concept of adolescence*’ (Strom and Strom, 2014, p.4) and using the phrase ‘storm and stress’ to describe the characteristics of this

phase. However, the model used by Hall was based on clinical populations, leading to a negative slant on adolescence as a time of crisis and mental illness, which is not the reality for most young people (Magen, 1998). The phrase ‘storm and stress’ was used as the title of a BBC Radio 4 broadcast series on the mental health of young people, suggesting that the image of the troubled adolescent still persists (Storm and Stress, 2018). Mead’s (1928) study of a society in Samoa found little difference in behaviour between adolescent girls and those who were pre-adolescence. The author suggested that adolescence is a social construct: *‘The stress is in our civilization, not in the physical changes through which children pass’* (ibid, p.162). This view concurs, to some extent, with that of Lesko (2012) who highlighted societal perceptions of adolescence and the assumptions and biases that occur. Perhaps the concept of adolescence is a combination of biological change and societal influences. This key area is discussed further in section 2.2.3. below regarding the reframing of adolescence.

One area of agreement is that adolescence is a crucial time of change (Martin, 2019) particularly for an individual’s physical, mental and emotional development. This change can sometimes lead to challenging behaviours which, as described above, can result in a negative view of adolescence while disregarding other significant environmental influences such as housing, social class, family, and the local community. Adolescent conflict with adults can be overplayed (Hines and Paulson, 2006) since many young people have positive relationships with their families and their teachers. A recent report from the Children’s Society on young people’s wellbeing pointed out that most are happy with their families (Roberts, 2024). Overall, the experience of adolescence cannot be generalised. Adolescents have been described as isolated and searching for some sort of identity *‘which does not let them down in their struggle, the struggle, to feel real’* (Winnicott, 1965, pp.122-123). This author suggests that adolescents do not accept *‘false solutions’* and need to *‘prod society repeatedly, so that society’s antagonism is made manifest, and can be met with antagonism’* (ibid, pp.122-123), an interesting interpretation of the awareness of adolescents regarding social ills and the social action that some are undertaking globally through student voice to influence education reform, particularly in the US (Conner et al, 2013; Conner et al, 2015; Welton et al, 2022).

With a view to more positive discourses on adolescence, there has been a development of work which has *‘a focus on positive youth development’* and *‘adolescents’ competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection’* (Youngblade and Theokas, 2006, p.58). This latter research found that risk-taking behaviours are *‘largely preventable’* (ibid, p.58) whilst possibly serving a purpose in challenging authority and the peer group. However, preventable behaviours in school could demand specific resources which some schools could be lacking. Another consideration, when understanding adolescents, is that adolescents may think differently to children and that their thought processes are

more theoretical (Nakkula and Todshalis, 2020). Adolescent behaviours, which have in the past been seen as rebellious, can be considered as an essential part of their development as well as a sign of difficulties in a young person's life (ibid). These considerations of the biological necessity of some aspects of adolescent development help to move the discourse away from an overall negative image of young people and can improve understanding.

Throughout my professional experience I felt that the voices of young people need to be heard since they '*have important things to tell us*' (Raby, 2007, p.39). One research study with young people on the nature of schooling, produced a list of student messages to adults ((Doda and Knowles, 2008, p. 27) some of which are reproduced below:

- Know us as people and as learners
- Respect us as people
- Understand our developmental nature and associated challenges
- Listen to us
- Let us know you
- Be kind
- Be honest
- Be hopeful and encouraging

If young people have such important messages for adults, it is incumbent on those who work with them to take notice and, where practical, act.

2.2.3. Reframing Adolescence

Deficit views of young people may be confirmed by some school practices (Lesko and Talburt, 2012) which may be '*causing student voices to be suppressed*' (Hogg et al 2020, p.xviii). This emphasises the importance of adults' perceptions of young people, a core strand of the conceptual framework. With reference to the research question 'How do adults talk about adolescence?' this section examines this discourse in more detail and heeds the warnings that continuing with negative assumptions and prejudices regarding adolescence leads to poor outcomes for students.

According to some theorists, young people have been '*imagined, endowed with meaning, and problematised*' (Lesko and Talburt, 2012, p.1) which was a trend that I observed in my role as an advocate for children in care since some secondary school staff held prejudiced views about the inclusion of some adolescents. Some adults can dismiss young people for their naivety and

inexperience (Thorne with Saunders, 2013), but often these negative assumptions were not borne out in reality, especially if the adults were willing to take an interest in individual students. Teacher perception of young people is seen as a strong influence on educational outcomes, with suggestions that adults need to relearn how to engage fully with their students (Finney et al, 2005; Delgado and Staples, 2008). The discourse of public opinion of adolescence is revisited in a recent American study (Busso et al, 2022) which revealed that public perception of adolescence is still using stereotypes which, the authors argue, could be a significant barrier to engagement with issues which matter to young people. The authors found that there still exists ‘*A sizeable gap between what we know about adolescents and what we do to support them*’ (ibid, p.1328). One conclusion of the study was that ‘*social environments are a primary influence on adolescents*’ (ibid, p.1333). One finding relevant to this research was that while adolescents can be perceived as vulnerable it is also a time of learning and adapting. This balanced picture of adolescence demonstrates recent reframing of this age-group, with its challenges and positive attributes.

The challenge of describing adolescents accurately, and reframing them, is illustrated below with a table which elaborates on four characterisations of young people (Lesko and Talburt, 2012). The table illustrates how some characterisations of young people are commonly and widely held. There is a familiarity to some of these definitions: they are descriptors I have used myself about adolescents before embarking on this research inquiry. These terms illustrate how adolescents are perceived by some adults and how limiting, deterministic, and oppressive such conceptualisations can be towards one group.

Coming of age • At the threshold • In transition to adulthood • Emerging • Not yet of age	Biological development • Grounded in biology • Emotional, unpredictable and often confused • Teenage body is destiny • Rebellious • Natural challengers of authority and limits • Raging sexuality of youth
Peer Orientated • Pressured by peers – common belief • Being popular more important than getting good grades (Coleman 1961) • Conformity to social ‘norms’ • Not fully autonomous	Signified by Age • Developmental view • Age as shorthand/code • Positions teenagers as immature, inferior to adults

Table 1. ‘Confident Characterisation’ Discourses of Adolescence (adapted from Lesko and Talburt, 2012)

Some of the descriptions and definitions of adolescence above are commonly used but are problematic regarding the image created. For example, defining young people by age can have a limiting effect which does not allow for individual differences in development. It has been suggested that this ‘*works to mute their conditions*’ (Lesko, 2001, p.172) through generalisation and stereotyping. The task of describing adolescents may ‘*best left to the generation in question*’ (Best and Kellner, 2003, p.77) since it is their perspectives that matter. Listening to student voices and their perceptions of adolescence may provide a more realistic characterisation of this phase of development and aid understanding.

In contrast to the above, there is a belief that in ‘*most settings, young people are serious, courteous and constructive in their commentaries*’ (Finney et al, 2005, p.225) which reveals a positive image of adolescence. A realistic attitude towards young people reflects the person-centred positioning and confirms the following positive aspects of young people (Youngblade and Theokas, 2006, p.58):

- Competence
- Confidence
- Character
- Caring
- Connection

Some recent research found that adolescents can be self-aware and articulate (Lewis-Smith et al, 2021). The authors suggested that ‘*Adolescents may appreciate opportunities to develop their understanding of values with people and in settings they feel comfortable with*’ (ibid, p.10). This suggests that the school environment be adapted to offer a ‘*comfortable*’ setting and provide student voice initiatives. However, one limitation of the quoted research was the narrow demographic of mostly female and White British young people. Further research with a more diverse group would be enlightening.

2.3. Adolescents in School

This section looks at two important aspects of the lives of adolescents – peer group relationships and mental health. The former is an area that has both positive and negative influences on adolescents. The latter is a priority for English educational policy due to the increasingly high rate of poor mental health found amongst students (further examined in Section 2.6.1.below). An additional pressure on the UK government arose from the Covid-19 pandemic, which occurred during this research inquiry and which impacted negatively on both students and school staff. This significant and unprecedented event is discussed in a dedicated section (4.5) in Chapter Four.

2.3.1. Adolescents and Peer Group Relationships

The table presented earlier (Table 1) illustrated some common perspectives from adults regarding adolescents with an assumption that the peer group is problematic. The literature on peer group relationships in adolescence is vast and was not the main focus of this research inquiry. However, some authors present work that is relevant. The person-centred positioning of Fielding and Moss (2011) views individuals as relational, highlighting the importance of peer group and student and adult relationships in school. Another study relating to the impact of the peer group reported that adolescent development is influenced by positive relationships with family and friends (Williams and Anthony, 2013) and that ‘*adolescents who are more susceptible to peer pressure, have poorer outcomes*’ (ibid, p.665). The link between peer relationships and school engagement is significant since it has been found that ‘*negative experiences with peers are associated with lowered achievement and academic motivation*’ (Li et al, 2011, p.331). The peer group can play both a positive and negative role in school engagement due to the complexity of adolescence friendships. The significance of the peer group relationships for socialisation has also been highlighted with the suggestion that adolescents with few or no friends are more at risk than their peers (Waldrip et al, 2008). Consequently, the quality of peer friendships can be a protective factor in school adjustment (ibid) which is worth considering if schools seek to provide appropriate resources for young people.

2.3.2. Adolescents and Mental Health

It is important to examine this area which has recently become embedded in the English school curriculum since it links with student voice. The combination of the performative agenda in English secondary schools and the impact of an unprecedented pandemic, appears to have resulted in an increase in pressure on all young people, with those more vulnerable being at most risk. This section looks briefly at those aspects of mental health in schools which are relevant to the inquiry. Research that found a recent decline in the mental health of young people is also mentioned here as evidence of a continuing concern within schools. The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on student mental health (Sharp and Nelson, 2021). Anxiety was common in children and young people during that time leading to an increase in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). A lack of appropriate provision for the mental health of young people, as reported by the school staff in the quoted study, could impact negatively on those adolescents who struggled in school before the pandemic. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on both student mental health and this research inquiry is discussed further in Chapter Four.

The mental health of adolescents has been closely examined with external stresses identified, in particular, friendships, schoolwork, parents, home, and the outside environment which may all induce stress leading to a high rate of young people (10%) *'diagnosed with an anxiety disorder'* (Lohmann, 2015, p.13). It is Lohmann's view that *'unfortunately, many teens are ill-equipped to handle everything that life throws at them'* (ibid, p.13). It is not clear what is being referenced here, whether it is family background or the young person's development. There was a perception that children or adolescents could not suffer from depression but *'researchers have found abundant evidence that depression is actually quite common in adolescence.'* (Boyd and Bee, 2014, p.477). This dichotomy could be confusing for those working with young people in schools; whether a young person is clinically depressed or exhibiting depressive tendencies is not always obvious to an untrained eye, which could lead to confusion regarding the most appropriate response.

Stressful conditions such as those described above can *'alienate'* and *'disconnect'* individuals (Elias, 1989, p.396) and may lead to self-harm. *'Self-reported substance abuse in middle-school students was significantly associated with perception of excessive academic demands and with an accumulation of stressors'* (ibid, p.397). The perceived stress is significant to this inquiry. Through a person-centred lens, an individual's perspective of their own experience is acknowledged and respected. This approach is central to listening to student voices.

A major stressor for all students is the emphasis on academic success in English schools, described as an *'audit culture'* (Roome and Soan, 2019). Students reported elevated levels of anxiety and spoke of depression and lack of sleep as a result of studying for GCSEs (ibid). School staff reported that they felt unable to offer appropriate support to students. This suggests that the school environment was not prepared for an increase in poor mental health outcomes. A separate study found that a high number of 10-15-year-olds reported being unhappy with their lives (The Children's Society, 2019). Yet the rise of 'depression' in young people was cited as a reason for introducing programmes in schools to improve children and young people's happiness (Seligman et al, 2009) with the suggestion that there was *'substantial evidence'* that this would increase *'resilience, positive emotion, engagement and meaning'* (ibid, p.293). An updated report from the Children's Society (2024) found that a substantial number (11%) of children and young people continue to report low levels of wellbeing leading to the conclusion that earlier responses were inadequate and did not reach all children.

The mental health of young people has been studied globally, and in some regions, suicide is one of the main causes of death in young people. In a study in three countries, it was found that children and young people who had considered suicide, were unsure of where they could find or access help, and when seen by a mental health practitioner they reported that they did not feel listened to (Gilmour et al, 2019). This is significant since it can be argued that when the voices of young people are not heard the outcomes for mental health are poor. Some English local education authorities have commissioned other partners to assist in assessing the wellbeing of their school populations. One project was devised by Leeds City Council, in conjunction with Leeds University, and was described as a student perception survey on health and well-being (Leeds City Council, 2019). The aims of the survey were to alert schools to areas in which they could offer new interventions to improve the wellbeing of students. There were 20,000 responses in 12 years. Findings were shared with partner schools in Leeds and surrounding areas and internationally. One response regarding 'feeling happy' showed a significant decline and the levels of stress experienced by young people was reported as the worst result in all year groups except Year 11. However, the quantitative approach of the survey could limit detailed information and may not represent the voices of all students.

In the search for answers to the decline in student mental health it has been suggested that young people *'struggle with the ever-increasing lack of connectedness'* (Smyth, 2013, p.69). This refers to an increasing reliance on social-media for most young people – their contacts with others often being 'virtual' rather than real, and with potentially negative consequences. One study on the impact of social media on young people and their families found that what appears as a routine activity for young people is in fact a major factor in their development (O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). The

complex relationship between young people and social media (Richards et al 2015) can produce both positive and negative outcomes (Valkenberg and Piotrowski, 2017) and currently the debate continues around whether young people should have access to their mobile phones whilst in school.

2.4. Student Voice

This section examines student voice discourses with reference to the key research questions which ask: ‘How do young people talk about being an adolescent in an English secondary school?’ and ‘How is student voice positioned in schools, and why does this matter?’ With reference to the latter question, the manifestation of student voice in schools is explored to understand the significance of this concept and its impact on young people. Redefining the role of students in research and educational change (Bahou, 2011) could impact on understanding where student voice fits within schools.

The quotes below are presented as examples of what student voice can represent and how the concept has developed in past decades, specifically relating to a recent surge in student social activism (Biddle, 2019) in schools across the world.

In this hyper-networked, post-truth era of global challenges, contradictions, and upheaval, youth are raising their voices and exercising agency in new ways.

Student voice reveals, through articulation, silence, and expression, youth consciousness about the world

(Hogg et al 2020, pp. xvii and xviii)

Student voice appears to have become a familiar term for some education practitioners (Conner, 2022) but different interpretations by teachers reflect the varied uses of the term by researchers (ibid). The term first appeared in 1978 when the Educational Review journal devoted a complete issue to student voice (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006). At that time, the concept flourished in mainly independent schools and some progressive state schools (ibid). There has been a continuous rapid growth of student voice initiatives in schools aiming for school improvement (Pearce and Wood, 2019). Confusion arises when it is acknowledged that the concept of student voice can sometimes straddle two themes: student alienation and school improvement (Mitra, 2018). This shift in thinking from either an impact on the student or on the institution to encompass both, is promising, mainly since some students have long articulated being overlooked and not heard by adults (Davies, 2001; Cook-Sather et al, 2015). The discourses have been many and varied, leading to *‘theoretical tensions and*

ambiguities' (Czerciawski and Kidd, 2011, p.2), with a limited consideration of a clear rationale (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006). The benefits for young people need to be considered alongside the benefits for the institution (ibid). For some, student voice has been ignored by pedagogy leading to a scarcity of guidance on capturing the views of young people and a lack of confidence from adults in implementing student voice in schools (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2019).

More recently the relationship between student voice practice in schools and learning has been highlighted (Conner et al, 2024). It has been suggested that student voice practice can lead to open communication, positive relationships and opportunities for students to share opinions with others. This optimistic view widens the scope of student voice beyond the benefit to young people personally and individually to developing into an important feature of learning: '*student voice can be a key feature of an engaging classroom environment*' (ibid, introduction). This important perception of the role of student voice, as a significant factor in learning outcomes, adds a further dimension to the historic concept by positioning it centrally within a classroom. This could mean that education practitioners who may have been sceptical about the role of student voice, may appreciate a more holistic advantage in its implementation in schools.

There are vast numbers of claims for the significance and positive impact of student voice in schools; but equally there are counterclaims which point to concerns regarding how student voice is initiated and how it has been utilised by schools as a political tool or as a promotional exercise. It has been suggested that the engagement of students in education practice needs to be meaningful (Cook-Sather, 2020) or it becomes a tokenistic exercise evidenced in some schools (Kahne et al, 2022). However, when young people perceived staff as responsive to their views, the outcomes for students improved (ibid). These authors highlighted the lack of large-scale studies linking academic performance with student voice. The significance of this is that despite the concept of student voice being debated for decades, there appears a lack of engagement from some schools. Another significant aspect of student voice is the opportunity for young people to contribute to their education (Finneran et al, 2023). Some of these complex issues inherent in the student voice debate are examined and discussed in detail below.

2.4.1. Defining Student Voice

Definitions of the term 'student voice' vary in the literature (Parr and Hawe, 2022) with a precise and widely agreed definition still unclear. The term itself is familiar to some teachers in schools and in one

study most teachers reported their agreement with a definition set out by administrators (Conner, 2022). The majority of teachers were positive towards student voice and saw it as linked to students and their education. However, the results are not representative of all teachers and the small sample of respondents in the study, fifty-five, were mainly White women. Student voice can be defined as the right to expressing an opinion as well as the right to silence (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, cited in Finneran et al, 2023) which fits with the person-centred approach of respect for an individual's response. Some adolescents may be uncomfortable with sharing their views with adults in an education setting and this has to be taken into consideration when implementing provision.

An absence of an agreed and coherent definition can be problematic. There is a difference between using student voice as a consultation exercise for problem-solving within school and listening to student views in general (Conner, 2022). The danger of an imprecise and wide-ranging definition is that it can lead to different interpretations on the part of both practitioners and policymakers (ibid) leading to misunderstanding and potentially unhelpful practice. The two distinct definitions as revealed in the literature were:

- Student Voice as participation in school or classroom decision-making
- Student Voice as opinion

Due to the confusion in defining student voice, there is a call for more research in this area (Conner, 2022) to ensure that there are benefits to young people as well as institutions. A significant finding from the latter research was that more than half of the teachers interviewed understood student voice as students talking about their education, with the remainder perceiving it as opinion or perspectives from students, not necessarily linked to learning. Understanding this significant difference could improve educational practice (ibid). Key benefits from implementing student voice, as reported by teachers, were enhanced student and teacher relationships and improved teacher practice (ibid), which aligns with the aims of this research and the person-centred approach adopted. A notable change perceived by teachers was an improvement in care and trust in the classroom. However, the study warns that teachers in other schools in the region (US) without student voice programmes were no more or less likely to change their practice. This suggests a lack of trust from education practitioners in the benefits of student voice.

2.4.2. Promotion of Student Voice

Some of the claims relating to the positive attributes of student voice are presented below. These have been selected for their alignment with the person-centred approach and the benefits for young people.

It is claimed that student voice promotes understanding and self-awareness in students (Fielding and Moss, 2011) whilst improving engagement with education and learning (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). Improving motivation for adolescents to engage with education and *'have a voice in how it is conducted and can affect how it concludes'* (ibid, p.30) provides young people with agency. Listening to students has often been linked to achievement and inclusion (Shields, 2004; Czeriawski and Kidd, 2011; Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012; Conner, 2022) with improvements in school practice (Welton et al, 2016). Some student voice initiatives have been promoted as a tool to aid education reform (Mayes, 2020; Czeriawski and Kidd, 2011). These attributes of student voice suggest it should be a key consideration for schools and positioned appropriately within secondary education.

Student voice can be a key element of participatory learning. Consultation, involvement, and the right of learners to be heard (Freire, 1970) links to the person-centred approach to education (Rogers, 1969). Similarly, to be effective person-centred approaches need to harness the experiences of adolescents to enable them to connect with the school curriculum (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012) making learning more meaningful. In addition, it has been suggested that some student voice programmes influence teachers' own learning (Conner, 2022), impacting on education practice for the benefit of young people.

Student voice has been viewed as an integral element of democratic education (Fielding, 2012; Fielding and Moss, 2011). A recent study from the Netherlands examined student attitudes towards student voice and how this related to their experiences in secondary schools (Kan et al, 2024). The authors found that listening to other people's ideas and opinions, described by them as *'listening democratically'* (ibid, p. 563), was a significant feature of student voice. Other key aspects of student voice were highlighted, such as *'discussion'* and *'influence'* (ibid, p. 566), suggesting a wide-ranging potential within a democratic education. The authors emphasised the *'importance for all students to have different opportunities to practice voice in a school context, as individuals, but also as members of a classroom community'* (ibid, p. 566). This links closely with other recommendations for education reform in which students are consulted and afforded agency (Fielding, 2010).

Within the discourses on student voice there have been multiple roles assigned to young people as *'analysts, researchers, agents of change'* (Conner et al, 2015, p.4). The latter role is demonstrated by action from students in an American High School who banned the use of the word 'redskin' when referring to their school's sports team. The principal of the school board reversed their ban. However, professional journalists supported it and removed the word from their sports coverage (ibid). The

influence of young people on education policy has elsewhere been recognised by US civil leaders (Conner et al, 2013).

The discourses of student voice in educational research range from students' perspectives on learning, to working with students as partners in or as leaders of educational projects (Bahou, 2011). The potential of student voice as a co-operative tool in schools can be extended when teachers become co-learners alongside student researchers (ibid). Student voice has been promoted as a tool for adults to use within school improvement, for example to improve teachers' own practice (Conner, 2022). In a similar vein, it is suggested that '*the lived expression of a shared delight and shared responsibility between adults and young people*' follows on from consultation between students and staff (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.80).

There is a potential for student voice programmes in school to contribute positively towards adolescent's engagement with learning as evidenced in the discussion above. However, there are limitations in initiating student voice which are discussed in the next section.

2.4.3. Problematisation of Student Voice

Whilst the positive aspects of initiating student voice in schools are encouraging, counter arguments highlight problematic areas which need to be considered (Black and Mayes, 2020) and some of these are discussed below. Initiating student voice in a tokenistic manner may undermine student empowerment (Conner et al, 2015; Horgan et al, 2017). Consequently, student voice can be perceived as a vehicle for control within educational settings (Czeriawski and Kidd, 2011) particularly when used as consultation tool. Consulting young people can limited to an adult agenda devised by school staff (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, cited in Berson et al, 2019) However, tokenism might be preferable to complete absence of student voice as a starting point. Since student voice is a relatively recent concept, there may not be enough evidence to convince practitioners of its significance, particularly from young people themselves. The concept of student voice also raises issues of equality for students and adults and traditionalists might perceive it as a threat to their authority.

Other key challenges are the dangers of privileging some student voices over others (Graham et al, 2018; Finneran et al, 2023) and selecting those students with status in their schools (Hanson, 2016; Horgan et al, 2017, cited in Berson et al, 2019). These are some of the challenges for schools when introducing student voice initiatives (Black and Mayes, 2020). Ensuring equal representation (Graham

et al, 2018) is key to avoiding the marginalisation of students who are less accomplished in expressing their views. The link between student voice and the person-centred approach is highlighted by the above considerations, since the impact on the individual, rather than just the institution, needs to be a priority for schools.

In other work, student voices have been described as context-bound with the suggestion that they cannot be taken at face-value (Pearce and Wood, 2019). However, from a person-centred position each individual is respected and trusted (Rogers, 1965). Some young peoples' voices are not heard due to their quiet manner and reserved behaviour (Finneran et al, 2023). An earlier study of the perspectives of student voice suggests that young people can be disregarded in decision-making (Quinn and Owen, 2014). This highlights the importance of providing opportunities for all student voices to be heard. The challenge for pedagogy is to evaluate the potential of student voice in practice (Cook-Sather, 2014) and to implement it appropriately. This last point is critical and impacts on the ethical nature of student voice since poor implementation, badly designed and executed, could adversely affect such issues as confidentiality and trust between students and staff (Mitra, 2018).

The inequality of power inherent in student and adult relationships is significant in whether student voice can work (Pearce and Wood, 2016; Welton et al, 2022; Finneran et al, 2023) since students may be perceived as passive recipients with teachers as active (Pearce and Wood, 2019). An imbalance can distort the voices of young people (Mannion, 2007) and has led to a call for reframing the concept of student voice (ibid). Another argument is that student voices could be used by schools for adult gain as in the suggestion that voices are '*selected to legitimate decisions that have already been made on their behalf*' (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, cited in Berson et al, 2019, p.26) Initiating student voice in schools has been interpreted as an exercise in public relations, a tool for marketing, rather than a benefit to young people and the community of the school (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant, 2019). The test is whether, having consulted students and listened to their views, schools act in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) by taking them seriously and acting on their behalf.

Student voice can be used primarily as a tool for raising standards or increasing attainment. However, when student voice initiatives recognise the importance of good student and teacher relationships (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006) all students benefit. This key theme of student and adult relationship is discussed further in section 2.5. below.

2.4.4. Adolescents' Perceptions of Student Voice

Key discourses on student voice raise the issue of benefits for young people as well as for the institution (Conner et al, 2015). Consequently, it is important to attend to young peoples' perceptions (Finneran et al, 2023). Some young people reported that student voice programmes are limited and unhelpful as school staff did not follow up or implement their ideas (ISC Research Report, 2023). This small-scale, international study had 151 responses, from six countries. International schools are set up for expatriate families as well as students from the host country with a mobile population (ibid). A Norwegian school study examined accountability and whether student voice can, in fact, lead to school improvement, a common claim. Schools in Norway follow a child-centred approach yet it was found that they scored lowest with regard to student participation (Jones and Bubb, 2021). One student reported that whilst the school staff listened to them, it was rare that action was taken (ibid). Students who attended an international school in Kigali wanted to '*build a culture and open the communication channels*' with '*safe spaces to speak out*' (ISC Research Report, 2023, p.70). The safety element could be of higher importance to young people in less secure regions. The crux of these findings and the feedback from young people, is whether schools act upon this information, and whether findings can be generalised to represent average students in ordinary secondary schools. This is discussed further in Chapter Eight.

Some advice suggests that schools should first reflect on conditions within their institutions to assist the implementation of student voice. Conditions viewed as imperative are '*a trusting and open climate, a rationale, risk-assessment, and learning from other settings*' (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006, p.219). Young people have requested space for all students to have their voices heard in school (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). However, as cautioned earlier, '*youths might be heard, but there is little guarantee that adults are listening*' (Pearce and Wood, 2016, p.5). These authors report an absence of young voices, in particular '*their experiences and perspectives*' (ibid, p.2). More recently, consultation regarding the views of students on a variety of school issues, has increased with one study examining adolescent perspectives of school councils. The students reported feeling '*privilege*' '*pride*' and '*honour*' at being involved and that it was a '*right*' for '*everyone*' (Finneran et al, 2023, p. 3). This highlights student awareness of the significance of the role of student voice. One study recently found that there was a wide diversity of language around the concept of student feedback. It is important to consider the constraints on schools and to value '*local knowledge and experiences*' (Jones and Hall, 2021, p.216) It appears that the concept of student feedback depends on the perceptions of individual institutions and whether it can fit with local expectations of what schools can offer.

2.4.5. Political Influence of Student Voice

Student voice has been viewed by some authors as wielding a political influence on education (Conner et al, 2013; Welton et al, 2022) evidenced by the power of students to promote education reform particularly in the United States (Conner et al, 2015). However, despite claims that student voice can influence educational policy, in some instances it has been absent from decision-making (Conner et al, 2013; Mansfield, 2014; Connor et al, 2015; Welton et al, 2022). This oversight has led to a call for the reframing of student voice (Mannion, 2017).

2.4.6. Summary of Student Voice Discourses

The themes discussed above were selected from a wide range of discourses and debates surrounding the concept of student voice. Due to the scale of commentary on this issue, a selection was made which matched both the aims of this research – to capture the voices of adolescents in English secondary schools regarding their experiences in and outside of school – and which related to the research questions regarding the role of student voice and its impact on adolescents in schools. The impact on students is a major consideration of this research inquiry and an important criterion for considering how student voice can be employed in schools. Listening to young people talking about student voice, is critical to assessing whether it has a role in schools. The person-centred approach of this research focuses on the needs of individual young people and how they could benefit from the implementation of student voice. Discourses around student voice revealed an argument that some initiatives can position school management issues above students' personal issues prioritising the needs of the institution rather than those of the students (Cook-Sather, 2020).

The main themes explored were the definition of student voice; the promotion and problematisation of student voice; adolescent perspectives; and political influence. Studies which examined adolescents' perspectives were particularly appropriate to the person-centred approach of this inquiry. The variations in definitions of student voice have led to inconsistency and incoherence in the field and more research is needed to fully understand how using student voice in schools can benefit students (Conner, 2022).

Student voice is a global concept with many countries embracing the notion as a tool for school improvement. Yet young people ask for a space to be heard and for action to be taken. The important matter of follow-up by staff has been acknowledged as an area that matters to young people. Despite international differences in culture and infrastructure it appears from student feedback that young people across the globe are asking for space, feedback, and action from adults. The significance of

student feedback is presented in an international study from New Zealand which confirms the view that the direct reporting of students needs to be prioritised rather than a representation of their views by others, since student voice has a key role in evaluating education practice and influencing government policy (Bourke and MacDonald, 2018).

Most school-based student voice initiatives described in the literature appear to be formalised and designed by staff rather than in collaboration with students. There appears to be limited dialogue with young people themselves about their perceptions of student voice (Hall, 2017). This is a key area that needs to be considered by schools before initiating a programme dedicated to student voice. The rationale for such implementation is unclear and some authors recommend a reframing of the role of student voice in the light of shifting education practice (ibid). Some recent discussion focusses on whether student voice should be mandatory in schools or implemented when judged as appropriate by adults (Finneran et al, 2023). Alongside this debate is a consideration of how much student voice initiatives can change education practice and influence and create education policy (Cook-Sather, 2014). Other authors suggest that student voice is absent from policy decisions ((Conner et al, 2013; Mansfield, 2014; Mitra et al, 2014; Connor et al, 2015; Welton et al, 2022)). This could be due to the uncertainty of whether student voice has a role in schools. It has been recommended that schools examine the scope of student voice before implementation (Mayes et al, 2021). The danger could be to engage with students at a tokenistic level. Similarly, there have been suggestions that student voice can present difficulties of implementation arising from the constraints of the education system on teachers (Pearce and Wood, 2019; Jones and Hall, 2021). Before student voice can be judged as effective these critical issues have to be considered and examined closely. Student feedback is an important indicator of the development of student voice in schools and further research could highlight young peoples' perceptions. The dangers inherent in the mismanagement or misuse of student voice initiatives have been highlighted as an area of concern (Czerciawski and Kidd, 2011). The next section examines a key theme related to student voice: the relationship between students and adults.

2.5. Student and Adult Engagement in Secondary School³

The engagement between student and adult is a key discourse of this research inquiry due to a recognition of its impact on the effectiveness of student voice (Fielding and Moss, 2011). These authors promote a person-centred version of student voice which aims to develop an inclusive education through student and adult shared responsibility and participation. A key component of this

³ I use the term 'student and adult' engagement in preference to 'student and teacher' since some of the adults who work with young people in secondary schools are support workers who play a significant role in this area.

vision is the development of a good relationship between student and adult: the significant terms of such an engagement as described by Fielding and Moss (ibid). Below I explore student perceptions of this relationship.

2.5.1. Adolescents' Perceptions of Student and Adult Engagement

It has been suggested that adolescents' perceptions of the kindness of teachers correlates to feelings of positive self-esteem and belonging to a school (Steinberg, 2017). Similarly, if opportunities are available for young people to feel '*autonomous, competent and emotionally supported*' (ibid, p. 229) then motivation, wellbeing, and engagement with learning can follow. Since the experience of school is different for adults and students (Conner et al, 2015) it is unsurprising that there could be differences in perceptions of the two groups. In one study examining student responses to school support young people acknowledged that the support that they received from staff was helpful but limited (Langford, 2016) which may be a result of some adults' disregard for the '*unique and personal*' views of young people (McHugh et al, 2012, p.9). Another study of student-adult relationships in schools found that adults can ignore young peoples' views (Spencer and Tinsley, 2008). It is important therefore that '*adolescents' ideas, beliefs, attitudes and intended actions are taken seriously in the face of the many obstacles that so many of them face*' (ibid 2010, p.184). Taking the voices of young people seriously was a key aim of this research inquiry within a person-centred approach. When adults '*demonstrate trust, share authority and learn from students*' (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012, p.34) the relationship between student and adult is more balanced and can lead to improved communication.

Areas of engagement between students and adults which have been considered as an essential element for positive outcomes for young people are presented below:

- A genuine openness with each other
- A reciprocity which is interested and alternative
- Acceptance of difference
- Giving young people regular opportunities in school for interacting as above (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.79)

The first two areas reflect the person-centred approach to education of this research, in particular the unconditional positive acceptance of individuals (Rogers, 1969,1983).

2.5.2. Involving Young People

A model for the meaningful involvement of young people in decision-making, and relevant to this inquiry, is presented below (Welty and Lundy, 2013, p.4). The model suggests four significant areas needed to meet the criteria of involvement:

- Space – opportunity
- Voice
- Influence - must be acted upon
- Audience - must be listened to

Adherence to the specific criteria listed can help *‘empower children as effective agents of change in their education and above’* (ibid, p.4). Lundy (2007) pointed out that responsibility with regards to ‘voice’ is a legal obligation yet there appears to be limited awareness of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989).

A further recommendation has been for adults to relearn how to engage fully with students and negate entrenched perspectives (Conner et al, 2013). This suggestion aligns with the reframing agenda promoted by Lesko and Talburt (2012) which calls for adults to adjust and amend unhelpful perceptions of young people. Communication between students and teachers is vital and *‘both parties need to believe they can have open and constructive dialogue’* (Robinson and Taylor, 2007, p.12), a task which aligns with the five areas of engagement described above.

2.6. The Impact of the School Environment on Young People

The link between students’ perceptions of happiness and the school environment have been reported and acknowledged. Examination pressure was a key factor in the unhappiness of some children and young people in a recent study (The Children’s Society, 2022). Winnicott’s view that *‘nothing takes place in emotional growth except in relation to the environmental provision, which must be good enough’* (1971, p.187) could be read in terms of the environment of a school with some aspects having an adverse effect. This has been touched upon in the discussion above regarding the significance of the relationship between students and adults in schools and its impact on positive outcomes. Recent education policy could benefit adolescents, however, as a recent Children’s Wellbeing Bill has been described as presenting *‘opportunities to tackle some of the challenges faced by children and young people’* following a call for *‘political parties to put children at the heart of the next government’* (The Children’s Society, 2024, p.5). Similarly, the impact of education policy on teachers needs to be considered since this can impact on young people’s outcomes. There have been

‘numerous Education Acts, White Papers, and Green Papers’ which have resulted in teachers being *‘accountable through formal audits of student learning outcomes controlled by senior management’* (Perryman et al, 2011, p.183). This practice undoubtedly exerts additional pressure on teachers.

Academisation is a significant and recent change to English education (Rayner et al, 2017). The Academies Act of 2010 changed the educational landscape with a move from public to private control (Kauko, 2022). The change was initially seen as a tool for school improvement but developed into universal provision. One report, relevant to this inquiry, has suggested that the needs of adolescents have been overlooked by a more academic system (Symonds and Hagell, 2011) and one source highlighted a lack of scrutiny and evidence-based advice with weak claims (Gunter and McGinty, 2014). By 2014 60% of state-funded secondary schools England had converted to academies (Heilbronn, 2016). The latter author suggests the new system compromises on inclusion, equality and social cohesion leading to divisive practice (ibid) which is a move away from a more holistic education practice. However, academic standards were predicted to improve. Whilst there are several studies which highlight the negative aspects of performativity in schools, I found little evidence, at first, to support the approach with regard to a positive impact on students. Yet recent findings have shown that it is possible to create an environment in which student achievement and performance are prioritised whilst offering care for individuals (Dadvand and Cvervo, 2020). This may lead, however, to the marginalisation of some students with different academic profiles and some teachers felt challenged when considering the individual needs of their students whilst acknowledging institutional priorities (ibid). Another report suggested there can be benefits to students when teachers are aware of individual achievements through regular testing and monitoring (Boxely, 2003). The debate around academisation is relevant to this inquiry since it centres on concepts of equity which, if compromised as suggested, could be a barrier to the instigation of student voice programmes.

2.6.1. Educational Policies Regarding Student Mental Health

This section briefly discusses relevant government policy on the mental health of young people which aligns with the research questions: to explore the experiences of adolescents in school as reported by them and to understand how the current education system may impact upon young people. The mental health of young people could be affected by how the current education system prioritises the needs of adolescents. Attempts at supporting the mental health of young people tend to rely on access to external services and increasing the numbers of children who are ‘seen’ by specialists, rather than initiatives designed and operated by school staff. A Department of Health and National Health Service report (2014) referred to prompt access to therapies for children and in 2015 the government invested £118 million to provide help to 110,000 more children. Earlier funding was found to *‘pilot joint-*

training for designated leads in CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) services and schools to access mental health services for children and young people' (ibid, p.18).

The term 'wellbeing' is used in educational programmes which promote mental health in schools and respond to issues such as depression, anxiety and anti-social behaviour in students (Watson and Emery, 2012). This term, however, has been seen as ambivalent (Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014) with the number of theories and models leading to inconsistency. The latter authors suggest that 'wellbeing' has *'taken a strong hold in our language, policy and practice with children and young people'* (ibid, p.39) with assumptions that children are vulnerable and in need of adult intervention to improve their happiness (Ecclestone, 2007). This discourse aligns with the person-centred principle of positive regard towards others and trust in an individual's self-awareness and understanding of what they need. The paradox seems to be that it is *'difficult to challenge a strong consensus that governments must intervene in a worsening crisis of emotional and psychological well-being'* (Ecclestone 2012, p.464). Similarly, it has been argued that therapeutic interventions can reduce an individual to a set of problems to be solved (Illouz, 2008) and that *'deterministic images'* emerge *'from a prevailing cultural sensibility which sees life as inherently threatening and distressing'* (Furedi, cited by Ecclestone, 2012, p.475). Such a position is in direct contrast with the person-centred approach which views individuals as capable of dealing with external pressures and trusts that adolescents can, with a facilitative adult, restore a sense of personal equilibrium.

A government report on mental health provision in schools (DfE 2018) found that exclusion from school can contribute to, or exacerbate, mental health problems, through isolating a young person from their peers and the 'normality' of a daily school life. A significant practice that impacts adversely on young people is the act 'off-rolling' students: removing a child's name from the school roll and leaving them adrift from education. A House of Commons, cross-party group produced a disturbing report: *'Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever-increasing exclusions'* (Parliament: House of Commons, 2018). One young person was quoted as reporting: *'I don't think they are treating everyone fairly and evenly'* (ibid, p.24). Exclusions from school had increased by 40% and 'off-rolling' was widespread practice, with some young people stranded outside the education system, denied their right to education and unprotected. It was suggested that some young people are punished and ultimately excluded for incidents that *'could and should be managed in schools'* (ibid, para. 25).

With regard to finding solutions for the mental health agenda in schools, the concept of 'resilience' has become part of the curriculum. The Education Inspection Framework (2019) states that students

can be taught how to build confidence and resilience whilst a website dedicated to the mental health of young people defines resilience as '*adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, or stress*' (Mentally Healthy Schools). The website suggests that resilience can '*offset the family and environmental factors that can undermine their ability to flourish.*' However, critics of the concept of resilience suggest it appears to target vulnerable individuals (Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014).

Positioning young people as vulnerable and needy can be both damaging and unproductive (Ecclestone and Rawdin, 2016) since most adolescents are self-aware and competent enough to deal with challenges. Changes made by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) relating to conditions such as bereavement and shyness, lean towards a medicalisation of common experiences and characteristics (Ecclestone, 2012) which adds confusion to the debate on supporting the mental health of young people.

2.6.2. The Person-Centred Approach to Education

The person-centred approach to education backgrounds this research inquiry. Carl Rogers believed that '*the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning*' (1958: 24.1.). However, success in education is often judged in narrower terms of academic achievement (Adamson, 2022) rather than a holistic view of an individual student's personal development and relationships. The Rogerian philosophy concurs with the agenda of student voice, since both promote the individual views of young people. One theorist who advocates the person-centred approach to education in his work on education reform is Michael Fielding. He has recently revisited the significance of personal relationships to education (2021) and suggests that the current education system follows an impoverished and disillusioned ideology which is '*Intellectually shallow, spiritually destitute and corrosive*' (ibid, p.105). This bleak critique is modified in a later suggestion that '*teaching subjects or getting results is only justifiable if it does actually help students to become better persons*' (ibid, p.102). This more balanced view can be understood as a rationale for academic achievement. Other advocates of the person-centred approach in schools suggest that education practitioners and school organisational systems need to subscribe to both the person-centred philosophy and the teaching of specific skills (Greenwood and Kelly, 2020). These latter authors highlight the increasingly central role of student voice in education planning and decision-making linking it with the person-centred approach.

The values of person-centred education are underpinned by concepts of freedom and agency (Rogers 1969). Importantly the philosophy presents a more optimistic view of human nature than European philosophers and psychologists such as '*Freud and his followers, who maintained a pessimistic attitude*' towards human society (Merry, 2006, p.5). One of the drawbacks of the approach when

adopted in schools is that a person-centred teacher may be faced with both the need to deliver the information, skills, and evaluations of students which are required in schools, whilst adhering to the person-centred philosophy which relates specifically to personal relationships (Kirshenbaum, 2007). The principles of the approach focus on responding to others with genuineness, empathy, and trust (Dasein, 2017). Individuals are understood to be focussed on a direction that will benefit them thereby making them trustworthy (Thorne with Saunders, 2013). This belief is echoed in a global definition of mental health in which individuals recognise their own potential (World Health Organisation, 2014.)

Person-centred education has developed to acknowledge the need for skills and knowledge in education with a strong additional thread of understanding individual differences (Rogers, 1983). These differences manifest themselves particularly in the link between mental health and learning. One example of how a student found the pressure of education impacting upon her mental health is described in the following quote '*I just slowly begun to sink under the weight of more schoolwork and just the depression and not caring anymore*' (Alice in Reuport, 2019, p.16). Alice received a diagnosis of dyslexia and struggled constantly with her learning with the consequence that she stopped attending school. An under-resourced system led to poor outcomes for Alice and the recommendation from the study was that schools become more interactive environments by including the voices of young people (ibid).

Recent theorists have aligned the person-centred approach to education with the positive education movement (Joseph et al,2020). These authors argue that person-centred education matches the aims of positive education in terms of a desire for individuals to flourish. However, this interpretation of the person-centred philosophy employs different language. Rogers wrote about personal awareness and agency which, he believed, could lead to the individual achieving fulfilment. It could be argued that Joseph et al are referencing the Rogerian philosophy to enhance the concept of positive education. Whilst the aims of positive education can appear similar to those of person-centred philosophy, in that they are for the benefit of individuals, there are more differences than similarities. The authors offer the caveat that positive education is not being presented as a revision of the person-centred approach but are highlighting those characteristics which are aligned. The most important aspect of person-centred philosophy, from my professional experience and training, is the concept that an individual is trustworthy in terms of knowing themselves and understanding how they can navigate life's challenges. The rationale for using the person-centred approach throughout this research inquiry is based on an acknowledgment and appreciation of an individual's self-knowledge. Significantly, this philosophy complements the concept of student voice, which affords trust to young people.

Another significant aspect of the person-centred approach that is central to this inquiry is the validation of others. The concept of ‘acceptance,’ at the heart of the person-centred approach, offers young people unconditional respect. I suggest that most teachers accept these principles and believe that children and young people have the potential for growth. Research into the person-centred approach found that:

in classrooms where teachers showed empathy, congruence, and respect for their students the students showed enhanced problem-solving skills, asked more questions, were more involved in their learning, had higher levels of cognition and showed greater levels of creativity (Rogers, 1983, cited in Merry, 2006, p.89).

An alternative person-centred approach was devised by a pioneer in emotional education, Macmurray (1957), whose belief in the authentic person parallels Roger’s concept of congruence. The relevance of Macmurray’s position is that he argued for relationships and care to be at the heart of education (Fielding, 2012).

A recent study concluded that the person-centred approach had positive impact on work with students with SEMH (social emotional and mental health needs) when setting up planning meetings which included students, parents and staff (Gray and Woods, 2022). Person-Centred Planning (PCP) in schools has developed recently, particularly with those young people who fit the criteria of SEMH. However, one reservation from the authors quoted above, was that whilst PCP appeared to aid professionals in focussing on student voice, *‘the voices of pupils with SEMH are still being overlooked in the majority of SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) research’* (ibid, p. 313). The research concluded that focussing directly on the needs of the young person and exploring their positive qualities encouraged them to be aware of themselves as learners and in some cases led to students feeling more connected. However, the research focussed on the use of the specific tool of person-centred meetings which might not transfer to the wider concept of person-centred teaching in secondary schools since this relies on an overarching ethos within the school environment. One question that occurs is whether the planning meetings met the needs of the young people or rather the agenda of adults in the institution. A significant aspect of the person-centred approach is that agency is handed to an individual student trusting that they can create and formulate solutions to problems of their own, facilitated by an adult. This latter point needs to be stressed since it demonstrates the importance of an interactive relationship between student and adult.

A recent advocate for person-centred education highlighted the importance of individual health and ability rather than limitations (Zucconi, 2016) which aligns with the reframing of adolescence agenda of this research and a focus on young peoples’ strengths and skills, rather than problematising

adolescent behaviour and attitudes. Other researchers have viewed person-centred education as part of the positive education agenda (Joseph et al, 2020). This is also problematic, since the person-centred approach does not aim to highlight only positive attributes but encourages the individual to express their feelings, whatever form they take. However, the authors highlighted the involvement of students in their learning and a focus on the inner resources of individuals, which is one of the tenets of the person-centred approach, as described in the paragraph above.

Since initiating this inquiry, the person-centred approach appears to have had a resurgence in research in the fields of education and health. Person-centred planning (PCP), as referred to above, is a tool embraced by healthcare professionals as well as by educationalists (Leahy, 2022; Avilesa et al 2025). However, some authors are concerned that there has been scant identification of the outcomes of using PCP, particularly with young people with special needs (Gray and Woods, 2022). The same could be said for identifying outcomes of using a person-centred approach with all young people in education and consequently more research is still needed.

2.7. Summary

This chapter has examined a selected range of literature relevant to the aims and research questions presented in Chapter One, and linking with the conceptual framework of this research inquiry, presented next in Chapter Three. The selection of work related, in the main, to the concepts of adolescence and student voice, with an outline of the person-centred approach to education which backgrounds the inquiry.

It was key to this inquiry to explore definitions of adolescence which have tended towards negative descriptions of development and problematising this stage by focussing on challenging characteristics (Hall, 1904; Erikson, 1968; Smith, 2016). It was unclear what specific ages encompass adolescence since the characteristics which are commonly described are complex and individual. One area which has developed is the issue of identity which has been highlighted as significant for adolescents (Erikson, 1968) but more recently described as an ongoing process within individuals (Sadowski, 2021). It has been suggested that the stage of adolescence is a social construct which contains negative assumptions and biases derived from adult perceptions (Lesko and Talburt, 2012). Societal attitudes contribute to a negative image of adolescence and continue to stereotype adolescents (Busso et al, 2022). Consequently, there is a compelling argument for reframing adolescence (ibid) and acknowledging competencies (Youngblade and Theokas, 2006) in addition to the challenges.

Reframing adolescence was a key driver of this research study with the aim of gaining a fresh and updated understanding of adolescents through their perspectives.

The concept of student voice has been debated for some time and has been developed as a tool for engaging young people in learning and achievement (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012; Conner, 2022) in addition to hearing their perspectives on education. However, despite lengthy research into student voice, there appears to be some confusion regarding an agreed precise and compact definition (Conner, 2022). It has been suggested that some student voice programmes meet the needs of the institution rather than benefitting young people from their perspectives (Mitra, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2020). The wide-ranging discourse on student voice examines this dichotomy: student voice as participation in school decision-making or student voice as opinion. One problem area identified has been the potential tokenism of student voice. This practice can be divisive and may marginalise some students by prioritising the voices of young people who are confident in articulating their views and whose status is high within the school. Michael Fielding (2000, 2004, 2010, 2021), a major contributor to work on student voice throughout his work on democratic schooling, promotes the agency for all young people comprised in student voice and links this with improved outcomes.

The person-centred approach (Rogers 1945, 1961, 1965, 1969, 1980, 1983) underpins the positionality of this researcher. Work which highlighted this specific philosophy, in connection with young people and their education, was explored and revealed up-to-date practice (Gray and Woods, 2022; Leahy, 2022; Avilesa et al, 2025). Gray and Woods (2022) found that focussing on young people and exploring their positive qualities led to self-awareness and improved connection with education. The concept of student and adult engagement aligns with the person-centred approach and impacts upon adolescents. Positive relationships between students and adults in school can lead to improved facilitation of student voice initiatives (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006; Fielding and Moss, 2011). However, one study found that *‘teachers are aware that the very ways in which they themselves relate to their students are being constrained by the expectations of performative measurability’* (Boxley, 2003, p.82). This suggests that the academisation of schools can have negative outcomes for some students (Hill, 2020). Young people have reported that examination pressure is a major issue for them (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2018; The Children’s Society, 2022). Increased contacts with Childline revealed that some young people have no-one to talk to about these challenges (NSPCC, 2018).

Linking together the key concepts of adolescence and student voice in order to reframe adolescence was a main component of the conceptual framework which is presented in the following chapter and considers how the conceptual framework guided the research design.

CHAPTER THREE

Framing the Research

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter examined the literature on adolescence, student voice, and the person-centred approach to education, which link to the key aims of the research: to hear the views of a small group of adolescents in local secondary schools; to examine the significant role of student voice and its impact; and to reframe adolescence. There has been evidence of suppression of the voices of young people in some education practice (Hogg et al, 2020) and it is important to explore the benefits of listening to young people. This chapter summarises the theoretical concepts which inform the conceptual framework and are underpinned by my researcher positionality, presented in Section 1.1. of Chapter One. The person-centred approach to education was a focus of this research inquiry and is outlined below.

3.2. The Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework has been viewed as mapping the territory of the research (Miles et al, 2020) and as a ‘*scaffold*’ with a utilitarian function providing strength and shape for the researcher to build the inquiry around (Smyth, 2004, p.1). The territory of this research inquiry, student voice and its impact on the adolescent in secondary school, was explored through the lens of the person-centred approach to education, developed from the theories of Carl Rogers (1945, 1961, 1965, 1969, 1980, 1983). In addition, key theories of adolescence were examined through the literature to find a fresh understanding of this age-group. The three key concepts of adolescence, student voice and person-centred education, are interlinked and are outlined below. The complexity of the framework derives from these differing yet connected elements, underpinned by my experiential knowledge of adolescents in school and arising from a humanist, person-centred training in counselling in education.

Within a multi-layered conceptual framework, there needs to be some cohesion (Maxwell, 2005) to provide an overview of the direction of the research and to avoid following inappropriate tangents. The construction of the framework aimed to provide clarity and connectedness which helped me in ‘*organising thinking*’ (Smyth, 2004, p.1). The key concept that underpinned this research was the positioning of adolescents in the education process – to understand how student voices can impact on young people and influence student engagement with education (Conner et al, 2024).

The key conceptualisations are summarised below.

3.2.1. Adolescence

Confusion surrounds an understanding of adolescence, with the age-range ill-defined. Adolescence is a stage between childhood and adulthood and yet definitions vary (Sawyer et al, 2018). It is important to acknowledge this lack of clarity since it has led to negative outcomes for young people in how others regard them and ultimately treat them (Lesko, 2001; Davies, 2001; Lesko and Talburt, 2012). The influence of adults in the construction of the concept of adolescence is significant and can frame adolescents in a way that may be viewed as harmful (Lesko, 2001). Teacher perception of young people has been recognised as a strong influence and has led to recommendations for adults to relearn how to engage fully with students (Finney, 2005; Delgado and Staples, 2008). One of the core aims of this research was to reframe deficit perceptions of young people by representing their views in a realistic light, aligning with the person-centred philosophy of positive regard towards others.

Young people have been '*imagined, endowed with meaning, and problematised*' (Lesko and Talburt, 2012, p.1) which I had observed in my professional role as an advocate for a special cohort of young people, those who were in the care of the state (see Section 1.1. Chapter One). My advocacy role promoted the positive characteristics of young people, in contrast to the problematic perception held by some school staff, particularly those in management. Due to an emphasis on negative behaviour in some settings, the term 'adolescent' has become a derogatory one leading to a failure to acknowledge the competence of young people by '*infantilising*' and '*disempowering*' them (Graham, 2004, p.1). This research aimed to redress the balance by demonstrating trust in the views of adolescents and presenting a fresh, updated representation.

3.2.2. Student Voice

Within the literature review of the previous Chapter Two the concept of student voice and its development was examined at length. This section summarises the significant aspects of student voice which underpinned the conceptual framework of this research inquiry. Through student voice programmes in schools, the issues that are significant to adolescents can be heard and where action is possible, then improved outcomes may be achieved for all young people.

Student voice is a concept which has been debated over decades (Pearce and Wood, 2019) and it is claimed that it can offer young people an opportunity to be taken seriously and heard by adults. Some adolescents have reported that they feel overlooked by school staff (Davies, 2001). The

implementation of student voice programmes can serve as a tool for adolescent's views to reach adults. Some theorists suggest that negative assumptions by adults have led to a suppression of young voices (Lesko and Talburt, 2012; Hogg et al, 2020). My professional experience in secondary education revealed that some adolescents were perceived by adults in schools as problematic, particularly those from minority groups such as children in care, those excluded from school, or those with special educational needs.

The lack of clarity which surrounds the concept of student voice (Fielding and Moss, 2011; Connor et al, 2015) is detailed in Chapter Two and has led to a range of definitions and claims. However, more recently there appears to have been a shift in thinking from perceiving student voice as a tool for institutional benefit to how it can best impact student mental health. This is an improvement on earlier confused visions of the role of student voice in schools (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006; Czerciawski and Kidd, 2011). The positive impact on learning from initiating student voice has been suggested (Czeriawski and Kidd, 2011; Toshalis and Naddula, 2012; Conner, 2022) and it is increasingly acknowledged that it can aid student engagement with education (Conner et al, 2024). This suggests that student voice could fit within a more performative education system than originally thought. In addition, student voice programmes can have a positive influence on teacher development (Bahou, 2011; Conner, 2022) when some teachers become co-learners alongside students. These conceptualisations of student voice suggest a wider reach into the education system, to improve the practice of teachers themselves and to impact positively on learning,

3.2.3. Student and Adult Engagement

Closely linked to the effective implementation of student voice is the importance of student and adult engagement (Fielding, 2004; Fielding and Moss, 2011).⁴ How adults and students relate to each other, is paramount to the learning process and outcomes for students (Steinberg, 2017). However, this view is problematic since it does not consider those adolescents who do not want to relate closely to staff – perhaps through shyness or a reserved nature. The matter of trust has been viewed as a central element of the relationship between students and adults (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006) and sharing views with staff is dependent on how students perceive the authenticity of adults. It is important to young people want to know that the interest from adults is real rather than ‘*contrived*’ (ibid, p.226).

⁴ I have amended the phrase ‘student and teacher engagement’ which is found in most of the literature on this theme, to ‘student and adult engagement’ in the text, to reflect the fact that in secondary schools there are other adults who have different roles to teachers who work with and support students. In this research inquiry interviews were undertaken with adults who were not teachers: a pastoral support worker, an Assistant Special Needs and Disability Co-Ordinator and a School Caretaker, all of whom had regular and significant contact and engagement with students in school.

The needs of all young people need to be considered when implementing student voice initiatives. Institutional organisation can be a barrier, however, to significant change, especially regarding the student-teacher relationship (Biddle, 2019) since the formality of school organisation is in contrast to the person-centred nature of positive interaction between adults and young people.

3.2.4. The Person-Centred Approach to Education

The key belief embodied in the person-centred philosophy is '*the capacity of the client to deal constructively with his life situation*' (Rogers 2003, p.384). For this inquiry, the word 'client' needs to be substituted with either 'person' or 'child' to acknowledge how Rogers developed his theory of client-centred therapy to embrace education and schooling. When he moved towards education theory he considered:

If the creating of an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding, and respect is the most effective basis for facilitating the learning which is called therapy, then might it not be the basis for the learning which is called education? (ibid, p.384)

The key concepts of the person-centred approach which are relevant to this inquiry are: that the individual can reflect and be self-aware; that each person has an actualising tendency – an ability to change; that congruence, empathic understanding, and unconditional positive regard, are essential characteristics of communication between teacher and student. Exponents of the person-centred approach believe that these skills and outlook, when adopted by teachers, can lead to improved relationships within the classroom and better outcomes for young people (Rogers, 1980, 1983; Tudor et al, 2004; Doddington and Hilton, 2007; Fielding, 2012; Fielding, 2021) and was the rationale for employing this approach throughout the research process. Rogers talked about '*significant learning*' (2014, p.66) by which he meant encompassing more than learning by rote. Rogers believed that '*a person learns significantly only those things which he perceives as being involved in the maintenance of, or enhancement of, the structure of self*' (Rogers, 2003, p.389). In other words, individuals learn best when they perceive a tangible benefit to themselves. This aligns with the student voice agenda; in that it focusses on the importance of the individual and their perspective.

In discussing how the person-centred approach can have relevance to education, Rogers referred to democratic education in preference to an authoritarian approach. One belief underpinning this approach was that '*we cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning*' (ibid, p.389). This was a controversial view put forward in the 1950's which continues to be discussed through the work of Fielding (2000, 2012) and Fielding and Moss (2011). This concept underpins the educational philosophy of Freire (1970) who promoted the concept of the learner at the heart of

education demonstrating agency and self-determination. These characteristics are at the core of both the person-centred approach and the student voice agenda.

3.3. Summary

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework designed by this researcher. The key elements of the framework provide a comprehensive study of the phenomenon being examined, the voices of adolescents. These key elements, significant to a broader understanding of adolescents in school, are the concepts of adolescence, student voice, student and adult relationships, and the person-centred approach to education.

One significant concept that underpins the framework is the reframing of adolescence (Lesko and Talburt, 2012) which was a key driver of the inquiry. The vision was derived from professional experience of working with adolescents in secondary schools and from person-centred training. I found that some young people are overlooked in our current education system and not given the opportunities they deserve (Davies, 2001). Unfortunately, this problem does not appear to have been resolved. The impetus was, therefore, to review the experiences of adolescents by listening to how they talk about their lives and to recommend changes within the education system which could provide better outcomes.

The long-debated concept of student voice has produced confusion regarding definitions (Conner et al, 2015; Conner, 2022). The suppression of young voices (Hogg et al, 2020) within education has led to debate regarding the efficacy of student voice. Student voice programmes can position young people within the institution of school with the aim of contributing their views and perceptions to adults and to practice agency (Finneran et al, 2023). Recently, student voice has become more familiar to education practitioners (Conner, 2022) and it has been suggested that there is a positive link between student voice and learning (Conner et al, 2024). However, engaging students in their own education practice needs to be meaningful (Cook-Sather, 2020) or it becomes tokenistic. Hearing the perceptions of adolescents on student voice is critical (Finneran et al, 2023) to its success. An underpinning discourse has been that the needs of the institution are prioritised above those of students (Cook-Sather, 2020). This significant theme of the benefits of student voice for young people aligns with the person-centred valuing of individuals. One study found that students had important messages for adults (Doda and Knowles, 2008) which included '*listen to us*' (ibid, p.39). There has been a shift from perceiving student voice as a tool for school organisation, to acknowledgement of its positive impact on student mental health and support for engagement with learning (Conner et al,

2024). Student and adult relationships can positively influence student voice (Fielding and Moss, 2011) and can lead to improved communication. Consequently, student voice has a wide reach to benefit young people.

It has been suggested that some adults make general and often negative assumptions about adolescence, leading to a deficit image which ‘*mutes their conditions*’ (Lesko, 2001, p.172.). A recent study showed that public perception of adolescence still employs stereotypes (Busso et al, 2022). Historical theories on adolescence centred on physical challenges (Hall, 1904; Winnicott, 1965; Erikson, 1968) rather than acknowledging positive attributes (Lewis-Smith et al, 2021). A wide range of perspectives on adolescence was found, with a continuum from ‘*extremely biological*’ to ‘*extremely environmental*’ (Steinberg, 2017, p.8). This has led to a call for reframing adolescence (Lesko and Talburt, 2012).

The person-centred approach to education has strong links with student voice since both focus on the views of the individual adolescent and demonstrate trust in that viewpoint. The concept of ‘*significant learning*’ (Rogers, 2014, p.66) suggests that more than academic subjects constitute education. The importance of the individual and their perspectives, is central to the person-centred approach and aligns with student voice. Recent interest shown in the person-centred approach to education has developed into Person Centred Planning (PCP) in some schools, which involves the contribution of students (Leahy, 2022; Avilesa et al, 2025). This recent initiative focusses specifically on education planning meetings but whether the concept could transfer to the wider concept of person-centred education is unclear (Gray and Woods, 2022).

The next chapter presents the research design and methodology used to examine how adolescents reported their experiences of school.

CHAPTER FOUR

Research Design and Methodology

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the conceptual framework linking adolescence, student voice, and the person-centred approach to education. In this chapter the focus is on the research design and methodology of the inquiry. One useful concept of '*methodological congruence*' refers to how the aims, questions, and methods of research can be connected holistically (Cresswell, 2013, p.50). The linking of these areas was a key consideration when making decisions about the research design. Denzin and Lincoln suggested that research design can be seen as a '*set of guidelines that connect theoretical paradigms to strategies of inquiry*' (2013, p.29).

The key research questions developed from my experiential knowledge of adolescents and the person-centred philosophy. These questions, which are re-listed below, derive from the research aims. The main research goal was to capture the experience of being an adolescent in a secondary school through the implementation of qualitative interviewing. A secondary goal was to understand how the concept of student voice has developed in schools and to highlight the benefits for young people and problematise the positioning within schools. The research questions link to the literature review, which examined past and recent theories on adolescence and the role of student voice in schools. An additional, and significant, thread throughout the framework and the research questions was the reframing of adolescence by unpacking adult assumptions, to reach a fresh and realistic understanding of adolescent lives.

The person-centred approach is a key theoretical paradigm for this research since it promotes the agency of young people and links to the concept of student voice which was a core element of the research design as described in the sections below.

The research design was based on an understanding of the significant role of student voice in school with an intent to reframe the concept of adolescence and the aim was to capture the voices of adolescents, '*individuals not heard in the literature*' (Creswell, 2013, p.102). There was a vast range of research projects regarding adolescence perspectives on multiple subjects connected with their personal experience. However, this research inquiry focussed on a small, random sample of adolescents, from Year 7 to university undergraduates, in four ordinary English secondary schools and one university, with the aim of giving an opportunity for them to voice their general perspectives on their schooling, rather than inquiring about one specific

aspect. The voices of older adolescents, in higher education were included due to the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially the plan was to recruit volunteer participants since this would provide a random group of individuals, rather than selecting particular students. The aim was to hear the voices of whoever came forward, without previous knowledge of their individual backgrounds. However, due to the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, some older adolescent participants were selected by one school through the form tutor system. Significant changes were made to the research design during this period and are outlined in Section 4.5.1.

The rationale for choosing a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis is described below in Section 4.2. The significance of the researcher's role and positioning was considered and reflected upon as it impacts on the design of the research. An important underpinning of the research is my positionality which relates to and impacts on the research (Ravitch and Carl, 2021). I have described my long professional engagement with adolescents, in a variety of contexts (Secondary Schools, Pupil Referral Units, Local Authority Children's Homes) as individuals and within groups (Chapter One). This experience brought into sharp relief the experiences of some young people in the English secondary school system. However, the groups I worked with were mainly minority groups: children in care, those with special needs, those excluded from school. I acknowledge that this is a limited and specific view of adolescence – I needed to find through the research process whether the voices of these discrete groups were echoed within a random, ordinary sample of adolescents. Similarly, as a white, middle-class woman I bring a particular viewpoint to the inquiry, having worked mostly with a similar ethnic group as my own. Many changes have taken place in both education and the social world in my lifetime, some of which present personal challenges, such as new and ever-changing technology. I acknowledge that being reflexive, as a researcher, is vital to the rigour of research (ibid, p. 13) and this fits with the self-awareness of a person-centred practitioner. The choice of research design was informed by personal beliefs and assumptions which have since been challenged throughout the research process, due in part to societal changes referred to above and to historical differences between my own schooldays and the lives of young people today. My aim was to reflect on these differences, highlighting them where appropriate for the reader, and being aware of personal prejudices. Some prejudices, or biases, such as a leaning towards the experiences and needs of young people who have been challenged by education, can be viewed as an advocacy for those who are not always listened to, or heard.

Debates surrounding research with children and young people point to the potential vulnerability of those under 18 years of age and the importance of protective practices (Kay, 2020) whilst acknowledging the competence and ability of young people (Skelton, 2008). Both

these conditions applied to the research design as safeguarding young people is a key ethical issue when interviewing (British Educational Research Association, 2024). The gatekeeping staff were responsible for safeguarding students which meant I could refer to them if any issues occurred during the interviews. It was important to ensure the safety and comfort of adolescent participants in a small group setting. Ethical guidelines were followed within a framework that offered opportunities for young participants to talk openly. Giving clear information to students regarding the research could minimise risk (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2016) so that the young people could appreciate what was involved before they volunteered. These important ethical considerations included explanatory presentations to students. The person-centred approach maintained by this researcher involved respect for and trust in the young people. Research ethics are discussed further in Section 4.8.

The methods for data collection are described in detail in Section 4.3. below and was reliant on the collaborative work of the school gatekeepers who were involved throughout the process. This was achieved through regular face-to-face planning meetings in school, during 2019 at DA and 2020-2021 at HHS.

4.2. Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research eschews notions of one single knowable account of social reality, and instead emphasises notions of situated knowledge and subjective understanding

Heath et al., 2009, p. 89

The qualitative research approach taken for this inquiry is a wide field (Cohen et al, 2002) which holds a central belief in the agency of individuals and complements the person-centred tradition of respecting the individual and their knowledge of themselves (Rogers, 1980). Cresswell has described qualitative research as beginning with ‘*assumptions*’ (2013, p.44). I reflected upon my assumptions throughout the process and recorded these thoughts through research journals (see Appendix 15 for an example).

One of the most important considerations was the ethical tone of the design. The current ethical guidelines from BERA (British Educational Research Association, 2024) suggest that ‘*ethical research design and implementation should aim to put participants at their ease*’ (ibid: paragraph 34). This was an area that I took particular care over – how to inform young people and adults, how to

ensure a comfortable space for interview, and how to conduct the interview in a friendly and relaxed manner.

‘The interpretive paradigm, in contrast to its normative counterpart is characterised by a concern for the individual’ (Cohen et al, 2002, p.21). This view aligns with the person-centred approach. By listening to student voices through interviews an understanding of their social worlds may emerge (ibid) which was the key aim of the inquiry. An important task was to capture the *‘richness of children’s lives’* (Graue and Walsh, 1998, p.3). The qualitative approach offers scope for exploring young people’s lives as described by them, whilst attempting to provide *‘An empathic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes thick description, conveying to the reader what experience itself would convey’* (Stake, 1995, p.137). It was important to make as clear as possible how it might have felt to be an adolescent in school in order to honour the data received.

Research methodology has moved away from *‘general theorising’* to *‘description and interpretation’* (Schatz and Walker, 1995, p.136). These authors warn, however, that the voice of the researcher can be intrusive and point to the risk of the researcher being at the heart of the research rather than the participants themselves. This was avoided by devising semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions giving scope to participants to answer on their own terms (Heath et al, 2009).

4.3. Data Collection

With reference to the main research questions (Chapter One), the intention was to capture the voices of students regarding their experiences inside and outside of school and subsequently *‘to describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it’* (Creswell 2013, p.131). This aligns to the person-centred approach of this inquiry – to find out direct from adolescents and adults how they perceived their experiences.

The first task was to recruit local secondary schools for the research process. Initially I contacted several secondary schools in the locality where I live. Four secondary schools were finally recruited for this research, including two schools which responded later during the Covid-19 pandemic, during 2020 -2021. When English schools were closed during the country’s lockdowns, I recruited two adult staff from two separate secondary schools, via a university MA course. Two young people volunteered from a university BA course, as an addition to the small sample of young people, and to view adolescence from a position of

hindsight. A total of forty-three young people, Year 7 to university undergraduates, were interviewed in small groups in school and individually online, and ten adult staff members (with a variety of school roles) were interviewed individually in schools and online. These interviews took place before, during, and post-pandemic, from 2019-2021. The students names, year groups and schools are presented with the dates of their interviews, in Table 2 in section 4.4. below. The adult staff names, roles and schools are presented in Table 3. *[All names are pseudonyms.]*

Semi-structured interviewing in small groups aligns with the person-centred approach, by using open-ended questions which could offer an opportunity for participants to answer as fully as they wished (Heath et al, 2009; Brinkman in Leavy, 2020). Interviewing young people can be viewed as a social encounter between the researcher and the group, rather than as teacher and student engagement (Pattman, 2015). This relaxation of the roles was evident in the way the interviews proceeded – in most of the small groups the young people appeared comfortable and accepting of my role. It felt as if there was mutual respect on both sides. The social roles which are adopted in interviewing are important and can affect the process (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2016). The person-centred approach and its belief in equality meant that my positioning was different to that of a teacher since I did not present as an adult with authority. My role became that of an adult professional, but with a more relaxed attitude since I was not employed to discipline the participants. My perception of how my role was seen by the young people is that they were respectful and the data shows that they responded seriously to the questions and acted in a courteous and polite manner, demonstrating acceptance of my role.

The choice of small group interviews for the data collection plan was designed to facilitate a context in which adolescent students could be reflective and open. One-to-one interviews can be more intensive and unsuitable for some young people. In collaboration with the gatekeeper of DA, the Assistant Principal, we decided to limit the groups to four or five individuals. The time for each interview was limited by the length of a school class period, about 50 minutes, so in order for all participants to have a reasonable amount of time to speak, the small group size worked well. The adults, however, were interviewed individually as I considered that they would prefer to talk without other staff present, especially those who were not in senior roles. This decision is discussed in more detail in section 4.4. The one-to-one interviews lasted no longer than an hour, due to the working constraints on school staff.

The non-directive and humanistic approach towards interviewing has been described as accepting the personal experiences and opinions of others as valid (Rogers, 1945). An equally

important paradigm was the concept of reframing adolescence by examining deficit perceptions of young people (Lesko, 1996; 2001; Lesko and Talburt, 2012) which can lead to poor outcomes. As a result of this choice of paradigm, this research aimed to develop and construct theory (Trafford and Leshem, 2012) around the voices of adolescent students, providing fresh, updated knowledge about their experiences and how it feels to be an adolescent.

An alternative research design was to use surveys or questionnaires rather than face-to-face interviews. However, these tools are often limited to standardised statements more suitable for accessing larger numbers of participants and may not offer the scope for wider, reflective responses (Jain, 2021). The decision to choose interviews over surveys developed from a wish to adhere to the person-centred philosophy and a belief that interviews can result in deeper insight from participants (ibid). Interviews may produce data that reveals individuals' views in depth (Kvale, 1996). In comparing surveys with interviews Jain (2021) found that there was better communication through a more individualised touch and despite the challenges of audio-recording and transcribing, interviewing revealed unexpected details and fresh information from participants.

One significant advantage of semi-structured and open-ended questioning was the opportunity it gave to modify questions during the interview process according to how the interview progressed ((Robson, 2011). If there was a delay in response, then a further question was posed as a stimulus to thought. The process became more organic and flexible, producing richer and unexpected data. Key questions were designed with prompts and some structured elements, such as asking the young people directly where they would go for support in school.

4.3.1. Recruiting Schools

Data collection in schools began when I approached local secondary schools during September 2019. I contacted six, mixed secondary schools which fitted the criteria of being schools unknown to myself from my professional work and within a convenient distance since I would need to use a car to reach them. It was imperative for me to work in secondary schools that I had not been involved in during my career as this might prejudice my research due to familiarity and the complex issues which arose due to my advocacy role. This meant that there was a limited number of schools to select from, since my professional role involved a brief of all schools in one particular area in the county. Once I found a group of schools that fitted my criteria, I approached senior management directly for their assistance, outlining my research (Appendix 6). At this stage I thought that I would only need to hear the voices

of Year 10 and 11 students, but when later I met with one Assistant Principal, Alan (Dryden Academy), he suggested that I interview all the year-groups, which resulted in rich data and revealed some significant commonalities between the age groups. After receiving one positive response I suggested an initial meeting with senior management to discuss the research in more detail and what I wanted from the school.

4.3.2. Context

The context of the inquiry is the lives of adolescents in English secondary schools which have undergone significant changes in the past few decades, leading to practices within education which seem to have led to increased pressure on young people according to reporting by young people. The ‘*perception of excessive academic demands*’ (Elias 1989, p.397) was shown to lead to self-harm and other reports have uncovered the role that exam pressure plays (The Children’s Society, 2022). Government education policies which are relevant to the research are discussed alongside a brief examination of the academisation of schools, with an aim of understanding the impact on students. The context informs the aims of the inquiry which in turn impacted on the research design and methodology.

Introducing the context of the research at this point is significant since it is important to have some understanding of the environment in which participants spend time (Cohen et al, 2002). There are several ways to gain this understanding, and in this case, I was fortunate to have a professional background of regular and close engagement with staff and students in secondary schools. However, the current Academy system of education was unfamiliar to me and I was uncertain what the response would be. In the light of current educational practices, I was curious as to how interested they would be in research on adolescent voices.

After receiving a positive response from the first school recruited, Dryden Academy, a meeting was set up with the Assistant Principal, Alan, to discuss my research and the role of the school staff. Dryden Academy is a non-selective, mixed secondary school situated in a small town in a rural county. The area in which the school is located consists of small villages and hamlets and is positioned between a large coastal town and a city. The population of this rural area is not diverse – the residents are mostly White British from agriculture, fishing, and commercial backgrounds. The area has good rail connections with London, so some people commute to the capital city for work.

I was aware of my role as a researcher rather than an education professional. I entered each school on my own terms, not as an employee of the local authority. Once inside the school premises I could observe the activity around me, looking at the reception space for clues as to what messages the school presented to its audience of pupils, families, and visitors, and how welcoming it felt. The detail of the first encounter with one school (DA) is reported in fieldnotes (Appendix 2) but a brief outline is provided here.

The first thing I noticed, outside the school (DA), was a large banner proclaiming the GCSE exam grades achieved by students. My meeting with the Assistant Principal, Alan, was productive and he was interested in and supportive of my research throughout the process. Alan suggested I spend one day following the timetable of a Year 9 group. This fitted with the view that *'observation can increase the researcher's general understanding of the children's local culture and social structure'* (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003, p.41). However, whilst this suggestion appealed to me at the time, consequently it was revealed that ethically this would not be appropriate since I had not received permission from the parents and young people. As I walked through the school building, I was reminded of my own school days - there were similarities and some major differences, particularly the use of technology. In each classroom there were rows of tables and chairs facing a whiteboard and screen at the front.

In order to increase my sample size, Alan suggested that I contact other schools within the same academy trust, but which were quite different in their locations. I approached Harris High School, a school in a suburb of the county city and the response was positive. This is a mixed secondary school with a Sixth Form and therefore a larger population of students. The students lived in a different environment and I gained access to more and older students. When I approached the school and met the Assistant Principal, Mary, she showed great interest in and support for the research inquiry. This became the second school for my data collection.

4.3.3. Recruitment of Participants

During the autumn term of 2019 the plan was to recruit adolescent and adult participants for interview. From studies of young children conducted at the Social Science Research Unit and the University of London (Marthner, 1997, p.17) a *'child-centred approach to data collection'* was recommended with the researcher presenting herself and her topic clearly to the young people. At an initial planning meeting with my contact Alan (DA) in September 2019, we decided to inform the students of my research by addressing their morning year group assemblies. I offered to speak directly to the students, rather than ask a member of staff to do so.

A few days after speaking to three morning assemblies at Dryden Academy and asking for volunteers, I received the names of nineteen students who had volunteered from a population of five hundred. I distributed detailed information sheets and consent forms to the volunteers for themselves and their parents to complete (see Appendix 13). These forms were returned to me at the school office before interviewing began. The current ethical guidelines from BERA (British Educational Research Association, 2024) recommend the procedure of opting-in to research. The names of student participants, their year groups, and the dates of interviews are presented in section 4.4.4. This includes all interviews with adolescents, prior, during, and post Covid-19 pandemic, both face-to-face and online.

The recruitment of adult staff participants proved to be more challenging. I had expected that it would be easier to ask the staff for volunteers and they would come forward willingly. I addressed a mid-week, after school, staff training session at Dryden Academy, in September 2019. This was an uncomfortable session for me perhaps due to the fact that it took place after school when the staff must have been tired. There were only a few teachers in attendance. Only one teacher volunteered from that group. Eventually I received four names: one from the training session (Liz), two from senior management who did not attend the staff training (Alan and Pat) and one teacher who was the first person I spoke to when I arrived (Ann). Later, Liz removed her name from the volunteer list due to family health issues and instead, I decided to interview Colin, the school caretaker, due to his daily contact with students. Unfortunately, no other adult volunteers came forward from that school.

Two months later, in November 2019, I began small group interviews with young people and individual interviews with adults at Dryden Academy. Two years later, after the schools lockdown, I resumed my data collection at DA in December 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 interrupted the data collection process and the plan for interviewing was changed to online interviews during March to June 2021.

4.3.4. The Role and Positioning of the Researcher

Consideration was given to the significant role of the researcher within a school and that determined much of the design of the research. The practice of self-reflexivity in research has been widely covered with researchers urged to be aware of their own contextualised perspectives (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992) which meant that I kept an open mind about working with different adolescents than I had previously. Some authors see research as social practice and creating a world through representation whilst understanding that the researcher is a part of that world (Usher and Scott, 1996,

p. 34). I was aware of my presence in the interview group and how the dynamics would be affected by my identity as an older woman, rather than the younger teachers within the schools. I kept a research journal which helped with understanding my role in interacting with interview participants and my relationship with staff. An example of my notes at a challenging time during the Covid-19 pandemic is given here:

Research Journal – Autumn term – 2021

Friday, 10th September 2021

What a year! So here we are, almost back to 'normal.' The UK is 'opened up' people are travelling abroad on planes to some destinations, children are all back at school, and some people are back at work. But lots of people still work from home. As far as I am concerned, the only change is that I could go back to the campus, but I am still being cautious. Numbers of cases are increasing daily, but with fewer deaths from Covid. Re my research I was keen to get going at the start of the month, and in fact emailed six schools re data collection on 31st August, anticipating staff returning to schools before the children. I got immediate replies from DA and HHS which was great and helped me feel that my work and I had not been totally forgotten or put aside. The four schools I contacted near the coast have not yet replied but it is still early days and they may in fact get in touch.

The good news is that Mary was happy to meet up and sent me three dates and yesterday we actually met for the first time in 18 months. I was really pleased to see her and had prepared a plan for data collection. I emphasised the need to get on with it now as my ethics approval is only up to end of this year. She understood and took it upon herself to recruit the children I need through the form tutor system. She wanted to send them a summary of my research and even suggested she could distribute the consent forms if I sent her electronic copies. I told her about the poster I had designed and she was happy to send that through to staff, too. We talked about numbers of young people needed and how many in a group. She also said it would be good to have a timescale so she could book an appropriate room for the interviews so we decided the week beginning 27th September would be good. I was very pleased with how pro-active she was and keen. It took a weight off of my mind and I came away from the school feeling much more motivated and excited about going back into school and interviewing young people and staff. Alan had also written straight back to me and just asked that I give him 2 weeks to sort out his timetable and then we could meet. So that is also a great help.

The practice of journaling continued through regular field notes (Appendix 2), a fieldwork progress chart (Appendix 3) and analytical memos (Appendix 4). Memos and field notes served as a helpful tool for ‘ideas and thoughts of the researcher, in the field or even after an interview’ (Jain, 2021, p. 4).

My position as a researcher, within a school, needed to be clear to the participants whilst ensuring their needs were uppermost when planning the data collection. I decided to introduce the students to the research through school assembly presentations and to reinforce the importance of their views at the start of each interview. As Christensen (2004, p.166) points out in her paper following her research

work with children in schools, '*viewing power as inherent in research emphasises that research is part of social life rather than an external contemplation of it*'. The author suggests that it is '*important to establish relationships with children*' from the start of the process and highlights the need to make clear to children and young people that it is *their* perspective that matters.

A researcher can be both an insider and an outsider with the disadvantage that an insider can overlook things close to them (Greene, 2014). I was concerned with whether school staff would perceive me as an 'outsider' in my role as a researcher, or an 'insider' due to my former career in education. When I entered the first school I recruited, I was able to find my way comfortably around the school building and was familiar with the culture within, although much of it had undergone changes. It helped me to feel part of the school to spend time in the building and develop a presence. Towards this end I arrived early before my meetings or interview sessions and interacted with staff in the staff room. Engaging with an institution can help the researcher get close to the culture and build trust with staff (Guba, 1981 cited by Greene, 2014). Despite some familiarity with the culture of a school, I decided to pay extra attention to the current organisation to understand how the new academisation system worked and how it might impact on young people. The significance of the academisation of schools is discussed in section 4.3.2. on context.

4.4. The Process of Interviewing

The process of interviewing is a sensitive practice, getting close to the '*subject's lived world*' which, it has been suggested, can ultimately produce knowledge that may be used '*to enhance the human condition*' (Kvale, 1996, p.11). Through the research interviewing, the expectation was that it would generate data which could reflect the lived experiences of the adolescents. It was important that an opportunity was created for participants to '*explore themes on their own terms*' (Heath et al, 2009, p. 81), a key rationale for choosing semi-structured interviews. I did not want to put pressure on participants to respond with 'right' answers. I wanted them to talk in an open and honest manner. The data shows that some young people explored the questions in their own way, by adding further information and more insight than expected. Adhering to principles which help interviewees feel app' (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2016) aligns with the person-centred approach.

Research interviews are '*a specific form of conversation*' according to Kvale (1996, p.19) which was evident in the interviews. My response would sometimes lead to more depth and a continuation of the discussion. Semi-structured interviews are one method of hearing a participant describe their

experiences and a way of extracting meaning (Brinkman in Leavy, 2020). They can be both flexible (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2016) and explorative which reflects the aims of this inquiry. Interviews can provide an opportunity to express concerns that may not, in normal social interaction, shared with peers (Poland cited in Holstein and Gubrium, 2003).

4.4.1. Ethical Practice

An essential ingredient of data collection is '*our respect for our research participants*' which '*pervades how we collect data and shapes the content of our data.*' (Charmaz, 2006, p.19). This is also echoed by the current ethical guidelines from BERA (British Educational Research Association, 2024) which highlights the need for respect for everyone involved in the research (ibid). I was aware that I needed to work sensitively with my participants, considering their comfort throughout the process within the space allocated by the school. I was allocated classrooms to work in at DA and a large meeting room at HHS. Before each interview I arranged the rooms to create a quiet and private space. Since the student interviews were in small groups, I positioned them around a group of tables with enough space to see and hear each other.

I was aware that the young people were already familiar with this space, unlike myself. This meant that I felt at a slight disadvantage. I was not sure when the end-of-class bell would ring (it was five minutes earlier at Dryden Academy than expected); I was not aware that we would hear so many sounds from movement in the corridors; and I did not expect (in one interview) for the lights to fail. One of the key aims was to create a relaxing atmosphere in which the young people could voice their experiences. This meant ensuring the conditions for confidentiality were addressed and that we would not be interrupted, by posting a notice on the door asking for the session not to be disturbed. Distractions from outside the room, whether loud voices, bells ringing, or general human movement, became the norm.

In research design ethical practice is paramount. For young people, in particular, clear boundaries and a professionalism in the relationship were important (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2016) so that the students could understand the nature of the research and the role of the researcher. My initial introduction to the research, in school assemblies, in two of the schools, was designed to give a brief outline of the research and information on the nature of volunteering. The response in the first school (DA) was that nineteen young people volunteered, demonstrating they understood what was expected. It was important to stress to the young people that I was not there as a teacher, but as an adult in a different role. I also emphasised that the process was confidential and anonymous. I introduced the concept of

consent by describing the requisite forms which the students and their parents needed to complete. The wellbeing of every student was a priority and I ensured that there would be safeguarding staff on standby in case of personal issues raised within the interviews (ibid). This was the case on one occasion, when a Year 9 student became slightly distressed. After kind and supportive gestures from her peers within the group, and checking she wanted to continue, I reported the matter to the staff member on the safeguarding team who noted my concerns. I did not receive any further feedback (see Chapter 5).

4.4.2. Interviewing the Adolescents

Students from Dryden Academy were recruited during the Autumn Term of 2019. The second group, from Harris High School, could not be interviewed until 2021, when schools were reopened following the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. Two undergraduate student volunteers were interviewed online during lockdown. Nineteen student volunteers from Year 8 and Year 9 came forward at DA after a presentation to the morning school assembly and an initial familiarisation session with the whole group was set up. The intention was to give the group confidence and enable them to voice their experiences of being an adolescent in school. The session was carefully planned to make effective use of time, both my own and the young people and is detailed in Appendix 7. The basis of the session was a fuller account of the research and a writing exercise in expressing their views about themselves and their experiences. The system of communication within the school between management and staff was via e-mail. Each teacher had access to a computer on their desk to receive regular updates yet the messages did not arrive in time and the group was late for the session. However, the session went to plan and the young people seemed comfortable in my presence. When I collected the written work, I noticed how some young people had been open and revealed some personal issues. I had not expected this at such an early stage in the process. Unfortunately, I later realised that I could not use this as data for ethical reasons as they had not yet returned their consent forms. I needed to be aware of this when following the same procedure in another school. In the event, following on from the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, the plan was changed and I decided to leave out the session in the second school due to time restrictions.

Table 2 below presents the student participants: their names, year groups, and schools, detailing the interview dates before, after and during the Covid-19 pandemic. These time periods are significant as the interviews before and after the pandemic were conducted individually and face-to-face according to the original data collection plan, whilst those during the pandemic were conducted online due to the closure of schools.

INTERVIEWS	Participants Dryden Academy Nov 2019	Year Group	INTERVIEWS	Participants Harris High School Post Lockdown October 2021	Year Group
Interview Group 1	Georgina Terri Andrew	8 8 8	Interview Group 4	Marie Pat Fiona Jane Sarah	12/13 Sixth Form
Interview Group 2	Edward Mary Tony John	8 8 8 8	Interview Group 5	Megan Lily Lucy Jess Rosie	12/13 Sixth Form
Interview Group 3	Elizabeth Molly Sarah	9 9 9	Interview Group 6	Diane Rob John	11
During Lockdowns March 2020- June 2021 ONLINE 1:1 Interviews	Participants University of Compton Amy, BA student Carol, BA student		Interview Group 7	Paula Tania Rose Tom Mary Willow	11 11 11 11 9 9
Dryden Academy Post Lockdown December 2021 Interview Group 8	Jaida Maddie Holly Ava Charlie	7 7 7 8 8	Interview Group 9	Fred Edward Tom John Mark Jimmy Jack	Y10

Table 2 – Student Interview Participants at Secondary Schools and University – pre, post, and during Covid-19 pandemic ⁵

⁵

All participant, school and university names are pseudonyms

The School and University names are abbreviated in the text as follows: Dryden Academy = DA, Harris High School = HHS, University of Compton = UC, Field Academy = FA, Tower Academy = TA

Some interview groups were mixed year groups due to the recruitment process which was based on addressing some mixed year group school assemblies.

An important consideration when interviewing young people was to facilitate an honest and self-aware appraisal of their experiences. A small group interview was more comfortable for the following reasons:

- Students are familiar with working in groups within the school environment.
- From my experience, one-to-one interviewing can be intense, especially if the interviewer is unknown to the participant.
- The outnumbering of the adult by the young people could add to a feeling of safety.

The familiarity issue was evident in most of the groups, except when the group included individuals from different year groups, who were not familiar with each other. However, whenever there was any initial awkwardness or silence, this was overcome as the confidence of participants grew and they felt comfortable with the process.

The rationale for using small group interviews with adolescents, rather than one-to-one, was that small groups may give more confidence to individuals, as they can feel less exposed than in the intimacy of one-to-one, and it can be more appropriate for a peer group (Creswell, 2013). Small group interviews can reduce the power and influence of the researcher, as the adult is outnumbered by the young people, making it less intimidating and more empowering for the participants (Eder and Fingerson cited in Heath et al, 2009; Fine and Weiss, 1998). An interview group can reflect peer culture (Eder and Fingerson, 2003). This was evident in the interviews when the young people chose where to sit in a room, staying close to those they knew and who belonged to their core peer group, demonstrating the importance of the culture. The size of a group is critical since too large a group could lead to less openness amongst the students who could find it more comfortable to speak with fewer participants, whereas too small a group might seem too intimate. Five or six individuals proved to be a comfortable number giving each student time to voice their experiences. One larger group (Y10 HHS) limited the amount of time each individual could speak and I was conscious that I moved the questioning on in order to complete the interview in the time whilst giving a fair amount of time for everyone to speak. Negotiating these pragmatic aspects with school staff was a vital part of the process of data collection within the school and I was fortunate that Alan and Mary (the gatekeepers) were fully in agreement with my plan as it proceeded.

Interview groups can be seen by outsiders as '*exclusive*' (McGeechan et al, 2019, p.157). Young people reported that there were jealous reactions from their peers towards a group collaborating with researchers and they were seen as a '*secret group*' (ibid). However, I did not get the impression from school staff that this was an issue with the groups I worked with, and there was no evidence of

negative reactions. As the interview group students were not always removed from lessons, but attended during lunch periods (at HHS), they were not so visible to their peer group. These considerations of type and size of group were a key part of the research design following a person-centred approach. The depth of responses in the data shows that the research aims of capturing adolescent and adult voices were achieved through these early and pragmatic choices.

One aspect of the grouping of young people that was not anticipated, was the age range within the school assemblies which were arranged across year groups. This led to some interview groups being a mix of ages while some interview groups were of the same year group. This did not appear to alter the progress of the interviews. In groups of mixed ages, the younger adolescents showed respect for the older students.

One limitation of interviewing in a group is that: *'context and audience shape what meanings get expressed'* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013, p.62). This was apparent in some of the interviews where some adolescents almost dominated the discussion. In other interviews the individuals did not know each other and there was a more equal response. The novelty of the process meant that the adolescents took it seriously and mutual respect existed. In fact, the context of a research interview, with the audience of both the peer group and an outsider, might have been a positive stimulus to the responses from young people. The interview situation offered an appropriate space to express their views and the presence of an unknown person could create a new experience, since I was not a teacher in the school. Interviews can favour *'the articulate'* (ibid, p.195), therefore it is incumbent on the researcher to facilitate more reserved students.

The opening questions asked young people both what they enjoyed at school and what challenged them: *'You spend a lot of time in school, out of all your experiences here what do you enjoy the most?'* and *'Is there anything you find difficult in school? Can anyone help you with that?'* This gave young people the opportunity to report their school experiences in positive and negative terms. The second question prompted a further view on whether their challenges were acknowledged and supported – I did not ask about school staff in this question as this came later and since their parents might be the adults who would support them with any difficulties.

Interviewing adolescents can be problematic (Eder and Fingerson, 2003) including the power differential which exists between children and adults; the difference in experience between the interviewer and interviewee (Briggs, 1986); and whether the researcher's everyday world matches that of the participants (Cicourel, 1982 cited in Briggs). These areas needed to be considered and the interview directed in a way that could mitigate against problems. I felt that my training in person-centred education gave me the skills to consider the needs of the individuals in the interview group and act accordingly with respect and kindness. On the positive side, interviewing can offer an opportunity to hear the student voice (Fielding, 2010), especially those adolescents who are not usually consulted. Roulston (2010) looks at three areas which can inform reflective interviewing: the researcher's concept of the interview; the position of the researcher in relation to the inquiry and the participants; and close examination of interview interaction to inform research design. The author points to the danger of the researcher bias and is sceptical about whether an interview can reflect what people think. However, I felt that for my purposes, to hear the voices of young people during small group interviews was the most appropriate method of answering the main research question. It was important that I considered my role in relation to the young people, and I was aware of my age (an older adult) and my previous career (an education practitioner) which would have brought some authority to the situation, thereby giving an imbalance of power. The voices of young people can be '*frequently left out of research*' and it is suggested that researchers '*approach children as the experts of their lives*' (Castro et al, 2017, p.3). This latter advice echoes an understanding I gained from my experiential knowledge of adolescents and affords young people the respect they need to talk openly with adults about their lives.

Interviewing participants about their lives can create a gap between the participants' understanding of his or her life and the researchers' interpretation of that life (Josselson, 2011). Josselson suggests that participants are taking part in a conversation with us, the researchers, about their experiences. Occasionally, I found myself using '*responsive interviewing*' (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. xv) by asking further questions following what was being reported. '*Responsive interviewing emphasises the importance of working with interviewees as partners rather than as objects of research*' (ibid, p. xv). This was an important consideration: I did not want the participants, adult, or adolescent, to feel that they were completely detached from the experience and that I was taking their data without some attempt at offering them the scope to respond on their own terms (Heath et al, 2009).

4.4.3. Interviewing the Adults

Table 3 below presents the names, roles, and schools of the adults who volunteered for interviews. It is divided into three sections to highlight the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic when interviews were held online. *[All names are pseudonyms]*.

PARTICIPANT	SCHOOL
PRE-COVID-19 pandemic, 2019	
Pat, Principal	Dryden Academy
Ann, Assistant Special Educational Needs and Disability Co-Ordinator	Dryden Academy
Alan, Assistant Principal	Dryden Academy
Colin, School Caretaker	Dryden Academy
DURING COVID-19 pandemic, 2020	
Alice, Teacher of Design and Technology	Field Academy – Online Interview
Simon, Head of Year 8	Tower Academy – Online Interview
POST-COVID-19 pandemic, 2022	
Flora, Teacher of Modern Foreign Languages	Harris High School
Mike, Pastoral Support Worker	Harris High School
Mary, Assistant Principal	Harris High School

Table 3: Adult Interview Participants at Secondary Schools - pre, post, and during Covid-19 pandemic

Interviewing adults was equally complex. They could have interpreted my role as intrusive and confronting when I was asking questions about their interaction with young people and the response of the school to this age group. The staff were asked to give their perceptions of adolescence and adolescents; about their own experiences at this age; the young people's challenges at school and at home, and in the wider community; and what they perceived as the benefits that young people received from school. These interview questions for the adult participants can be found in Appendix 5.

I decided to use a different method of interviewing for adult staff. Small group interviews were considered but seemed inappropriate for adult participants, due to the staff hierarchy in their schools. It could have been uncomfortable and limiting to interview staff with separate roles and responsibilities in one group. One-to-one interviews, in a room of the individual's choice, were chosen as offering confidentiality. In practice most of the adult participants chose to be interviewed in their own offices or an office shared with one other member of staff which guaranteed no interruptions.

Individual semi-structured interviews were held with school staff, and their distinct roles revealed some discrepancies in their individual experiences of working with young people. I wanted to hear from a range of adult professionals, those in management, as well as teachers, but I anticipated it would not be possible to predict their different approaches to the research or their behaviour within the interviews. The status of interview participants can govern how they feel about the research process (Charmaz, 2006). The participant may not trust the researcher or, conversely, the researcher can take on the role of advocate and therefore could be trusted. I sensed this discrepancy during interviews with the senior management, one of whom was more positive about the research (the Assistant Principal DA) and the other was less enthusiastic (the Principal of DA).

The rationale for interviewing adult staff was to understand their perspectives on the experiences of adolescents in school. The aim was to examine whether the adults prioritised the voices of adolescents within their schools. The adult interviews which were conducted face-to-face proved easier to manage on a practical level than the student interviews since each adult talked to me in a school office. At Dryden Academy three staff members had their own offices, and one used the main room of the support centre as our site. A different challenge was the organisation of online interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Section 4.5).

In my first interview with a staff member, I found myself more involved and less detached, than anticipated. The challenge was to remove myself from inward reflections which were distractions and focus on listening closely. *'The person storying his or her life is already interpreting experience in constructing the account'* (Roulston, 2010, p.25) which reflects what can happen in a person-centred counselling relationship. Roulston continues *'our interpretive framework...structures understanding.'* (ibid, p.25). I noticed there were layers of responses from some staff: about their background, their role in school, their values, and their experiences which emerged in the data (Chapter Six) and which afford more understanding about them.

The limitations of capturing data from staff participants could be that the institutional politics of the school would inhibit some individuals from being open and honest. The intention was to interview different practitioners; support staff, class teachers, administrators, and senior management to get a range of responses. Interviewing the adults proved to be a distinct experience from conducting the same process with young people. One question which proved fruitful was asking the adults to refer to their own adolescence. This question was positioned towards the end of the interview session. The style of this question, which may have come as a surprise after the more impersonal, early questions, indicated my interest in the personal aspects of the individuals' responses.

4.5. The Covid-19 Pandemic

The previous section outlines the collecting of data prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In February 2020, the first signs of a serious pandemic were apparent in the UK and globally. Initially, it was not clear how this would impact on research. This section describes the impact on my own data collection and on the mental health of students.

Due to this unexpected interruption, the second school in my data collection plan, Harris High School, closed before I could interview young people and staff. I had one meeting with the Assistant Principal when we outlined a plan together for my data collection and I addressed school assemblies as for Dryden Academy to recruit student participants, which resulted in twenty-six names. However, in March 2020 I attended HHS to present my research to staff members, following a televised announcement by the UK government regarding the closure of all schools to prevent the spread of the virus. That day the school closed indefinitely. I could not return to the school during the next eighteen months due to the lockdown regulations. As the pandemic continued, the government cancelled all school examinations and young people were assessed by teachers, modified by a government body. In August 2020, The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual 2020) took the step of *'aligning standards with the preceding summer'* which meant using an algorithm that downgraded some assessments and upgraded others, in line with the school's previous examination results.

Whilst schools were closed to visitors during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, I contacted the University of Compton, to recruit undergraduates for online interviews. I addressed teachers in training who were on an MA course. This seemed a better alternative than trying to interview adolescents out of school, in their homes. The ethics of working with young people at home would have led to challenges too difficult to overcome at the time, and the plan would have become more time-consuming. More details of the problems regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the

data collection and the solutions, are described in section 4.5.3. For a sense of how this unusual period of research progressed, faced with analysing data, the analytical memo (AM) of April 10th, day seventeen of lockdown follows:

Regarding my analysis so far, it is patchy, and therefore, my findings are unclear. I sometimes see meaning in a statement in a transcript but how does it relate to my overall aim? I can still hear the voices of my participants. I hope I am still listening in the way I need to. But I am aware that huge change has taken place since those innocent days of going into a school and interviewing young people. How will these young people be changed when we meet up again? How will the adults be feeling about their roles in school and how have they managed the situation? I will be emailing my two contacts in the schools after Easter – just to touch base and to remind them of my existence. But it will feel even less relevant to them, I am aware, than previously. Or could it be a distraction? Best to be optimistic. **AM 10.4.20**

4.5.1. Data Collection Solutions

It was clear I needed more participants for my research sample. The problem was how to access participants at a time when schools and universities were closed for face-to-face teaching. Five months later the schools remained closed, except for the pupils of ‘frontline’ staff and those who were designated as vulnerable. I stayed in touch with my two contacts, Alan, and Mary, who kept me updated with the changing situation in their schools. The UK government loosened the lockdown in the mid-summer and opened some shops and amenities. Schools, however, did not open until September 2020 when they were fully re-opened across England.

As the schools remained partly open over the summer term of 2020, I attempted to set up online interviews with the staff at HHS. However, my contact, Mary, at HHS was not responding to email at this time and I was therefore unable to proceed with this plan. I continued to work on the small amount of data I had already secured from the first school, analysing, and writing up my findings. However, I needed to find a larger sample. Apart from the data collection problem researchers at university were also finding themselves more isolated with university campuses closed to students. A ‘click-and-collect’ system was set up for accessing university libraries and meetings and supervision continued online.

Once it was clear that schools in England were not operating as usual, I needed to find a new method for data collection, to increase my research sample. It was not possible to bring together student interview groups on a school site, although my contact at DA did try and solve this dilemma by suggesting I sat outside the building with a group but this raised ethical challenges, particularly concerning confidentiality and privacy. Most young people were working online and interviewing

them at home raised similar ethical issues. A better alternative was to set up online interviews with young people who were either students at university or training as teachers. This would reflect the two groups of young people and adults and was the best solution at that time.

The aim was to capture the voices of university students and teachers studying for MAs, regarding their experiences of secondary school. For the university students it would be an exercise in hindsight, but the data showed that much of what they reported was echoed by the school students. Most university students were now studying at home with lectures online. By interviewing these older students (in the late adolescent group of 18 to 21-year-olds) I felt that their reflections of their experiences in school could add a useful dimension to the data. I approached teaching staff at the University of Compton for assistance in recruiting student participants.

I sent an outline of the research study and an online recruitment poster (an amended version of one for schools, see Appendix 8) to UC staff to present to BA and MA students. I presented my research study to them online during one of their modules, and two female students volunteered. Similarly, two volunteers came forward from the MA course who were full-time teachers working in separate schools: a mixed secondary, Field Academy, in the same county as UC, and an all-girls' school, Tower Academy, in a different county. I provided detailed information sheets and online consent forms which were completed by the participants. The interview questions were adapted for the university students since their experience of school life was in the past, rather than currently as it was for school students. This slight change of approach and questioning necessitated an application for a minor amendment to the ethical permission, which I duly received (see Appendix 14). The next stage was to set up individual online interviews.

4.5.2. Online Interviewing

Online interviews became a common research tool during the Covid-19 pandemic, providing a solution to the dilemma of how to continue with data collection when the site of the research was unavailable (Chia et al, 2021). Some of the particular challenges were:

- The issue of privacy
- Replacing paper consent forms with online forms
- Lack of control over the interview space (ibid)
- Prioritising the safety of participants and researcher (Robberts et al, 2021)

- Problem of unequal access (ibid)

One positive aspect of virtual interviewing is how it can overcome distance (Robberts et al, 2021) – I could interview a teacher in a school in southern England without needing to travel. The ethical issues for virtual and face-to-face interviewing were similar (ibid). Ethical guidelines from BERA (British Educational Research Association, 2024) point out that *‘participants’ understandings of the level of privacy in a particular place, especially in online spaces, may be inaccurate’* (ibid, para. 44). The issue of privacy was ethically more problematic than interviewing face-to-face, since it was not possible to guarantee that there would be no interruptions in the participants’ space. The lack of control which the researcher has over the space in which the participant is situated, was evident when I set up my first online interviews. Not being in the same room as a participant was an unusual experience, whereas at both schools I could dictate, to a limited degree, the kind of space needed. The two university students took part in the online interviews by occupying spaces that seemed, from my screen view, to be quite private and comfortable. It was important that I provided these individuals with an opportunity for their voices to be heard, even at a distance from their school experience.

When one adult staff participant (Simon, TA) appeared on my screen he was seated at a desk in a school office with another person present nearby and in view. The interview lasted half of the time of other interviews. It occurred to me that Simon was uncomfortable in this office space without the privacy needed and this affected the data. There was little new material – mostly standard responses, similar to other staff, which could have been an outcome of the inappropriate space arrangement. The limitations of online or ‘digital’ interviews mean that *‘standards are less well established’* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013, p.137). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, further research has evaluated the use of online platforms for qualitative research (Chia et al, 2021; Robberts et al, 2021) and the limitations have been examined, as described earlier in this section. The benefit mostly seems to be one of convenience, not needing to travel to a setting, for both the volunteer and the researcher (ibid).

One of the main challenges of conducting online interviews was that due to the closures of the UK schools, I could not visit the schools of my adult participants or meet them in person. In a summary of an online interview with Alice, a teacher at FA, I noted:

‘I had no concept of what the school was like, had not met any staff, and had not seen any of the students. I was coming to the interview almost ‘blind’ to the context of the school for this participant. I was more reliant on her descriptions of what went on than my own received perceptions and experiences drawn from a physical presence in the school’ Interview summary: 7.4.21.

In one particular area online interviewing can differ from face-to-face. This was the organisation of my own space so that I could be seen on screen and ensuring that the quality of sound was clear. The possibility of technical error seemed more likely. There was in fact a minor technical problem with one interview as I inadvertently moved the audio device away from my laptop resulting in some of the recording being inaudible. When I sent out the transcript to the participant, I requested that she pay attention to the part that I was not sure of and to let me know if I had captured her responses accurately. I observed the minutiae of life inside a secondary school – from noisy corridors to the posters on the classroom walls - which added to the understanding of the experience of young people and the staff in the setting. Interviewing online, however, meant that contextual detail was absent. Although I had some anxiety about how the data would be affected, once the technical issues were overcome, there was minor difference in the outcome of the two methods of interviewing. Despite this unexpected change of research design, it was the best solution at a time when the future was still uncertain.

4.5.3. The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdowns on Young People

It is important to note how the pandemic impacted on young people in line with the focus of this research on adolescents in school. Although I did not add a question about the pandemic in my questions for young people after the event, it was interesting that some individuals recruited for interview brought the matter to my attention within the interview sessions. These comments are summarised in the findings in Chapter Five.

From a wide range of studies relating to the pandemic, one examined the impact that a school environment can have on the mental health of students (Widnall et al, 2020). The study found that 54% of 13-14-year-old girls were at risk of anxiety at this time, with 26% of boys of the same age. This was during the early days of the pandemic. One interesting finding was that students who felt least connected to school before lockdown were less anxious during the pandemic, suggesting that students working from home were less stressed than working in a school. The authors suggested that without the pressures of school life the academic achievement and relationships changed. New ways of working with students, for example online, meant that some students felt a closer connection with their teachers (ibid). A second study by Widnall et al in 2022, which involved 603 students of 13-14-year-olds in seventeen English secondary schools found that symptoms of anxiety increased on return to school for some students and that those students who did not engage well with school exhibited poor mental health both before and after Covid. This study concluded that more research is needed to understand how to help young people engage with school to support their mental health.

A European study (Panchal et al, 2021) found that young people can be more affected by the isolation caused by lockdowns, which can impact on both their physical activity and their relationship with peers. Lack of routine, resulting from the closure of schools, was a risk factor found in a literature search, as was adolescence. The authors found common symptoms were sleeplessness, depression, and anxiety, with these last two being most reported. The role of the parents, when the young people were at home, was even more important at this time as it gave some children more attention and support. The conclusions were that support for young people with mental health needs is essential with the recommendation that *'public health strategies to support this population need to be developed'* (ibid, p.1170).

4.6. Data Source Triangulation

Triangulation is a process of using several sources of information and procedure from the field (Stahl and King, 2020). This section explains the breadth of the data I collected from the transcriptions of face-to-face and online interviews of three separate groups - school students, school staff and university students. Involving more than one school revealed some of the *'multi-layered'* meanings for young people (Ravitch and Riggan, 2012, p.75).

Site triangulation (Shenton, 2004) provided diverse contexts: three mixed secondary schools in one county; one university; one single-sex secondary school in a different county. Two of the secondary schools were part of the same Academy Trust. However, there were significant differences in both setting, status, and management. Deane Academy is a small rural school and Harris High School, with a Sixth Form, is a larger institution in a suburban setting. The management system of the two schools was different: at DA there was one Principal and one Assistant Principal, and at HHS there were three Principals and two Assistant Principals. The communication between myself as a researcher and these two management teams also differed. I had more regular contact with the management of DA than I did when I worked with HHS, where the three school Principals never met with me during my time at the school. Researching these two contrasting schools, with online interviews from two additional secondary schools and undergraduate students from one university, meant there was a mixed range of participants.

4.7. Data Analysis

The process of analysis can overlap representation *'throughout the duration of the qualitative project'* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013, p.414) and it was the case that analysis was ongoing during the data collection period and on occasion, throughout the interviews. My reflexivity as a researcher helped

with objectivity and an awareness of my '*theoretical stance, worldview, and biases*' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p.320). The person-centred approach backgrounded this inquiry and this humanist approach governed the inductive methods used for data analysis by identifying emerging themes rather than superimposing themes onto the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Reflexivity can highlight power differentials between participant and researcher, so that the voices of participants are given due respect and equal space. This was important for this research since student voices were the main focus.

Brinkman and Kvale (2015, p.6) described the purpose of interviewing as: '*obtaining descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena*.'

Listening to the subjective accounts of participants (Cohen et al, 2002) can provide a sense of meaning for the researcher. It was important to examine my interpretations since these can differ widely (ibid). A separate aim was to capture '*as much of reality as possible*' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013, p.17) and to attempt to clearly relate the intentions of the participants. The intention was to create meaning from the data (Robson, 2011; Ravitch and Riggan, 2012; Denzin and Lincoln, 2013) by keeping an open mind when reading and analysing the transcriptions rather than coming to the research with expectations.

Following the interviewing sessions which were audio recorded and transcribed, the next task was to manage the data effectively. Transcribing each interview involved reflections on and interpretations of the words spoken by participants. It became apparent that I needed a systematic approach to the large amount of data produced.

4.7.1. Management of the Data

Data collection is inescapably a selective process Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020, p.64)

As the quote above suggests, I made choices about what to select from the vast amount of data from participants and what to discard (ibid) to give the best account of the voices of the participants. I kept a data collection progress log as a management tool (see Appendix 9) and to record my progress in reading and analysing the transcripts. It was important to organise material so that it could be easily referenced and accessed when needed. Recording each interview at the stage of analysis proved helpful as it meant that I could follow the progress of the data collection. Rereading the transcripts was important to find meaning and understanding and achieve familiarity with the data (Fitch, 1994). Repeated readings of the transcriptions revealed sub-themes and micro-patterns beneath the surface.

4.7.2 Approach to Data Analysis

An interpretive approach offers an opportunity for the researcher to ask open-ended questions and observe young people in their natural and social setting (Troudi, 2010) which aligned with the person-centred approach. The complexities of the lives of adolescents are difficult to capture and attempting to produce a comprehensive account of their reporting can create some tension (Hammersley, 2008). Needing to be succinct and clear about what participants reported was a challenge. It was important to find a method of analysis that would provide answers to the key research questions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) at the same time aligning with the person-centred approach and producing unanticipated results. By reading and rereading transcripts of the interviews, I began to uncover significant information about the experiences of adolescents at the same time being aware of significant repetitive themes which were emerging, which led to the decision to use thematic analysis as the preferred method of data analysis.

4.7.3. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method of identifying patterns within data in order to reveal meaning and to begin the interpretation of material (Naeem et al, 2023; Clarke and Braun, 2016). Interpreting themes in a data set can often produce new insights and lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon (Naeem et al, 2023), a key aim of the research. Reflection on the data and analysis can take place during the process of data collection (Saldana, 2011) and this occurred during interview sessions.

Patterns and themes began to emerge from the data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). This can be a '*flexible*' process (Robson 2011, p.474) matching the qualitative nature of this research study. One limitation of this approach is that it can be broad and generic and lead to confusion regarding the key concepts. However, the advantage of this method is that it '*captures something of interest or importance in relation to research questions.*' (ibid, p.474), which I found to be the case. The responses from young people regarding the key research question: '*What is it like to be an adolescent in an English secondary school?*' demonstrated that young people have a range of individual experiences and perspectives of adolescence.

The first stage of the data analysis was to read a transcript, sift out areas relevant to the research, and select common threads, components, fragments of ideas or experiences (Miles et al, 2014) whilst focussing on any specific words and phrases which seemed to have meaning for the participants (Charmaz, 2006). This latter task proved useful when analysing interviews with older adolescents who talked at length about their views on school support (see Chapter 5). Another task when searching for

threads was to isolate common themes from divergent themes. When transcribing the interviews of the young people, much of what was reported was later echoed by another group and significant differences which appeared age-related or gender-related emerged (see discussion of these commonalities and divergences in Chapter 5).

Themes which emerged initially from the data related to key aspects of the conceptual framework: the experience of being an adolescent; student voice; the engagement between students and adults. The next stage after identification of themes was to devise an appropriate system of coding to highlight significant and relevant data (Miles et al, 2014) (see Section 4.8.4). Common patterns in the text were coded and categorised into smaller sub-sections (Fitch, 1994; Saldana, 2011). These methods were helpful since the questions to participants had been open-ended and the responses wide-ranging. I chose to sort those excerpts with the same code into single data files, and then to a summary of the file (Miles et al, 2014). The advice was to sort and re-sort material within each file, labelling each excerpt as a subgroup and summarising the result of the sorting. Tabling the data in an at-a-glance format made the analysis more concrete (see Appendix 10) and was a way of organising the vast amount of material collected.

4.7.4. Coding

As each interview transcription became available, the next stage was to begin to interpret the data. I was already making some decisions about the categories which were emerging. *'First cycle coding'* (Miles et al, 2020, p.72) is suggested as a starting point and involves labelling areas of the text to give meaning to the information. I have provided an example for the reader in Appendix 11. My personal preference for coding onto the printed transcription was to use coloured markers to highlight each code. During this process I reflected on what was emerging in the text as an early analysis. This led to segments which could be further clustered to produce a label as follows:

Interviewer *'Why did you choose to work with adolescents?'*

The response from the participant (the school Principal) would be seen as MOTIVATION and labelled as such.

The above method can help to capture the essence of the data (Saldana, 2013). Coding involved a thorough reading of the text of each transcript, but it emerged that there was some repetition of common views throughout the data. This led to a focus on the key themes of the transcripts with a further examination for new sub-categories. Repeat readings revealed significant issues which needed to be examined in more detail. The early themes which occurred throughout the texts began to create a broader view of the data set, with the commonalities and divergences of the participants apparent. The

suggestion that ‘*You cannot and do not get it all*’ (Miles et al, 2020, p.73) was borne out when I reflected on the extent of information each participant shared with me, and which was not always verbalised but apparent through body language. An example would be when an individual in a group interview showed agreement with the participant who was speaking, by a gesture, or facial movement. Such passing moments could not be set down in a transcription but added to the meaning of the spoken word.

Second cycle coding meant grouping summaries into smaller numbers of categories and identifying emerging themes. These processes began to condense the substantial amounts of text into key units. It was important to devise a consistent system for indexing the data set and to generate what I perceived as the most significant categories. For an example of the coding used on an interview with a small interview group at DA see Appendix 11. In this example I used the words of individuals as well as some lettering for coding different themes, which was helpful in highlighting the emerging patterns.

4.7.5. Analytical Memos

Writing analytic memos proved a useful adjunct to coding. I followed the practice of ‘*writing reflections as they occurred*’ (Wertz, 2011, p.138) which highlighted significant issues. Writing analytic memos proved an immediate way of expressing my early interpretations of the text. I wrote the following analytic memo after a group interview, held at HHS after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and is included as an example:

The young people report on Wellbeing Day in lockdown and how ‘it was probably one of the worst things’ (Megan) whilst I had heard one of their teachers describe this activity in more positive terms.

There is a repetition of the word ‘understand’ from the group as in ‘they just don’t understand’ when referring to teachers, and perhaps to adults generally. This reflects earlier interviews with Years 8 and 9 at Deane Academy. The concept of being misunderstood on different levels and for different reasons runs through these transcripts.

Suggest that staff have a limited view of a young person’s life and their family situation. But adults do understand this – maybe they don’t demonstrate/acknowledge this understanding enough to young people?

Echoes of earlier interviews – pressure to look at their future. AM 17.10.21.

4.7.6. The Researcher in the Data

The researcher can become embedded in the data and needs to be aware of the power imbalance in the interview process (Eder and Fingerson in Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). My interpretations, assumptions, conclusions, were revealed through the interaction between myself and the text which

represented the voices of the young people and adults. Whilst reading the text of my transcripts I could examine my own dynamics within the group. At times I took the role of teacher, moving the interview on, trying to make things clear for the participants. At other times, I slipped into a person-centred counselling style. These behaviours were evident as I read the interview transcripts and impacted on the data since they sometimes facilitated additional responses from individuals. There were, however, times when I rushed in with the next question and did not give the participants time to finish what they were saying. These moments suggested that I needed to be more sensitive to my participants in subsequent interviews.

4.7.7. Responding to the Data

Some powerful statements emerged in the data from young people and adults during the interviews in schools. Managing such statements, which were often just one simple phrase, raised the challenge of how to give the best account of the participants views. These ‘memorable quotes’ are provided in the findings in Chapters 5 and 6. The interview process led to young people and adults making sense of their views as they spoke. This was evident when reading a transcript from an interview with a BA student. I found similarities with her description of the limitations of school with the voices of young people in Sixth Form at HHS. It would have been easy to make several assumptions about what I would find in my data, particularly regarding a possible polarised response from adolescents and adults. However, it emerged that both adolescents and their teachers were feeling pressurised by the same education system. This important theme is discussed in more depth in Chapters 10 and 11.

4.7.8. Adolescent Speech

Throughout the analysis process I was cautious of producing an interpretation which was not representative of the young peoples’ perspectives. One way to attempt to provide an authentic representation was by recording the words of the adolescents verbatim and including any speech patterns used by the young person:

*I was **like** worried about everything I did, because as I was the youngest, **like** we were the youngest in school, I felt that sometimes people might just come up to me and **like** say something...sometimes I get distracted, **like**, now, as I am **like** older than people, I get distracted, so it's kind of **like** I think I can do stuff because I'm older than someone. Andrew (Year 8)*

Referring to Andrew’s quote above, he uses the word ‘like’ in his statement on several occasions. This could be a way of ordering his thoughts. From the transcription (exampled in Appendix 12), the reader will notice the inclusion of the young peoples’ hesitant style, particularly their repetitive use of the word ‘like’, as in Andrew’s example above, which appears to be a current mode of speaking amongst young people. Initially I considered deleting these modes of speech, but on reflection, decided it would be a false reporting of what I heard. The use of the word ‘like’ seems to operate as a break, a

pause, whilst the person is gathering his or her thoughts, so as a device appears to be important to some individuals. In an analytic memo during my analysis stage, I noted:

Re-reading the transcript I am aware of the complex speech patterns some of the young people use, interspersing their talk with 'like' not stopping for breath, using 'cos' a lot. Example page 5 of Georgina with her long stream of words in which she uses 'like' five times. I put in commas in order to help myself separate out the phrases (or clauses) she uses. Is 'like' used to emphasise the next word? Makes reading the text more difficult as it doesn't flow but keeps changing direction. How much does it impact on what the young person is trying to communicate? All three of them used 'like' up to six times in each short speech. AM 27.4.22.

It felt important to pay attention to this aspect of student voices, since it may represent them on their own terms, as well as evoking the naturalness that I found in the interaction with this group. The fact that they spoke in their own style points to the likelihood that they were comfortable in the interview situation.

4.8. Research Ethics

Ethical research requires balancing the value of advancing knowledge against the value of non-interference in lives of others

Neuman (2000, p.92)

The 'non-interference' in lives of others in the above quote is problematic since it is difficult to assess whether I have interfered or not in the lives of my participants. The act of asking questions and recording the answers could qualify as an interference. Neuman could be suggesting that researchers should be cautious about interfering in a *negative* way. By volunteering, a participant is giving permission to the researcher to receive personal information. One of the key principles of ethical research is to minimise harm (British Educational Research Association, 2018.) I adhered to ethical guidelines by ensuring that I behaved in a sensitive and transparent manner when introducing the research study into a school. I ensured informed consent by all research participants, including anonymity and the confidentiality of data (ibid) by the implementation of detailed information sheets and consent forms (Appendix 13) for which I received ethical approval. The most recent BERA (British Educational Research Association) guidelines of 2024, point out that adhering to the spirit of the guidelines is important. The following guidelines are particularly appropriate to this study:

- Having respect for all people (including the researcher) who participate in the research
- Treating individuals fairly and sensitively
- Applying the key principles to online research

Ethical guidelines can be problematic when working with young people as in some circumstances their ability to make competent decisions may be overlooked (Skelton, 2008). This dilemma did not occur in the data collection process due to the person-centred approach towards the participants. I would argue that the findings demonstrate that the young people articulated clearly with competence.

An important aspect of the ethical approach was to ensure that there was a clear protocol for reporting issues of safeguarding to school staff. Ethical guidelines from BERA (2024) recommend that researchers think through their duty of care, in order to be prepared for, and in a position to, respond to any distress on the part of participants. I was aware that my two school contacts at DA and HHS were both part of their schools' safeguarding team. There was one occasion when a student talked openly about her relationship with her mother and the difficulties she was experiencing, which I reported back to the appropriate member of staff, along with one declaration of bullying by another young person which I shared at the same time. I heard no feedback from the school. Another ethical dilemma occurred before the Covid-19 pandemic when I decided, along with the school staff, that it might be productive to set up a one-to-one interview with a young person who had talked at length about her negative experience of adolescence. We felt that she might have more to say. However, the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown intervened and meant that schools were closed indefinitely, so that this plan was shelved. When the schools finally re-opened there was a new data collection plan and the interview was put aside as there was a pressing need for restarting small group interviews at HHS with constraints on my time.

The interpretive paradigm '*characterised by a concern for the individual*' (Cohen et al, 2002, p. 21), fits the person-centred approach and, consequently, interacting with young people and adults equally alongside considering issues of confidentiality and privacy was paramount to the ethical approach of this research study. Respecting autonomy allows individuals to decide whether to participate or not (BERA, 2024). The young people and adults were given detailed information sheets explaining the research and introducing myself and my role, as well as consent forms to be signed by parents, young people, and staff (see Appendix 13) to protect anonymity and confidentiality. All names have been disguised in the thesis so that schools, staff, and students cannot be identified. The positioning of research within a school's pastoral system could '*potentially contribute to pupils' personal development.*' (Lewis et al, 2004, p.250) which I considered. My contacts arranged interviews either during lunch break (the young people could bring their lunch) or during an appropriate lesson on the timetable, such as Citizenship (DA). For the adult interviews, a time and a place were chosen which suited them.

In addition, I wanted the adolescent participants to feel that their contribution was valued, and a form of reciprocation was discussed with staff contacts in two schools (DA and HHS). We decided to offer the young people appropriate ‘rewards’ in the form of tokens, at the end of the interviewing. The young people had no knowledge beforehand of this decision. This felt like an important ritual and a concrete way to show my personal gratitude for their contribution. Online interviewing with other young participants did not allow for this to happen.

4.9. Summary

This chapter outlined the key research design decisions made and the theoretical background. The qualitative research design aligned with the person-centred approach and complements my humanist background. The qualitative approach was appropriate for the key research aims of listening to the voices of adolescents in school as it offers scope for understanding a range of voices. An equally important goal was to reframe adolescence since deficit societal views can cause ‘*student voices to be suppressed*’ (Hogg et al, 2020, p.xviii).

The data collection plan involved recruiting local schools, meeting with gatekeepers and making a joint plan for small group and individual interviews. The significant role and positioning of the researcher was acknowledged, and how it could impact on the research. My role could be considered as an insider (from my professional work in education), but also as an outsider (a researcher). It was important to explain my research to both adults and young people through short presentations to both school assemblies and staff briefings. I followed ethical guidelines throughout the data collection process by respecting my participants, ensuring their safety and comfort, and being aware of my duty of care (BERA, 2024).

The method selected for capturing student voices in an appropriate way, was to set up semi-structured small group interviews, designed to provide comfort and safety for the participants. The decision to conduct group interviews for adolescents and individual interviews for adults, was made since it seemed more familiar for the young people who are in groups within the school day. Additionally, an individual can be heard in a small group but also have time to respond to other views. One-to-one interviews were chosen for the adults as more appropriate and more private, given their differing roles in school. In the event, the data showed that the adults were comfortable with the process and willing to critique their schools and the positioning of adolescents (see Chapter 6).

Other important decisions made included the use of online interviewing at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic which was a sudden and unexpected event. The immediate impact of this event, for both researchers and others, has been described in a separate section (4.5). Using online interviewing was unfamiliar and there were practical challenges. A creative response was required whilst the schools were closed to visitors. This caused some anxiety which added to the pressure of securing a sizeable sample. The organisational aspect of setting up a range of group and individual interviews within schools and online was challenging but the data from both methods proved equally useful. A key consideration was how to capture voices in a way that would produce fresh information about their lives. Aiming to provide a '*feeling of immediacy*' for the reader was important in reporting findings (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p.218) which meant distributing direct quotes from participants throughout the findings chapters (Chapters Five, Six and Seven) and to emphasise a point, within the concluding chapters. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was widely researched and some critical findings regarding the mental health of young people have been presented (Section 4.5.3.)

The data analysis process involved transcribing interviews and reading and re-reading transcriptions, to achieve familiarity (Fitch, 1994) and to uncover the meaning of the voices of the adolescents and adults. Searching for significant themes and patterns which related to the conceptual framework of the research, meant using a detailed coding method which was appropriate and which helped to cluster significant and repeating aspects as reported by the participants. This helped to uncover critical issues for the individuals interviewed and captured the essence of the data (Saldana, 2013). Early themes expanded into a broader data set, with the commonalities and divergences of the participants emerging. Using analytic memos and a research journal were useful tools which aided in the process of reflection and analysis.

Limitations of the data collection plan could be that the sample was small and the schools used were ordinary. There could have been different outcomes if I had chosen to recruit a range of schools, including private and single sex. There was a limited response to my initial contact with schools which left me with little choice. However, the data shows that the responses received from the adolescent and adult participants was rich and varied and gave a clear indication of what issues are important to young people and a sense of how they can imagine an improved school system. These views have informed my reframing of adolescents: that they are competent and capable and can be self-aware. I could have made more comparisons if the schools had been more different – there were only subtle differences that I could see between the rural and the urban school. The aim of the research was not to compare schools, but to hear the voices of some young people in local secondary

schools which was achieved. The next chapter presents the data received from the voices of adolescents who reported their perceptions of school.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Adolescents' Responses

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter on research design and methodology described how this research inquiry aimed to capture the voices of adolescents and adults in schools, through small group and individual interviews. The data collection plan and subsequent analysis have been explained with a rationale for the qualitative approach used. The comfort and safety of the young people was an important ethical consideration and the interviews progressed to produce rich and varied data as presented below.

This chapter reports the responses from the volunteer adolescent participants which referenced the key research questions as listed in Chapter One. The findings from the data are presented in separate sections below with reference to the significant themes which emerged. Table 4 (Section 5.6) lists the main visions for change put forward by the young people. A brief discussion follows in Section 5.7. which highlights the areas that emerged as important to adolescents. The concluding section of this chapter summarises the key findings.

Within this chapter are some direct quotes from the young people as recorded during the small group interviews, selected for their relevance and concise articulation of an issue. Transcriptions of the interviews provided a verbatim reporting of the recordings and what I heard. I noted any significant behaviours from individuals or the interview group such as laughter or agreement, to remind myself what the emphasis was in that moment. In an analytical memo (see Appendix 4) I comment on the use of some words from the young respondents with an attempt at finding meaning. An example of a transcribed small group interview is provided for readers to access the verbatim text which was produced and to highlight the richness of the data which cannot easily be conveyed in a chapter section (Appendix 12). Pen-portraits of each student with significant quotes from each small group interview are recorded in a separate document (Appendix 9a) presenting the range of individuals who came forward voluntarily and gave their unique responses to the research questions. These adolescent '*ideas, beliefs, attitudes*' (Spencer and Tinsley, 2010, p.184) were taken seriously as stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

The data presented below shows the adolescents' responses to the group interview questions (Appendix 1) which focussed on the following key research themes: the experience of being an adolescent; the benefits and challenges of school; and outside influences. Two students described adolescence as a time of difficulty - as '*hell*' (Molly Y9 DA) and '*the school's bringing me down*' (Jane Sixth Form HHS) - whilst it was seen as a time of '*freedom*' (Terri Y8 DA). Between these extremes are rich descriptions of the experience of school for this group of young people, aged 12 to 21-years old, from early to late adolescence.

Student voice was a major overarching theme and the young people demonstrated that they have views about a range of issues, especially societal challenges (Hogg et al, 2020). Sarah (Y9 DA) said she was frightened of '*the environment and what society's coming to*'. Student and teacher engagement is considered a significant aspect of student voice (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006; Fielding and Moss, 2011) and the data showed that the relationship with teachers was important to young people. Some adolescents reported the support that they had received from their teachers. Mark (Y10 HHS) spoke of a teacher who '*really does help me a lot*' and Lucy (Sixth form HHS) reported that some teachers '*speak to me, help me, then provide me with the right support*'. However, in contrast, Fiona (Sixth form HHS) said that support was '*not specific enough for people's individual needs*.'

The experiences for adolescents outside of school were varied, with some young people dealing with complex family situations, which were shared within the interview groups. Rosie (Sixth form HHS) felt that '*there's an expectation that everyone's family is perfect*.' When asked about the choices they made for their social and leisure time Fiona talked about her Youth Club which was '*a nice space to relax in and talk to other people*' giving an added dimension to the picture of their daily lives. Doda and Knowles (2008, p.27) found that student messages to adults included: '*know us as people and learners*' – a key rationale for listening to young people talk about their lives.

What became clear during the data analysis was that there were echoes between the different student groups from different schools – Sixth Formers agreed with the views of younger students, often using the same words, and the university students picked up points made by those at school as illustrated by the following brief example of some responses to the challenges experienced in school:

- '*I was misunderstood a lot*' Amy (UC)
- '*You don't want to come in, and I think some people don't understand that*' Jess (Sixth Form HHS)

- *'You have to be mature, but like they don't, some people don't understand that'* Sarah (Y9 DA)

The quotes from student participants above illustrate common feelings reported by an undergraduate, a Sixth Former, and a Year 9 student: a sense of being misunderstood by adults. This theme was a significant one for students and those who had the benefit of hindsight, now at university, described this lack of understanding of their personal and individual needs, as a significant barrier to their positive experience of school. The data illustrates that a few of the young people had the self-awareness to understand processes within themselves. Lucy (Sixth Form HHS): *'You're finding out like yourself, and who you are and who you want to become.'* Some theorists (Fielding and Moss, 2011) have suggested that student voice initiatives in school promotes this. My experience shows that most adolescents can demonstrate that understanding as Lucy indicates through the data.

Other examples of common feeling were found throughout the transcripts suggesting that the experience of being an adolescent in school has elements that all adolescents recognise. The similarities were clear across all gender groups (male, female and two transgender students), across different interviews, and between the four schools and one university. This chapter draws together the significant themes that appeared from close analysis of the data from young people and are examined below by separating them into the responses to the research questions and include issues of particular importance to adolescents.

5.2. The Experience of Adolescence

Older, more responsible, and judged Georgina (Y8 DA)

The quote above was in response to the key research question of this enquiry: *'How do young people talk about their experience of being an adolescent in a secondary school: the benefits and challenges they face?'* The quote from Georgina is presented here to illustrate the awareness and perception of a Year 8 student. It encapsulates the views of other participants, as will become apparent later in this section. The intention was to summarise the views of the young people about this period in their lives. When asked to talk about their experiences in school some young people found it problematic at first, evidenced by their hesitancy to answer. But after some reflection when they seemed to have relaxed into the interview process, they gave answers which were vivid and well-articulated. One example which illustrates this was from Molly (Y9 DA) who talked about *'the shell you build around you'* which brought an image of a young person needing some kind of protection at this age.

One exchange between a group of Sixth Form students (HHS) in response to the question about their experience of adolescence is presented below. This illustrates the interaction that took place which echoes, in its format, other interviews:

Rose: It kind of goes from one end of the scale to the other. Some people treat you like you're a child still, and then other people treat you like an adult and...

Lucy: I think sometimes when people treat me like I'm like a piece of dirt on the ground, it just gives me such a negative attitude towards that. So, if like a teacher is, like acts in that way towards me it makes me like just not motivated to learn and try hard. Cos, I like, you feel like you're not respected.

Lily: We get treated like that because we're connected to a main school because there's younger students here so Sixth Form is literally in the same school and obviously all the things – can't wear this, can't wear that. And I just feel like uniforms such a big problem.

Rose: And they say it's particularly like it's preparing you for work but there are so many workplaces where it's just like you can like go to work wearing a crop top.

Megan: It's so sexist.

The above example illustrates how a response to one question was moved on into another trajectory by the individuals in the group. From discussing the position of adolescents in school, they talked about how individual staff sometimes treat them. Lily made the important link between learning and student and adult relationships. Rose added her views on uniform with Megan stating her view regarding sexism. This complexity of interaction was not unusual, especially with older adolescents who expressed common views and were given an opportunity to consider other aspects of their lives in school. This can be seen as an example of how the voices of young people have a significant contribution to make to education practice.

The transition from primary to secondary school is a significant part of a young person's life and several young people talked about how overwhelming they had found their new school: in terms of physical size as well as the student population. The perception was that adults treated them differently at their new school in comparison to when they were in primary education. Rosie (Sixth Form, HHS): *'Some people treat you like you're a child still, and other people treat you like an adult.'* Another young person said: *'We're not children. And we're given so much responsibility. And we're meant to be so mature, but we're not adults.'* Elizabeth (Y9, DA) and Jaida (Y7 DA) echoed this perception:

'not teenagers, not children.' This state of limbo, described by these young people, could lead to confusion, not knowing how to react and behave in response to the attitudes towards them from other people. Hendry and Kloep (2012, p.1) reported the role confusion for adolescents and suggested that *'individual trajectories are unique and somewhat unpredictable'*, illustrated by the two polarised views of adolescence from Molly and Terri above. This is relevant to the key aim of this research study which was to capture individual student voices and to hear their unique perceptions of their lives as adolescents.

The expectations on young people were reported as increasing as they got older, leading to additional pressure and greater judgement – as perceived by young people themselves. Judgement (as articulated by Georgina above) seems to come from their peers, their teachers, and adults in general. Being judged academically mattered to those who felt they were failing and not matching up to the school's standards. Young people were critical of the constant reminders from teaching staff that they would be sitting their GCSE examinations even when they were in Y7. Some teachers were described as exerting a lot of pressure on young people, as Mary (Y9 HHS) points out: *'They're already talking about GCSEs, it's probably for, er, our own good, so that we know that it's quite soon'*. She appreciated the advanced warning but is suggesting that she is not quite ready. This theme was referred to by other participants who also expressed their dismay about the over-emphasis on exams by teachers. Rose (Y9 HHS) said: *'we're stressed from exams'*, and Willow (Y9 HHS) added: *'stress with homework, deadlines and stuff'*. The academisation of schools has been blamed for a performative approach with the curriculum lacking consideration of the developmental needs of adolescents (Symonds and Hagell, 2011). Success in schools is measured in what has been described as an *'audit culture'* (Roome and Soan, 2019) rather than a child-centred and a comprehensive approach to education. A significant amount of pressure from school was reported by the participants in this study, matching the findings of The Children's Society report (2019) in which a high number of 10-15-year-olds reported that they were unhappy, with exam pressure cited as one of the principal causes. Marie (Sixth Form HHS) talked about this pressure which she described as *'a bit excessive sometimes'* and Jane (Sixth Form HHAS) echoed this saying it could be *'very, very like overwhelming.'*

The young people reflected on the fact that as they get older change occurs in how they respond to and feel about different areas of their life, aligning with the developmental approach of some theorists (Hall, 1904; Winnicott, 1965). There are major changes for adolescents at this time (Martin 2019). Molly (Y9 DA) highlighted the conflict of being *'too young'* or *'too old'* to take part in some activities, echoing the views of Elizabeth (Y9 DA) earlier regarding the state of limbo of being neither

children nor adults. Andrew (Y8 DA) acknowledged that he had changed since he moved from Y7 and said he was not as worried as he was then: *'I just don't really care about it as much.'* Terri (Y8 DA) expanded on this: *'I honestly think growing up changes a person, like, who they are, the most, like, than anything else'*. She also suggested that other people can be the source of this change, even while they might be judging the individual. Terri shared some negative feelings in the group interview:

'I always feel like, I have like, a black, I don't know how to describe it, but I always feel like there's a tiny bit of pressure on me like what my family are going to think of me, cos I want to do the best I can for them'.

The importance of family is echoed by other young people throughout the interviews (see Section 5.5.).

Being treated as an individual was articulated as important to some students and was reinforced by the undergraduates Amy and Carol, who both felt they had not been treated as individuals when they were in school. *'You're not your own person'* was Lily's (Sixth Form HHS) response reflecting the importance of developing as an individual. *'You're finding out like yourself and who you are and who you want to become.'* Lucy (Sixth Form HHS). This echoes a view that young people can struggle *'to feel real'* (Winnicott, 1965, p.122) and appears to be a significant part of the search for identity in adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Smyth, 2013). This concept has been seen as an ongoing process of lived experience (Sadowski, 2021).

As quoted at the start of this chapter, several young people spoke of feeling misunderstood by others around them. A need for understanding was articulated: *'Sometimes you are not understood, because you are going through changes.'* (Sarah Y9 DA) and *'I just think there could be more support and understanding'* (Megan 6 form HHS). This suggests that young people can feel conflicted at this age, not fully able to meet the expectations of adults who hand them responsibility and are perceived as treating young people as if they are children. Tony suggested *'you've got a lot more responsibility in terms of people expect more...'* reflecting upon the complexity of living up to the expectations of adults. Pat (Sixth Form HHS) said *'with the work, I find that teachers don't understand about mental health'* which suggests she is aware of the impact of mental wellbeing on academic achievement but has been frustrated by the response of some school staff. Another Sixth Former, Rosie (HHS) when referring to her part-time job said, *'They don't necessarily understand that sometimes you have to work, like if you're from a low-income family.'* Most school staff have some understanding of the differing lives of their students and their mental health needs, but perhaps the issue is that some adults are not communicating this awareness to the students themselves. The relationship between students

and teachers has been seen as critical to the success of student voice in schools (Fielding and Moss, 2011) and is a key component of this research. The relationship with staff is articulated throughout the data from the young people, ranging from reporting positive support to a lack of feedback and acknowledgement of a young person's needs.

Some young people talked about adolescence as a time of independence. Molly (Y9 DA) pointed out that *'You also have that sense of freedom, as well, because you can just go out and be with your friends'*. She qualified this by adding that she felt some people *'go too far and get a bit stupid'* demonstrating her understanding that being given more freedom to spend time with other people came with responsibility to act appropriately.

5.3. The Benefits of School

This section refers to the second part of the research question which examines the benefits of school from the perspective of an adolescent. There was noticeably less information about this than any other question. The young people reported on some of the subjects they enjoyed: Art, Drama, German, Technology, PE, and Science, as examples, and many students were complimentary about their teachers. An expectation could be that most young people have a negative view of schooling. The key areas which were reported as being of most value to young people in school are listed below:

- Friendships
- Learning
- Relationships with teachers
- Extra-curricular activities

The first theme is one which has been examined by researchers, regarding how the peer group impacts on the development and school engagement of young people (Waldrip et al, 2008; Li et al, 2011; Williams and Anthony, 2013) and confirming the complexity of these relationships. The importance of friendships for young people was raised in response to the first interview question, about what they enjoy most at school. Elizabeth (Y9 DA) described how she enjoyed the early part of the school day: *'That brief bit in the morning, before Form, like when you just get in and you can just say 'Hi' to everyone'*. Having a friendship group emerged as an issue of significant importance to the young people. There was an awareness of the complexities of keeping relationships alive. Old friendships from primary school seemed to fade and, as Andrew (Y8 DA) said, *'new alliances'* were formed. The question about what friends mean to them at this age led to a discussion about both the positives and challenges of relationships with peers. Most young people acknowledged the importance of their

friendships. *'It's your form of communication'* Tania (Y9 DA); *'I love all my friends and I just think they're all amazing'* Tom (Y10 HHS); *'We're still teenagers and growing up ...to have friends is really important at this stage in life'* Jack (Y10 HHS). This appreciation of the support from friendships suggests that young people already recognise that social relationships are significant to their development.

Some of the benefits of having friends were seen as: company, help with motivation, sharing interests, better than family and, most importantly, support: *'If I had a problem I would normally just go to my friends'* Rose (Y9 HHS); *'They can help if you're having a tough time'* Pat (Y12 HHS); *'I've got a certain few friends that if I was ever in trouble, I know they'd have my back'* Mark (Y10 HHS); *'Friends help with your mental health wellbeing'* Megan (Sixth Form HHS). The complexity of friendships was also articulated: *'It's a love/hate relationship'* John (Y10 HHS) and *'You have like certain friends who drag you into being naughtier.'* Mark (Y10 HHS). Most of the young people considered their friends a vital part of their lives. Elizabeth (Y9 DA) said, *'I enjoy talking to my friends quite a bit, actually face-to-face'* highlighting the need for conducting part of her relationships face-to-face, rather than using social media. Tony (Y8 DA) talked about his friendships at primary school which he believed were enough when he moved to secondary school. However, he continued:

Once I knew everyone in my set, I realised that there were more people that I liked and my friends became friends, and like friends of friends, and now they're my best friends. So, it's like getting to know them gradually and then you become friends with them.

Sarah (Sixth Form HHS) reported a different view: *'I think friendship groups have got smaller, but friendships are important, but I think that a load of friendships from my perspective, they are not built in school. They're built outside of school. At clubs and things like that.'* Another student, Sarah (Y9 DA) talked about the different peer groups as *'the popular group, the dodgy group'* who judged others. It sounded as if the opinion of her peers is important, yet she said, *'it doesn't affect me.'*

I suggest the above narratives confirm the significance that peer relationships have for young people at adolescence. Tony (Y8 DA) was surprised to find that he could like another set of young people and that his old friends mixed with the new, creating what he calls *'best friends'*. Having someone in the background was described as vital, especially when young people felt they could not easily talk to an adult. Friendships also offer a way of sharing common experiences, helping the young person feel less isolated. As Lucy (Sixth Form HHS) said: *'You're all in the same boat.'*

Whilst friendship was very much a core concern, their classroom experience mattered to the young people. Lily (Sixth Form HHS) reported that *'lesson times are nice when you talk to your teachers about different things'* emphasising the significance of the student and teacher relationship. Other students acknowledged that homework is important and that knowing what you want to do in the future is an area that needs to be considered. Lessons seemed to be tolerated and sometimes enjoyed, especially if students liked their teacher, and some subjects were mentioned more than others. Some listed the subjects they enjoy: PE and Science (Sarah Y9 DA) and *'the artistic lessons, things like art, and drama and technology'* (Molly Y9 DA). Whilst feeling pressurised by the exam culture within the school, most of the young people articulated that this was something they needed for their future careers. They talked about relationships with staff and said there were teachers they could talk to if they needed support. The importance of student and teacher engagement to student voice (Fielding and Moss, 2011; Taines, 2012; Steinberg, 2017) is a key focus of this inquiry. Some young people acknowledged the support and encouragement they receive from their teachers which matters a great deal to them: *'If I need any help then I just go to...and ask her and she'll help me'* Tania (Y9 HHS). Mark (Y10 HHS) also spoke of a teacher who *'really does help me a lot'*. Lucy (Sixth Form HHS) reported that some teachers *'speak to me, help me, then provide me with the right support.'* She pointed out something extra that she received from a teacher: *'they'll continue helping me and supporting me'* which reveals the need for continued support. It is also interesting that Lucy talks above about the *'right'* support, demonstrating that she is aware of what she needs. Jack (Y10 HHS) had a different slant: *'Teachers you can trust, I feel like you could get a good response out of them'*. The importance of trust was a common theme for young people. *'I think all teachers would try and support you to an extent'* Jess (Sixth Form HHS).

Another area that was seen as a benefit in school, was the support available to students. Tania (Y11 HHS) described how support was arranged in her school. *'Each house has a pastoral person and they're really good to talk to about things.'* She continued: *'There's more of a connection there, rather than just not knowing them.'* This comment is in contrast with the critical views of some students at DA who were dissatisfied with the service they said they received from the school support hub.

5.4. The Challenges of School

This section refers to part of the first research question: the challenges that adolescents face in school. As Terri (Y8 DA) pointed out above, young people are going through changes as they grow up and in addition to dealing with their personal development, each student is trying to adjust to the demands of a large institution, a secondary school. The list of themes was longer in this section and this is presented below to illustrate the multiple challenges that some of the young people reported:

- Peer group relationships
- Expectations
- Fairness and equality
- Evaluation of schoolwork
- Teacher feedback
- Exam pressure
- In-school support

The complexities of peer-group relationships were reported by adolescents with the negative side of relationships illustrated by two young people who described their experiences of being bullied. One girl described how her friends had told her to do '*bad things*' (Mary Y9 HHS) and another talked of the bullying getting worse once she had reported it to staff (Paula Y11 HHS). [I reported these responses to the safeguarding staff at HHS].

They talked of the pressure of the peer group to 'fit in' and the criticism that came from others of their own age. Elizabeth (Y9 DA) said she didn't always know what to expect from her peer group, whether they would accept her or not. This unpredictability could operate as a powerful strategy by those wielding it. Georgina (Y8 DA) was critical of the behaviour of some other young people in school, observing their need for '*a lot of attention*' and then '*to get it they had to like stand out by being naughty.*' Young people reported what they consider bad behaviour at the same time as being sensitive to the judgements they perceive from others. It sounded as if it is not always clear what is the expectation of their peers, leading to confusion.

An indication of individual anxiety experienced by some of the young people, was evident throughout the responses to challenges in school. Terri (Y8 DA) talked about a time when she needed support and recommended a self-help book which had helped her. Andrew (Y8 DA) said he thinks about his future every night before he goes to sleep. Support for emotional issues did not seem to be forthcoming within the schools in the way that some of the young people expected. Ava (Y8 DA) was worried about '*what they were going to do*' when she reported her concerns to her teachers. Jaida (Y7 DA) said she was uncomfortable asking for help for work that she doesn't understand. She said '*I worry about what they think*' meaning the staff. Andrew (Y8 DA) said he would not go to teachers about '*sensitive stuff*' because although he has '*the fear inside me*' he cannot trust other people. The issue of trust between teachers and students was explored with participants, some saying they can only trust a few members of staff. This points to the significance of student and adult engagement and how it can have an influence on student voice in schools (Fielding and Moss, 2011; Steinberg, 2017).

Jane (Sixth Form HHS) talked about schoolwork being *'very, very like overwhelming.'* This from a young person in the final years of her schooling. An aspect which holds fear for the future was articulated by Pat (HHS): *'Money terrifies me.'* Not knowing what they really wanted to do when they finally left school was a big concern and led to feelings of being helpless. Lily (Sixth Form HHS) pointed out *'What we want to do, that stresses me out, I don't have any ideas'*, illustrating the fact that some young people need to take time to make up their minds about what employment or training they envision for themselves when they leave school, and may not know by Sixth Form.

Andrew (Y8 DA) touched on the expectations of adults: *'I think older people...have higher expectations as well, and teenagers don't normally like go to that high expectation'*. Other students agreed that teachers have higher expectations at this age. The need for proportionate expectations from adults is reflected in a list of student messages (Doda and Knowles, 2008, p.26) with the following example: *'understand our developmental nature and associated challenges'*. This relates to the introduction of this chapter where the data showed how much young people need to be understood by adults (see Section 5.1). Andrew referred to the pressure from home *'I get pressure because my homework is not going to be good enough.'* He talked about having to help in the home which put him in a difficult position – needing to *'cook tea'* whilst knowing he had homework to complete. Terri recognised the expectations she perceived from adults and the sense of responsibility this brings with it: *'Growing up, you think, I, older people, you feel like you get like more responsibility, and you feel like you can do a lot more.'* Some students felt that the school staff expected them to all perform equally well in tests and examinations. One young person who said she struggled with schoolwork reported that *'You're expected to do so much and to do what other people can do, but you can't do that, but teachers don't realise that'* Lucy (Sixth Form HHS). Another expectation voiced by Pat (Sixth Form HHS), was that all young people would want to go onto university. Diane (Y11 HHS) echoed this by talking about the limited range of options for GCSEs – she felt she had been forced by the school staff to take a language when this was not her strength. Again, she said, the expectation was that the options on offer would suit everyone. John (Y11 HH) highlighted this lack of choice: *'You're being told to take it down a specific route, so you don't get much choice in the matter'*.

I noted some of the concerns brought up by Lucy (Sixth Form HHS) who felt that differences in ability were not appreciated by staff (see Analytical Memo below). The lack of response when asked what they liked about being in school suggested that this group found it difficult to describe positive aspects of their experiences:

Interesting start to the interview – the same pause after my initial question about what they like about being in school as in other interviews with up at Dryden Academy. Lucy refers to the expectations and points out differences in ability. This sounded as if it came from the

heart. As if her unique abilities were not considered, but the expectation was/is still that each individual student can achieve to the same level as others, despite differences. Touches on the issue of treating young people as a homogenous group, without individuality. She talks about a 'barrier' between those yp who can (described as 'book smart') and those who can't. This division is concerning. AM:15.10.21

Justice and fairness were important concepts for the students. An example was given of perceived unfair treatment from teachers: the rule forbidding young people to use the school toilets during lessons: *'They don't let anyone go because some people do it to get out of lessons, and meet up with friends in the toilet, and stuff like that.'* Georgina (Y8 DA). When she damaged her foot in PE and sought help at the school office, she said the staff were unsympathetic, making her feel *'as though you could be doing it to get out of lessons.'* There was an element of discriminatory practice by staff perceived by both boys and girls who suggested the other group received preferential treatment from teachers. Gender divisions also were mentioned with some boys being described as acting in a very unpleasant manner towards girls *'Horrible boys: there's a group of girls that they just literally be nasty to every day. That's probably the worse experience at school'* said Megan (Sixth Form HHS). This approach was seen as aggression towards girls from boys as well as *'rules are always stricter on the girls'* Rosie (Sixth Form HHS). She went on to add: *'We're always told that girls need to cover themselves up, it's never the boys like, you know, control themselves.'* However, some of the boys felt that teachers did not want to upset girls and so were sometimes more lenient towards them. *'It's as if girls go against the rules, it's all right. But if it's a boy, it's no, you're in detention'* (Fred Y10 HHS). Edward (Y10 HHS) also supported the view that there were differences in practice towards different genders: *'There does tend to be like in school a difference about how they treat boys and girls. I just find it like, really, hypocritical.'* The issue of school uniform brought some strong opinions: that the rules were biased towards boys, by allowing them to wear *'joggers and tracksuits'* whilst girls were expected to be more formal. However, in the boys-only group interviews the Year 10 students told me that school staff did not challenge girls as much as boys about how they wore the uniform, in particular the length of their skirts. It sounded as if this was a long-running dispute with neither 'side' feeling that they were treated equally.

The issue of gender differences, both to rules and expectations, links to recent findings about the wellbeing of young people. The Children's Society (2024) found gender differences in wellbeing of students. The report suggests that wellbeing measures in specific school years (for example Year 12 or Sixth Form) could offer further support for girls. This aligns with the findings above – that girls articulate the need for support in a unique way to boys. They are aware of differences of treatment and are self-aware regarding what they need from school, particularly in Sixth Form, evidenced by the

statements they made regarding the school responses to their mental health and their recommendations for change (see Table 4 in Section 5.6. below).

Other young people were concerned that teachers did not treat individuals fairly in the classroom – only asking certain individuals for answers to questions, overlooking others. Edward (Y10 HHS) said *‘Sometimes teachers like maybe give out unfair punishments, unfair detentions.’* Andrew (Y8 DA) talked about frustrations in the classroom:

‘It annoys me when I’ve got an answer to say, to a question, and then the teacher asks someone else the question. And then they have the same answer, and they get rewarded for the answer, but I still thought of the answer.’

The issue of being overlooked by teachers was also reported in connection with behaviour; some of the younger students in Year 7 talked about how teachers focussed on young people with *‘naughty’* behaviour in class rather than those who were getting on with their work. Some students commented on how they perceived teachers as overlooking them: Rose (Y11 HHS) talked about herself as a quiet person: *‘I get quite anxious talking to people’* and how unfair it was that sometimes people like her are overlooked. She added that having a group of other young people to listen to her was helpful (meaning the interview).

One of the challenges of school was the support that the school had offered some young people: *‘When I was being bullied ...and I’ve been to a teacher, and nothing’s been done about it’* Paula (Y11 HHS). [I reported this comment to the school safeguarding team]. And *‘some people who, like, just say that they go to the teachers and like ‘Oh we’ll do something about that’ but nothing really happens’* Edward (Y10 HHS). Taines (2012) found that young people reported some relationships with teachers as unhelpful. *‘A lot of other teachers just brush you off’* reported Megan (Sixth Form HHS). The perceptions of the two groups (students and adults) are based on their different experiences of school (Conner et al, 2015). The data in this research inquiry revealed a significant gap between the perceptions of the students and the adults regarding the support offered by the school (Chapter Eight).

When asked *‘Is there anything at all that you find difficult in school?’* most young people talked about the pressure of homework and deadlines. However, there were some individual difficulties: Mary (Y9 HHS) said that *‘I find it hard to concentrate, I struggle a lot with work’*. Terri (Y9 DA) pointed out that: *‘if you have a teacher you don’t like, it depends whether you just get on with the lesson that you are doing or just don’t listen to them or don’t take in what they say’*. In some cases, the marking of schoolwork was an issue, especially with younger students, who reported that feedback from teachers

was not always forthcoming. It was reported that one teacher only looked at tests or homework. Georgina (Y8 DA) expressed her frustration:

'I prefer my work to be marked and judged and if it's like applicable and stuff, because sometimes when it's not marked and when it's questions and we don't get time to answer, I'm never going to know what I need to improve those questions.'

Terri (Y8 DA) remarked that feedback is *'really helpful...cos you learn from the mistakes that you make'*. She summed up with: *'Feedback and marking are really helpful then you can learn what you did wrong then get it right the next time.'*

Perceived pressure to perform and achieve was high on the list of challenges for young people with too much emphasis on exams. The perception of stress is significant since it can still lead to harm: *'self-reported substance abuse in middle-school students was significantly associated with a perception of excessive academic demands'* (Elias, 1989, p.397). One view articulated was that GCSE exams were prioritised by the school too early in the first term – creating pressure when students were just settling into secondary school. Mary (Y8) said, *'it's kind of stressful when they are talking about GCSEs all the time'* and John added *'especially in English, they talk about it a lot, in assessments and stuff'*. Tony (Y8) said the school had unrealistic expectations and suggested that, whilst GCSEs are important *'they're not like the end of the world if you don't do as well as you could'* which is a balanced view to reduce the pressure of attaining the highest results possible.

The support available to students within school was both praised and criticised by the young people. The support hub at DA was described by some adolescents as unfriendly and the rooms lacking privacy. There could be some conflict inherent in a resource which was also used for sanctioning students. Elizabeth's (Y9 DA) experience of the support centre was that *'they are not that great. And also, the atmosphere in there is just horrible.'* Molly (Y9 DA) echoed this, with an anecdote about a time when she *'filed a report'* describing hostile behaviour from some other girls. However, the staff had lost the report. *'And they still haven't found it to this day'* she said. To Molly, it was important that staff responded with some urgency to her report considering that it sounded as if she had been bullied by her peer group. Following on from this incident, when Molly moved into Year 9, the situation improved, and she said that if she now has problems: *'I usually go there (the school support hub) and try to speak to people in person. Because of that, and I don't really trust that the report will be read, so I have to go there and tell people myself.'* Molly worked out for herself how to get the support she needed, by talking face-to-face with a member of staff, rather than 'filing a report' which had not worked. The fact that she talks about not trusting the support staff to read her report could be interpreted as a lack of engagement with the needs of young people.

A similar case of indifference was noted by Lucy (Sixth Form HHS): *'they're patronising, question after question'* and Lily (Sixth Form HHS) *'they just send you off to someone else'* demonstrates how it matters to young people that they are treated age-appropriately and that they are not dismissed by staff. One of the messages from a young person in a presentation on research with children was that follow-up by adults was very important to them (Demkowicz, 2019). Young people want to know that adults are available to listen, but also that adults are going to try to respond by making changes. Molly (Y9 DA) demonstrated her outrage, above, at school support staff who, she said, lost her report about a bullying incident. This carelessness affected her and could be interpreted as the schools' flawed safeguarding procedures which led to her feeling let down. On the positive side Tania (Y11 HHS) pointed out the formal arrangements for support and the role of the pastoral support. *'They're really good to talk to about things'* she said.

Other young people expressed their view that some of the school initiatives regarding student mental health were both inconsistent and inappropriate. Diana (Y11 HHS) was wary of online initiatives: *'Setting up online, setting up these little tasks that people can choose to do, I don't think that's very helpful'*. Rosie was critical of the practice of recommending websites for students:

And like, so I'd speak to a teacher about you know mental health and stuff, but it was kind of like the whole thing that 'Everybody's feeling the same. Just look on this website' and it's like I know that other people are feeling the same way as me but I'm not like doubting, or like, disregarding their feelings, but like I came to talk to you about me.

Later in the interview Rosie offered the following: *'It's like 'Go on a website, you can talk to people I was like, I don't really want to go onto a website with some adult that I don't know.'* This is a significant comment. It is easy to suggest that other people might feel the same, but as Rosie so clearly articulates, this did not help her with own feelings, which are unique. Lucy (Sixth Form HHS) articulated her experience of how school staff dealt with mental health support pointing out with some insight that mental health issues can impact on school performance: *'It's just left to one side and in a school, I don't think like it should be, cos if you're not feeling great, if you've got bad mental health you can't do your work. And that has a knock-on effect.'*

Amy (UC) described how unsupported she had felt at a time when she had some behavioural difficulties and was temporarily excluded from school. *'They never found me, and I never found them'* she said, which is a powerful statement showing that she was unable to seek out the help she needed. She was clear that her school gave no opportunities for young people to *'voice an opinion.'* She went

on to say, *'you don't have a voice during the teens'* and *'you feel quite oppressed.'* Despite this Amy said: *'I remember at the time enjoying school for the large part.'* She talked about some of the teachers who were *'brilliant and did care.'* However, she also offered the following reasons for the perceived lack of student voice in her school: there seemed to be no space, no time, no room, and no opportunity. This suggests that some schools neglect to position the needs of their students as a priority. This key issue is highlighted and discussed in the concluding chapters.

5.5. Outside of School

With regard to the third research question *'What do young people tell us about their lives outside of school in their communities and how does this impact on their lives inside school? How do young people talk about adult attitudes towards adolescents?'* the adolescents talked about their lives outside of school, particularly their attitudes towards family. They spoke about the challenge of making choices about life beyond secondary school with some perception that adults did not understand the visions they had for their futures.

The views on family were mostly positive about the role of their families and most offered support. *'My Mum's a pretty good influence on me'* Edward (Y10 HHS) and *'I rely on my Mum quite a lot'* John (Y10 HHS). Diane (Year11 HHS) acknowledged her families' influence in her career choice, saying: *'Without my parent's influence I wouldn't really have an idea of what I want to do in the future'*. Tania (Y9 DA) was also appreciative: *'They're everything to me, my parents. If I've done the most stupid thing ever, they'll always be there, no matter what.'* However, other young people reported conflict within their family and suggested reasons for the challenges: *'Me and my Dad are very similar; but then that's probably why we clash'* Mark (Year10 HHS); *'Me and my Mum used to have a bond and now as we're getting older it's like falling apart'* Mary (Year 9 HHS). They could also be frustrated with the attention from adults saying that they did not always listen to advice from a parent. The importance of strong links with family is highlighted in a paper which found that adolescent functioning is related to positive relationships of both family and friends (Williams and Anthony, 2013). It appeared that young people are sensitive to the relationships within their families. This is another considerable influence on their life experience. Their perception of adult attitudes towards them varied, from those who talked about the supportive influence of family to those who felt that some teachers were dismissive. It was apparent that adult perceptions are important to them and there was reporting of teachers who did not acknowledge them, did not mark their work, or offered token gestures towards issues of mental health. These behaviours from adults could indicate a lack of understanding of what young people need. Teacher perception of young people is a strong influence, with some researchers suggesting there is a need for adults to relearn how to engage fully with young

people (Finney et al, 2005; Delgado and Staples, 2008) since some adults can dismiss young people for their naivety and inexperience (Thorne, 2013). The importance of positive student and teacher engagement (Ruddock and Fielding 2006; Fielding and Moss 2011) was confirmed with the findings from the data which revealed how much it mattered to young people to have good relationships with adults.

In response to a question on their leisure activities outside of school, the young people talked about the following:

- Spending time with friends and family
- Going to the gym, skateboarding, biking, running, dancing, playing football
- Looking after pets
- Going to church
- Watching television
- Shopping and going ‘to the city’

‘I like doing active things, like going out with my friends, playing sports, talking with my family, and stuff like that’ Tony (Year 8 DA) and John (Y10 HHS) talked about liking drawing *‘to relax my mind.’*

It emerged that these young people were aware that being active and keeping fit is a healthy option. Pat (Sixth Form HHS) described it as *‘a massive push to mental health’* and Marie (Sixth Form HHS) pointed out that activity *‘takes my mind off things, sort of like in school and stuff.’* Evidence that young people know what it is that they need to help them stay happy and well. Rosie (Sixth Form) said she is part of a Youth Advisory Board and that she helps *‘make like campaigns and it gives young people more of a voice.’* Fiona (Sixth Form) attends a youth club which she describes as *‘a nice space to relax and talk to other people.’* The above list contrasts with some of the stereotypical attitudes from adults towards adolescents described in Chapter Two with reference to work by Lesko (1996; 2001) and Lesko and Talburt (2012).

The descriptions of young people’s lives outside of school as reported by this small sample would suggest that they spend their leisure time in varied ways, with friends, family, and by themselves, and engage in a range of activities. This is important since it contributes to a reframing of young people as engaged with their communities outside of school in a productive way.

5.6. Student Visions for Change

Young people have called for action from adults (Demkowicz, 2019) as well as being listened to. Having asked the students about the benefits and challenges of school it was appropriate to find out if there was anything that they could imagine, ‘in an ideal world’ that the school could do differently or better. The students were asked for suggestions as to what might improve their experience in school, and I have summarised below the views of a Year 11 interview group at HHS using their own words:

- *I would suggest that the staff maybe listen more to what the students want to do, instead of GCSEs. (Diane)*
- *I think in an ideal world I would prefer more teachers to be hired, so we had smaller classrooms, so we all feel more involved in the learning process. It would help teachers to create like stronger bonds with the students. (Rob)*
- *A lot of people don't want to go down the traditional route of university. (John)*

The above quotes relate to two important and key elements of this research inquiry: the significance of student voice and the importance of student and teacher engagement. What is clear from this data, is that the issue was given consideration and the resulting suggestions cover a range of possibilities which school staff could take note of and may prove solutions to some of the challenges found in all schools. This is discussed in more depth in Chapter Nine.

The following table summarises the responses of all the participants to this interview question demonstrating the wide range of pragmatic and creative solutions to areas that the respondents found limited or which hampered their progress in school. The list is divided into the three different adolescent stages (Steinberg, 2017) for comparison.

Early Adolescent Students	Mid Adolescent Students	Late Adolescent Students
Mental Health More ‘downtime’ in school to relax Support in School More awareness of students who are struggling/unhappy Appropriate support Learning Only one teacher per subject More Teaching Assistants Designated lesson to help with homework Clearer information regarding progress More rigorous reading and marking of schoolwork by staff Less reliance on internet More resources especially laptops Fair and Equal Practice Fair treatment – looking out for everyone Better feedback from staff Fairer rules Use of mobile phones at times	Mental Health More understanding of mental health issues Training for teachers to notice signs of mental illness Better facilities for relaxation at breaktimes Support in School A wider range of support – more staff to help More attention to individual need More individual help More understanding Learning Smaller class sizes Fewer deadlines Student Voice Teachers to listen more fairly Having opinions listened to Regular small group discussions about concerns More consideration from adults Choices Other options beside university School Facilities Improved sports facilities	Mental Health Mental health prioritised Improved relationships between students and teachers Support in School Ensuring appropriate support is in place More understanding of an individual Recognition of individual challenges Student Voice Space available to share ideas and express opinions

Table 4: Student Visions for Changes in School⁶

5.7. What Matters to Adolescents

It is interesting to note, in the table above, that the younger adolescents did not mention aspects of student voice in the way that the older groups did. The main concern for the young adolescents was

⁶ Adolescent definitions in heading from Steinberg (2017). See Chapter Two.

that teaching and learning were improved for them in the classroom and that adults treated them fairly. Older students had fewer comments to make about learning. From the responses above certain themes stand out as important to young people:

- Being treated as an individual
- Being treated fairly
- Being listened to
- Being appropriately supported and understood
- Provided with the right and best resources – whether for learning or recreation
- Receiving the best learning support
- More equal standing – their views considered alongside those of the school staff

One memorable and significant quote from the data is worth including here with reference to several of the statements above: being treated as an individual, being treated fairly, being listened to, and being appropriately supported and understood.

If someone has a day off for ill-health, you come back and can't do your work and that just makes you feel worse. You don't want to do it and, but they, I don't think that schools understand that you can have bad days when you do feel awful, you don't want to come in, but it's not because you're physically ill it's because you feel like just not up to having.. And I think some people don't understand that, so maybe they should look into that more, that people can have bad days and not feel up to coming in. (Jess Sixth Form HHS)

My interpretation of Jess's statement is that one reason for absence from school is a young person's mental rather than physical health and perhaps some school staff are not always aware of this. Jess suggests that schools could investigate this area to help to increase understanding. The themes above from young people align with those found by Doda and Knowles (2008, p.27) with the standout quote from that work being: '*know us as people and learners.*'

5.8. Summary of Key Findings

The core focus of this research study was to listen to adolescent voices in secondary schools in order to gain an updated understanding of adolescence and to reframe deficit societal views (Lesko, 1996; 2001; and Lesko and Talburt, 2012). The deficit discourses were examined in the Literature Review (Chapter Two) and highlighted as unrealistic representations of the characteristics which make up adolescence (ibid). The data showed that the adolescent participants in this research study were

competent and co-operative in the interviews, could work collaboratively in a group, and reported their experiences in clear and concise ways, evident in the direct quotes from young people which are presented throughout this chapter and in Appendix 9a. They described their lives outside of school as active and useful. Family was as important as friends, with some individuals expressing gratitude for the help and guidance they received from adult staff.

Through the words of adolescents, a picture emerged of adolescence as an anxious time whilst dealing with issues such as their physical development and peer group relationships. Their perception of how adults viewed them showed that some adolescents felt unfairly treated by school staff with others pointing to unrealistic expectations from adults – parents as well as teachers. Their sense of injustice stemmed from some practices by individual teaching staff – not returning schoolwork or only marking some aspects of their work. Adolescents reported inequalities in the way adults responded to and behaved towards different genders, with the groups feeling that some school rules and regulations were unfair, especially regarding uniform. This latter issue can be seen as an area that adolescents, with their search for identity, take seriously – how they dress matters to them and any perception of discriminatory practice appeared to be a significant issue.

The views of adolescents regarding education and learning centred on classroom practice and school policies. Key challenges in school as reported by adolescents were:

- Distraction of negative peer group behaviour in the classroom
- Perceived unequal treatment by teachers regarding schoolwork
- Pressure from attention on GCSEs at an early stage
- Limited range of choices for GCSEs
- Lack of options for different futures beyond school
- Inadequate responses regarding mental health guidance and support

However, when responding to the question about the benefits of school, most of the young people praised their teachers and reported that they enjoyed lessons and learning. From Year 7 students to 6 formers and undergraduates, there was a call for realistic expectations - in terms of examination results, school rules and regulations, and future plans. Mental health was a priority with older adolescents, highlighting the limitations, in their view, of tokenistic responses from school. Being treated by adults as an individual, with an acknowledgement of different abilities, was a priority for some. Quiet students felt overlooked and those who struggled with their mental health felt dissatisfied with the provision available in the school.

Through the interviews with young people and the subsequent data analysis, I uncovered what matters to them. They talked about what they need as adolescents. Terri (Y8 DA) referred to the importance of '*a good group of friends*.' Others talked about the significance of close family relationships.

Regarding their experiences in the classroom the young people wanted fair treatment from their teachers, both with regards to how their work was marked by their teachers, and the feedback they received, and in being seen as individuals, rather than a homogenous group. They talked about the need for '*appropriate*' pastoral support, rather than leaflets or website links. They recognised the benefits of talking 1:1 to someone about personal issues – that person could be a friend, a trusted teacher, or a pastoral support worker.

The core challenges that they perceived and reported regarding being an adolescent in secondary school were as follows:

- Responsibility
- Being judged
- Expectations from adults
- Changes to self
- Pressure from adults

The positive experiences as perceived and reported were:

- Freedom
- Learning
- Independence
- Friendships
- Support from individual teachers

One key area that was explored through the interviews was how much the young people felt supported by their school and whether their voices were heard. Diane (Y11HHS) suggested that '*staff listen more*' and Amy (UC) offered the following as reason for not being listened to, no space, no time, no room. In other words, that her school had not found the capacity to offer the opportunity for student voices to be heard by the adults.

The limitations of the support hub at DA were described by the students as unfriendly, not private, and a place for sanction as well as support. Sarah (Y9 DA) observed that the support hub was a place

where students go ‘*to get told off, to get punished*’. Other students were positive about the support they received mentioned the role of pastoral assistants and individual teachers who were trusted. Andrew (Y9 DA) said he did not want to talk to teachers about ‘*sensitive stuff*’ and other young people articulated similar concerns. In an Analytic Memo I noted:

Could there be a stigma regarding asking for help in school? Are there enough different ways of accessing support for young people? Perhaps using only one space means it is too obvious/too visible to others if a young person wants to talk in confidence. At the same time, the climate within the school needs to be accepting of all young people needing support at some point. It could be an important aspect for a Year 7 pupil to know that no-one is alone with their issues and perhaps the school could offer online support alongside a place to go?

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Transition from primary school was found to be problematic for some students with a need to ‘fit in’ with the current school population, who are older and more experienced. More than one young person in this research study talked about the size of a secondary school, both in the building and the number of people, being overwhelming. The disruption to education which takes place on moving to a different school, can affect some individuals more than others and is linked with changes in both expectations of increased independence and classroom practice (Mumford and Birchwood, 2021). This transition has been described as a ‘*significant event in their lives*’ (Hassard, et al 2024, p.5.). A significant finding was that ‘*urban myths*’ (ibid, p.6.) affected students’ perceptions of the experience of secondary education. This suggests that research on adolescence could begin at the later stages of primary education, at a time when it appears that students’ perceptions of secondary education are already being formed, alongside their search for an identity.

Most schools offer a transition package, with pupil visits from primary school to secondary school before they enter Year 7. Involvement of parents has been seen as a supportive way of managing the discontinuity (Anderson et al, 2003). Consulting young people before they move into secondary school could lead to a better understanding of what young people need at that time and could help make that transition more comfortable.

Peer group behaviour and opinion mattered to the young people interviewed. Trying to navigate the complex rules and norms of peer groups which they described (from how the uniform is worn to flaunting the mobile phone policy) creates huge challenges. Keeping old friends was as important to adolescents as making new ones.

Discriminatory practice was reported regarding the wearing of uniform and the use of school toilets. Rules which were perceived as rigid and inflexible were problematic: one example being the rule regarding the use of the school toilets which was highlighted by girls in Years 8 and 9. This is an important area that perhaps needs discussion between staff and students to find a way that allows some young people, particularly girls during menstruation, to safely use school toilets. Other students reported vandalism in the toilets alongside threatening behaviour from some groups. The young people reported how powerless, to some extent, they feel, whether it was about the choices they want to make for their futures, the ways they want to learn, how they are supported or the respect and acknowledgment they need from adults.

The responses demonstrated a complexity of views from young people. The qualitative and person-centred approach to this research yielded rich data. The young people had time and scope to express their views clearly and their interaction with each other, within the interview groups, added depth to the data. Their suggestions for changes to school practice included the need for more specialised support staff, more options at GCSE level, and more understanding from adults about differences in ability and personality. The significance of student and adult engagement was evident as they reported how individual teachers could be effective with support and acknowledgement of their needs. Trusting teachers was paramount to making positive engagements with school.

One rationale for listening to student voices is that an adolescents' unique experiences and perceptions give credibility to their views (Raby, 2007; Doda and Knowles, 2008; Strom and Strom, 2014) in preference to second-hand reporting from adults. By recording their views and transcribing them verbatim, the aim was to represent as authentically as possible, what the young people reported. Another reason for capturing the voices of young people is that their '*experiences and perspectives*' have been absent from the literature (Pearce and Wood, 2019, p.5). A deficit view of adolescence has had an impact on how young people are viewed (Lesko and Talburt, 2012) and a key aim of this research was to reframe adolescence and arrive at an in-depth appreciation of how it feels to be an adolescent (Fraser et al, 2004). It was evident that young people '*have important things to tell us*' (Raby, 2007, p.39) and the aim was to convey this through the voices of adolescents in school.

Whether school staff are aware of these significant issues that matter to adolescents, is an area which is examined in the next chapter where the responses of the adult participants are presented.

CHAPTER SIX

The Adult Participants' Responses

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter presented the voices of adolescents in school: the key focus of this research inquiry. In this chapter the adults' views are reported with reference to one of the core research questions (Chapter One 1.3.) which aims to examine how adults perceive the experiences of adolescents in school. Adults have a significant role to play in the lives of adolescents, not only with regard to academic achievement (Wu et al, 2022), but as impacting on the role of student voice in schools (Fielding and Moss, 2011). By listening to the voices of different adults (teachers, senior management, a Pastoral Support Assistant, a School Caretaker, and a Special Needs Co-ordinator) the intention was to examine commonalities and differences between adolescents and adults, to reach an understanding of adults' perceptions of adolescents in school and how they position student voice.

The key rationale for interviewing adults was to examine their perspectives on the experiences of adolescents in the expectation that their responses could add an informative and updated dimension to understanding young people in school. Ten members of staff from Dryden Academy, Harris High School, Field Academy and Tower Academy were interviewed individually regarding their perceptions of adolescence and adolescents; the young people's challenges and benefits of school; and their lives outside of school. The interview questions for adults are presented in Appendix 5. How the schools framed their responses to young people and positioned them within school was also examined through the data from adults and is presented below in section 6.4.3.

The data collection period was unexpectedly disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic as discussed in detail in Chapter Four. The repercussions of this meant that the interviews at Dryden Academy took place two years before those at Harris High School, with online interviews with staff from Field and Tower Academies in between, during school lockdowns. This research inquiry did not examine the impact of the pandemic on staff members, but the adults who were interviewed post-pandemic were no doubt affected by the uncertainty of that period. The impact of the pandemic on schools has been widely researched, both the effect on staff (Kim and Asbury, 2020) and on students (Walters et al, 2022; Widnall et al, 2022). However, it was not immediately apparent from their responses how the staff were coping, although some chose to mention the pandemic in their responses. One important quote was from Alice, a teacher of Design and Technology at HHS, who highlighted harmful behaviours in young people since the pandemic: *'Things like self-harming or suicide – really quite*

extreme feelings and behaviours seem, that have been reported to us, you know, is through the roof, since Covid.'

Interviewing the adults proved to be a different experience from interviewing adolescents. The adults responded with more confidence which could be due to the fact that they are familiar with interviews, in particular with Ofsted inspections. Dryden Academy had experienced an Ofsted inspection prior to my involvement so the adults were possibly reiterating views previously expressed. At first glance, the adults' responses seemed slightly defensive, more rehearsed, and more divisive ('them' (the young people) and 'us' (the adults)) than the responses from the young people. Their responsibilities and their roles in relation to young people could have an influence on their outlook. One study of student and teacher relationships suggests '*adult-centric*' views tend to disregard the '*unique and personal*' experiences of young people in school (McHugh et al, 2012, p.9). This is important since it suggests that some school staff could misjudge young people. As reported in the previous chapter, some young people felt misunderstood by adults.

The data from the adult respondents was read and reread in order to find common themes and patterns and subsequently to interpret the responses. Coding was applied to the transcripts (see Appendix 11) and a thematic analysis was used to reveal meaning (see Appendix 10). Themes which appeared significant in understanding the role of adults in school and how they interact with young people are discussed within the separate sections below. These themes were not always overtly expressed by participants but emerged through the text as it was closely examined. The themes presented represent areas which were mentioned by more than one member of staff and were a common concern of the adults or were noted as of significance to the research, regarding those areas which could impact on young people themselves, such as the assumptions described in Section 6.4.3.

The first section below reintroduces the adult participants, their roles, and schools. The following sections and sub-sections deal with their perceptions of adolescence, including societal attitudes, the positioning of student voice in schools, the challenges for adolescence, the benefits in school and school support. The adults were asked for their suggestions for change, which are included, and the chapter closes with a summary of the key findings.

6.2. The Adult Participants

Table 5 below presents the adult participants, their roles, and their schools with their personal experiences and rationale for working with adolescents. I have included key quotes from individuals, as with the young people in Chapter Five, to give a sense of the unique personalities and perspectives of each adult. The intention of interviewing adults individually was to capture their voices in a confidential and private space. The adults needed little prompting to put forward their views. They were asked to reflect on their own adolescent years, as a sub-question, to prompt a reflection on this period of life, and to add to their understanding of what it might be like for young people. This question proved productive as the adults talked about their earlier mistakes and frailties when younger and demonstrated empathy with the struggles faced by some adolescents.

Name and Role	Career Trajectory	Personal Adolescent Experiences	Rationale for Working with Adolescents
Pat Principal DA	20 years teaching 9 years Deputy Head	<i>'You go through such a range of emotions - trying to work out who you are'</i>	<i>'They're fun' 'They keep you young'</i>
Ann Assistant SENDCo DA	Volunteer in school Teaching Assistant 9 years current post	<i>'I was very happy at school' 'There were lots of supportive staff there'</i>	<i>'I get on better with older children' 'You can have more of conversation with them' 'More stimulating'</i>
Alan Assistant Principal DA	Ambition to be a professional athlete. Changed to PE teaching.	<i>'14 or 15 is tough' 'I know I was really stubborn'</i>	<i>'You can have a bit of a laugh and joke with them' 'I like that you can have a sort of back-and-forth with them'</i>
Colin School Caretaker DA	2 years Army Apprentice College Served in Northern Ireland. Worked in engineering. 6 years current post.	<i>'Can't really remember too much about school' 'You felt safer in those days' 'It was a really good time'</i>	<i>Colin wanted a job in caretaking as there weren't many openings in welding which he'd previously done. He did not mind which type of school he worked in.</i>
Alice Teacher of Design and Technology FA	Studied fashion, worked in the industry. Worked with SEN students before current post.	<i>'All about friends' Worried 'too much about other people' 'I was quite grade-driven'</i>	<i>Primary school teaching 'didn't fulfil me as much' 'I really wanted older, quite experienced like me' 'It's been a rewarding experience'</i>
Simon Head of Year 8 TA	Fifth year teaching humanities subjects.	<i>'I enjoyed it. I liked being a teenager. I liked being at school. I went through an awkward teenage period.'</i>	<i>'I find they're a bit more engaged, easy to go into depth into interesting topics, as well'</i>
Flora Teacher of Modern Foreign Languages HHS	Trainee teacher in 2 nd year of NQT during Covid-19 lockdown.	<i>'I was very badly bullied when I was a child but particularly at secondary school' 'I had very few friends' 'I tried to change who I was'</i>	<i>Wanted to teach and help others like herself and 'To try and make a difference'</i>
Mike Pastoral Support Assistant HHS	Worked in a National Park and as a football coach prior to current post.	<i>'I came from a very abusive childhood. So, I had a horrific adolescence' 'You had your mates'</i>	<i>Friends told him that he was ideally suited to the job. 'With my life experience and knowledge, I figured that's where I'd be best used.'</i>
Amber	23 years old. Recently arrived	Learnt to feel she was not alone (as a trans person)	Enjoys teaching younger students – Y8 and Y9

Trainee Teacher HHS	in the school. Teaches English.	by reading literature and by a supportive teacher who <i>'checked in with me'</i>	
Mary Assistant Principal HHS	Trained as an English teacher. Pastoral work after first year teaching.	Disaffected in Year 11 after a lengthy illness. Had a baby at 19. Didn't do <i>'traditional route.'</i>	<i>'There are definitely gaps in my own education, so I thought let's see if I can help some young people along the way'</i>

Table 5: Adult Participants and their Narratives as Reported by them

The adults gave detailed descriptions of their own childhoods with an explanation of the work trajectories they had followed. Their early experiences had an impact on their current lives: Alan (Assistant Principal, DA), said that he might have become a lawyer, but his desire to be an athlete led to him training as a PE teacher. Ann (Assistant SENDCo, DA) admired and appreciated her own teachers who had supported her at school – leading, perhaps, to her choice of working within the school support hub. The rationale for including this detail is that it serves as a background to the adult views and perspectives reported in this chapter and adds a further dimension.

The differing rationales from adults for working with adolescents illustrate a range of motivations. Some adults described the pleasure they received from working with this age-group. Those adults who had difficult experiences in school wanted to help students who might have similar experiences to their own. Two adults described their negative experiences at adolescence: *'I was very badly bullied'* (Flora, Teacher MFL, HHS) and *'I had a horrific adolescence'* (Mike, Pastoral Support Assistant, HHS). One adult reported that he had been academically successful at school and he wanted to use his skill in teaching his subject (Simon, Head Y8, TA). The adults described their lived experiences of school, both as adolescents and now as professionals, areas which informed their judgements of adolescents.

Alongside their narratives regarding adolescents, some adults talked about their role as teachers. Flora pointed to the lack of control she feels that teachers have over the lives of young people: *'what we see are not things we are equipped to deal with'* suggesting a feeling of frustration that some aspects of students' lives are beyond the scope of school staff. Amber looked back to her time as an adolescent in school and showed appreciation of some of her teachers, especially one who *'checked in with me.'* This was a common narrative, that students need staff to follow-up with support or advice. Pat, as a senior manager, recognised the skills of teachers noting that they *'know their stuff'* and praising them as excellent. However, Pat also pointed out that *'we're everything to everyone'* summing up the pressure teachers can feel from society outside of school.

Similarities of education and family background were evident in the life histories described by Pat and Alan, two of the senior school managers at DA. They both referred to their successful educational backgrounds and supportive families. They had followed a traditional career path of school followed by university. Alan suggested that *'if you don't get a good set of results, it dictates what's going to happen to you.'* In contrast, Colin (School Caretaker) and Ann (Assistant Special Needs Co-Ordinator) at DA, whose educational backgrounds and lived experiences differed from those of senior managers Pat and Alan, expressed different views about young people. For example, Colin had not followed a traditional route of education and work and said he remembered little about his schooldays. But his lived experience ranged from a spell in the armed forces, working as an engineer and then a welder, and finally a post as caretaker of DA. He described his varied jobs and time in the military, a wider experience of the world of employment than the school managers, Pat and Alan.

The lived experience of Mary (Assistant Principal of HHS), included some challenges for her at adolescence, including becoming a parent. For Mary, being a teacher was described as a way of helping young people who might have experienced similar challenges. This perspective was echoed by Amber (Trainee Teacher, HHS). Her experiences as a transgender individual resulted in a desire to provide support and understanding for young people struggling with issues of identity. Some of the responses quoted above align with the concept of teaching to make a difference to young people (Cockburn and Haydn, 2004). These differing personal experiences permeated the adults' perception of the challenges and benefits experienced by young people in school as examined in the following sections of this chapter.

6.2.1. Adults' Experiences as Adolescents

The participants were asked: *'If you cast your mind back to your own adolescence, what stands out for you at that time? What would you say to your 15/16-year-old self if you could go back in time?'* This gave them an opportunity to reflect on their personal experience of adolescence, adding another dimension to the data. The intention was to remind them of the experience of being an adolescent to bring them closer to the young people they work with. Pat (Principal, DA) stated: *'my sense of identity really formulated as a teenager'* and described how she had coped with a range of emotions, desperate to grow up. She called it *'a massive time for any human.'* Amber (Trainee Teacher, HHS) said she had been supported at school in her search for an identity and highlighted the importance of young people being treated as individuals, not as members of a homogenous group.

Alan (Assistant Principal, DA) remembered being a *'know-it-all'* who was *'very reluctant to listen to anyone else.'* In hindsight he realised that he thought he knew best and felt he had wasted his potential. Ann (Assistant SENDCo, DA) said that she *'really enjoyed my education'* remembering that *'there was lots of supportive staff there.'* Whilst Colin (School Caretaker, DA) couldn't *'remember too much about school'* he could recall *'fun times as a youngster, of playing with my mates. Football in the winter, cricket and tennis in the summer.'* Importantly he pointed out *'you felt safer in those days, than what there is today.'* To Pat (Principal, DA) *'friendships were a really big thing at the time'* and praise from teachers and parents was important. *'Praise would have been a really big thing. And that sense of doing well. Wanting to do well. And family feeling I was doing well.'* Other adults also recognised the support they received. Amber (HHS) had a supportive teacher who *'checked in with me'* and Mike pointed out that *'you had your mates.'* This latter remark was echoed by Alice (Teacher D and T, FA) who said, for her, adolescence was *'all about friends.'*

The above reflections offer snapshots of the adults' earlier lives with memories of their mistakes as well as achievements. Peer group relationships were important, which echoes the data from the young people and it was acknowledged that positive family support and discipline from home was an advantage.

6.2.2. Working with Adolescents

In connection with this discourse, when asked why they had chosen to work with adolescents, Alan (Assistant Principal, DA) referred to the positive effect derived from working with young people. Ann (Assistant SENDCo, DA) stated: *'I get on better with older children'* and *'I think you can have more of a conversation with them. I just find it more stimulating.'* The view from Pat (Principal, DA) echoed this: *'they keep you young.'* Alan recognised adolescents as unique individuals, *'You've got 500 kids in school and every one of them is going through something different'* and stated that he *'sort of fell in love with the kids and how children are and that idea of being in a school'*. He saw his role as a *'responsibility to teach the kids how to function as part of society, the wider world, and teach them things that they're going to need to carry forward.'* Alice (Teacher D and T, FA) talked about adolescents being *'more experienced'* whilst Simon (Head Y8, TA) pointed out that secondary school students are *'a bit more engaged'* and *'easy to go into depth, into interesting topics, as well'* focussing on young people as learners. Similarly, Amber (Trainee Teacher, HHS) talked about enjoying the teaching element of working with young people.

Some staff used their childhood experiences to inform their work with young people. Flora (Teacher MFL, HHS), like Mary (Assistant Principal, HHS) wanted to '*make a difference*' and to help other young people like herself. Both Flora and Mary had overcome personal difficulties during adolescence and were using that experience to enhance their work with young people in school.

This background information illustrates the individual perspectives from adults regarding the lives of adolescents. They could recognise patterns of adolescent behaviour and significant challenges of identity and peer group relationships with the importance of family support.

6.2.3. Adults' Positioning Within School

With a range of teaching and non-teaching roles of the participants, it was possible to speculate whether the adults' perceptions of young people could stem in part from their individual positioning within their schools. Referring to professional contexts acknowledges the complexity of adult perceptions of adolescence. The views from Pat and Alan, senior staff at DA, differed from those of Ann (Assistant SENDCo) and Colin (School Caretaker). The managers' views could be ascribed to the supportive home backgrounds which were described in their interviews, and their subsequent successful academic outcomes. Their professional practice would likely be influenced by Ofsted's recent framework (2019) and the ethos of the Trust that oversees their Academy. This was not overtly articulated, but beneath Alan's statements about the failings of the current English education system, the impact of external pressure on some staff was evident. It could be said that managerial staff will be aware of their influences and achievements in their professional roles, which could affect their perceptions of young people. Ann works to support young people, so has a different insight into students' lives arising from her interactions with them, and Colin had extensive life experience in both the Armed Forces and working in industry with its associated interaction with a range of people, rather than the narrower world of education. These differing positions within school could have an impact on how they view the experiences of adolescents but, importantly, gives balance to the data received.

6.3. Adults' Perceptions of Adolescence and Adolescents

The adults were asked how they perceived the adolescents in their schools with reference to one of the research questions. The importance of the adults' perspectives on adolescence and adolescents stems from the conceptual framework which highlights the impact of student and teacher engagement in schools. This relationship is critical to student academic performance (Pianta et al, 2012; Yu et al, 2016) with the performative agenda in schools lessening the amount of attention teachers can pay to

students. It was an important strand in the data since the young people talked about a need for acknowledgment from staff and a demonstration of investment in their work (by marking and offering feedback).

6.3.1. How Adolescents See Themselves

The adults were asked their views on how young people see themselves at this stage in their life. A feeling of frustration was identified as part of being an adolescent. Pat (DA) perceived this as *‘desperately wanting to get to the next stage where they can have some independence.’* She described *‘a real pull’* to be grown-up on one hand and *‘you still kind of want to do all those other kind of younger things’* on the other. Alice agreed that young people *‘are desperate to be adults.’* Pat continued:

‘Teenagers find it difficult to process and think about actions or things that they are doing now, are going to have an effect later on in life, or even that the steps they take now to improve what is going to happen later in life.’

A sense of how some adolescents lack confidence emerged, with Mary (HHS) saying, *‘there must be a lot of uncertainty in a young person’* and *‘they look to their peers a lot, I think they’re influenced by their peers.’* She suggested that an adolescent’s experience was in part dependent on the school, as well as the peer group and the adults around them. *‘I think it must be quite an anxious experience for lots of young people.’* As a safeguarding leader, Mary heard from young people about their experiences and said that they tell her *‘I just want to feel something’* or *‘I wanted to belong to something.’* Simon suggested that young people want change and that they are knowledgeable about world events and hold strong beliefs although he felt *‘yeh, it’s really hard being a teenager.’* Alan referred to the role-models currently influencing young people: *‘What has developed now is generations of children who see people like Youtubers and people who make videos and make fortunes by making those videos.’* He expressed concern that *‘they think it’s going to be easy’* to emulate these individuals.

6.3.2. Adults’ Perceptions of Adolescence

The general picture presented of the experiences of adolescents in school as perceived by the adults, was mixed. Adolescence was *‘hard’* in Alan’s (DA) opinion and Ann (DA) described the lives of some young people as *‘quite sad.’* Mary (HHS) perceived adolescence as a time of anxiety. Simon talked about young people *‘struggling’* with friendship issues and suggested *‘they like to be able to control things.’* The issue of control was referred to by Flora (HHS) who said *‘their lives are taken control of’* which perhaps points to the transitions from children to adolescents and from primary to secondary

education. However, Flora pointed out that adolescents '*know their rights*' as well as being self-aware and understanding mental health needs.

For Pat (DA) adolescence is a formative time, when young people are dealing with a range of emotions and working out what they are going to be. This echoed the views of students and of theorists who highlighted the search for identity as significant in adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Spencer and Tinsley, 2008; Smyth, 2013). Staff recognised that there is a lot of confusion in the search for identity alongside a need for freedom. The overall sense was that adolescence is not an easy time and some adults echoed Colin (DA) that '*I wouldn't want to be a teenager in today's world.*' Colin pointed to the lack of discipline he perceives in young people's lives today and Mike (HHS) suggested '*teenagers go through hell of a lot.*'

There were some negative assumptions from adults. Pat (DA) described some adolescents as '*ultimately very selfish*' and '*everything is about immediacy, about what is happening now*' suggesting that young people disregard consequences. She continued: '*the most they can think ahead is two years when A-levels or 'I can drive' or 'when I can get a bit of money.*' The data from young people contradicted this view as students talked about their visions for futures in employment or training (see Chapter Five).

Alice (FA) described groups of young people in the following terms: '*They seemed to, all sort of, just, gather*' and '*That's what they quite like to do, big herds of them, they just walk round together.*' Ann's (DA) view was that '*I don't think they really understand what life is like*' and Mark (HHS) suggested that young people are '*all so desperate to be part of their social group.*' The negative side of this, however, is that '*the bad choices that young people make are often borne out of a desire to conform or fit in or be somebody*' (Mary, HHS).

In contrast, Alan (DA) had a positive view towards the adolescents in his school: '*Some of our kids are the nicest, most moral, incredible people I have ever met*' which was echoed by Colin (DA): '*they're a good bunch of kids.*' To Pat (DA) the young people are:

'Very open, they can tell you exactly – what's more interesting is what they tell, the conversations they have in less-formalised things, so somebody will stop me and say, 'Miss I'm a bit concerned about this lesson'.

She pointed out that *'the concept of fairness is huge'* and that *'they have quite a vocal response to their experiences, I think, on the whole.'* It emerged through the data from young people that fairness was a significant issue regarding schoolwork and school regulations. Pat (DA) also reported that *'young people don't tolerate other children breaking the rules...they will just come and report straight away, so we can investigate.'* One young person, Georgina, described how misbehaviour from other students in the classroom was a distraction and frustration for her.

6.3.3. Societal Perceptions of Adolescents

A key theme in this research inquiry is the societal perception of adolescents which arises from the deficit discourses of some adults (Lesko, 1996; 2001). The data showed that the adults acknowledged and shared some of these discourses. Mary (HHS) suggested that society wants young people to *'perform, to fit in.'* She pointed out a *'massive disconnect between older generation and younger generation'* a view that can be seen as a common stereotype of the difference between generations. Other reactions which emerged from the question on societal views were: *'I think maybe we're not very tolerant of teenagers'* (Ann, DA) who qualified this with *'working in a school obviously we try to look at the positives in our students.'* She suggested that the wider society paints a negative picture of *'teenagers always stuck in front of games or phones'* and that *'the media focus on the negatives, rather than the positives.'* Alan (DA) agreed: *'They get a rough ride. From society. I don't think the media help.'* Pat (HHS) described society's attitude as *'an ill view towards teenagers'* and *'I think they are quite often patronised, grouped together.'* This view of teenagers as a group to be wary of, and judged, was echoed by Flora who suggested that *'people don't stop to look or don't have the opportunity to look past the hood up.'* Most of the adults concluded that society has a negative view of young people, despite their own experience of the positive aspects of adolescence that they witness daily in school. Some of these views echoed the work of Lesko (1996; 2001) which highlights the common and deficit discourses from adults towards adolescents and the harm this has had on an image of young people. Pat (DA) pointed out her personal feelings in contrast to the negative societal view: *'My experience of teenagers is that they are nothing like that at all. Most teenagers feel passionately about the world.'* Most of the adults reported society as viewing young people negatively, especially if they are seen out in large groups. *'They are painted in a bad light'* suggested Flora (HHS). Both Alan (DA) and Ann (DA) suggested that society is not tolerant of teenagers, giving them a *'rough ride'* (Alan). Most adults were critical of this negative framing of young people. *'The trouble is, I don't see a way of tailoring the education system to deal with the uniqueness of children'* (Alan).

The above responses extended to frustration from the adults about how society views the functions of schools – seeing the teachers as social workers, as well as police, whilst at the same time blaming schools for society's ills. Pat's (DA) frustration was articulated as *'schools aren't here just to educate now.'* Mary (HHS) echoed this, saying: *'We have housing issues, domestic violence, domestic disputes, criminal things. A lot of what we see are not things we are equipped to deal with and wouldn't want to be.'* Alice (FA) felt that the school day is very focussed on attainment, and she quoted *'six hours teaching and 25 minutes for lunch'* illustrating an imbalance between work and breaks. The frustrations felt by some staff, in dealing with the personal developmental needs of young people, alongside formal teaching and learning, were pronounced. Alan (DA) voiced his impatience with the system, which fell short, in his view, of meeting the needs of young people at a crucial stage in their lives. He called for a new kind of leadership from government. *'You know, someone in the education food chain needs to take some responsibility'* he said, when talking about the pressure of exams and home issues experienced by a Year 11 student. *'Children in society don't exist by those same parameters and guidelines'* Alan stated.

6.4. Student Voice and Participation

6.4.1. Adults' Perceptions of Student Voice

Student voice is a key element of this research inquiry and encompasses an examination of how this critical issue was perceived by school staff and how, if at all, it was implemented within the schools. The interview questions on this issue elicited a wide range of responses which highlighted some different understandings and definitions of the concept of student voice. The many and varied opportunities for young people to contribute to the running of the school, and participate in decision-making, were listed by staff. Alice (HHS) felt that the School Council worked well with the views of young people shared with senior management. She referred to the online surveys in school which monitor well-being, happiness, and changes. A similar resource was also referred to by Pat (DA) who said, *'they're always popping down to the IT room to do a survey.'* For some, this resource appeared to fit the schools' obligation to give young people a voice. Amber (HHS) referred to an online PASS (Pupil Attitudes to Self and School) survey which the school operates annually. She described it as a way of *'trying to pick out those children that are perhaps disaffected.'* Overall, it was not clear, from the response of the adults, whether their schools offered a comprehensive package of consultation opportunities to young people or whether much of what was on offer was a tokenistic gesture towards the student voice agenda. What was beginning to take shape was the schools' own interpretations of student voice which could fit into the school system, rather than as a tool for the benefit of adolescents. This echoed Alan's (DA) earlier complaint that the system does not fit the young people. Mary (HHS) voiced her frustration that *'I'm not sure we reach the students'* when talking about her

school's response to student voice and participation. She suggested that the procedures which were in place were not offering participatory opportunities to all students. She gave an example of a survey, Pupil Attitudes to Self and School' (PASS) which is undertaken annually by students. She said the purpose was *'to pick out those children who are disaffected.'* Whether this resource achieves what it sets out to, and whether the results are acted upon, was not reported.

One of the activities that young people can get involved with at the DA, was working with school governors. *'The governors can ask them their view of what is happening in the school'* Ann (DA) reported. Alan (DA) made it clear that *'we do a lot of consultation with the students. Talking about things they like in lessons, things they don't, things that work well.'* He referred to changes in education which have improved this relationship: *'The idea of schools being where the adults in the building decide what happens, the kids just have to take it, has shifted.'* However, whilst talking about improvements in co-operation between staff and young people, Alan suggested that the young people have *'got to buy into what it is you are trying to do in the classroom'* and followed this with, *'the best way to get someone to buy into something is to let them feel like they were consulted'*, which view clashed with his earlier statements. As a way of explaining what he meant, Alan described the school's provision for hearing young people: *'We have quite a lot of Student Panels, today we had our Student Parliament, and all these various other bits and pieces that go on. All with the idea being that the kids take ownership for a fair proportion of what happens.'*

Adults described school resources and initiatives which were available to young people regarding mental health and with some reference to the notion of student voice. Some adults (HHS) described the use of a Student Voice Box, a suggestion-box, positioned in a school corridor, where students could post their ideas, as an illustration of an acknowledgement of student voice. Students seemed nonplussed about this resource, and some were unaware of its existence. In a different study a 'pupil voice box' was positioned in every classroom in a primary school which led to *'children feeling their views were listened to on a regular basis'* (Ainscow and Messiou, 2018, p.8). An important and relevant finding was that it was *'evident that members of staff were willing to listen and act upon what children had to say'* (ibid, p.9).

A Student Voice box was described as a significant resource used at both Dryden Academy and Harris High School. *'They can put suggestions, they can put ideas, in there'* (Pat). She went on to say they had not used it recently so wanted to revive its use. Pat and Alan both talked about the initiatives their school had set up to respond to Ofsted's new framework (2019) which focusses more on personal development than in the past. Showing an awareness of this new requirement, they talked about what

they offer to young people in order to help them participate and contribute to the daily running of the school. There was a consensus that the school staff listen to the young people through various activities, and Pat gave some detail about these resources. She listed the various aspects of the Student Service areas: teaching and learning; student study support; community enrichment; campaigns and equality; and charity. *'It's like a service to the school'* remarked Pat. The school wanted the young people to *'actually do something, rather than just talk about it'* showing a desire for active participation on the part of the young people. She pointed out that the school sets questionnaires for students, once or twice each Half Term which she said is *'very regular.'* Students could also *'get to feed in their views about who is going to join the school'* from the Staff Panel which recruits new staff. Also, young people could debate issues in their House Parliament.

Most teachers demonstrated a positive and enthusiastic attitude towards school support systems and student voice resources, which was not fully mirrored by the student testimony found in the data. The confusion which emerged amongst the adults regarding the concept of student voice is examined in more detail in Chapter Seven.

6.4.2. Adult Framing of the Schools' Responses to Needs of Adolescents

The discourse around the framing of adolescence by adults in society is one made by Lesko (see Chapter Two, Section 2.2). Lesko's stance is that society holds a deficit view of young people (Lesko, 2012) with negative assumptions about adolescents. The adult respondents demonstrated this negativity in some of their responses. However, they framed the schools' responses positively, whilst recognising the limitations, as illustrated in Table 6 below.

Beneficial Role of School as Reported by Adults	Limitations of School as Reported by Adults
School keeps young people safe - good safeguarding teams Good student/staff relationships Staff know young people well <i>'School is pretty good at listening to students'</i> Pat (DA) <i>'We try to talk to them about emotions'</i> Flora (HHS) Variety of student voice resources such as Student Voice box Student leadership team Good student participation opportunities School Support resource unit Variety of support initiatives – annual online surveys re wellbeing and happiness - Social Skills group	Limited support for student mental health Limited listening to and reaching some students Pressure of pastoral role of teachers Rule-bound Conformist Lack of agency for students Limited freedom/leeway for students Lack of funding for support of students Time limitations Inadequate staff capacity Lack of appropriate funding Inadequate sports facilities Lack of non-academic facilities Constricted classroom space Temporary classrooms

Table 6: Adult Framing of the Schools' Responses to Needs of Adolescents

One area which the staff mostly agreed upon, was that their schools offer good support to the young people. The limitations of the schools' support resources were not given in detail but there was a call for more support assistants or personal mentors for young people (Pat DA).

Initiatives set up by schools to hear young people express their views and contribute ideas, tended to be delivered mostly online rather than in person. Pat described how young people could complete regular online surveys reporting that *'they're always going down to the computer room.'* The Student Voice box in a corridor, into which students can put their written comments on any issue, removes the young person from person-to-person contact.

One of the challenges for schools, highlighted by Alan (DA), is the balance to be struck between learning and support for students. He suggested that it is an area schools are reluctant to tackle. With Ofsted now including personal development in their targets, schools have to face the question of how wellbeing support is delivered.

6.4.3. Adults' Assumptions about Adolescents

False assumptions by adults of the nature of adolescence are a major theme in the work of Lesko (1996, 2001, 2012) and formed a key strand of this research inquiry. The adult respondents made statements that could be construed as 'assumptions' about young people. Pat (DA) suggested that students know '*that everyone that works in education cares.*' However, some young people reported a lack of appropriate support. This suggests that it is not evident to young people that staff care about them individually.

Another assumption made by an adult participant, Flora, is that '*their lives are taken control of*' but an argument could be made here that some external control is beneficial to young people, even if they don't recognise it as such. However, some young people referred to feeling powerless: '*You just feel a bit helpless, to be honest*' (Marie, Sixth Former, HHS). One member of staff, Colin, suggested that young people do not feel safe now, referring to his own childhood some decades ago when he spent time outdoors playing. However, there was no evidence of feeling unsafe from the reporting of young people, but it is reasonable that school staff feel protective of young people in their care.

There was concern from some adults about how little prepared young people can be for the future as it was said that adolescents can be too focused on the present (Pat, DA). The assumption seemed to be that adolescents could not comprehend the consequences of their decisions and actions and are too busy with the present moment. However, young people in this research demonstrated that they could look ahead and can imagine different options for their lives beyond school. Some young people spoke about the possible scenarios they foresaw for themselves in the future. Jane (Sixth Former, HHS) said '*I wanted to go into full-time work*' when talking about the options on offer from the school. She felt pressure to follow the school-to-university trajectory which was not the future she envisaged for herself.

A discourse of problematic adolescent behaviour arose through the data. Problematising the behaviour of young people can be seen as one of the ways adults negatively frame adolescence (Lesko, 2012). Mary (HHS) talked about the '*desire to conform or fit in*' as a problem for young people yet this could be seen as a natural part of the emotional development of adolescence. She felt that this could lead to

'bad choices' made by young people which could occur if some young people do not fit into school. However, the environment of a school, its organisation and priorities, can influence both the behaviour and achievement of some young people (Clark-Kazak, 2009; Steinberg, 2017; Dadvand and Cvervo, 2020). A significant theme that emerged from the data from adults was the concept of a 'happy' school. Adults reported that *'the kids are very happy here'* (Alan, DA) and *'it's a happy school'* (Colin, DA). The use of the term 'happy' or 'happiness' can be seen as a simplistic and reductionist view of how individuals make sense of their lives (Ecclestone, 2012). This word was sparsely used by the young people interviewed (see Chapter Five).

6.4.4. A Divided Population

Another area worthy of attention and expressed by some of the adults, is that the school population of young people seems to be divided into those who can, and those who cannot, with the main criteria being successful academic outcomes. This echoes the view of Lesko (2012, p.185) who suggests that we need to be: *'Understanding of the relationship among the powerful and the less-powerful in adolescent society and in adult-controlled institutions.'* Mary (HHS) said she had witnessed two distinct groups of young people, almost two tribes, one of which deals with the day-to-day routine of school and the other which does not. Whether this is a realistic judgement of the population would need to be more closely examined. This theme was touched upon by the young people – some of them had clearly not had any need for using the school support system, whilst others were full of criticism for the handling of their issues. The tribal nature of adolescence, as perceived by some adults in society (Lesko, 2012), fits with the image of separate groups who have very little in common and whose experience of school is widely different. It is worth considering how school management could address this issue.

6.4.5. Adolescents' Participation in School

Alan (DA) highlighted the ways in which adolescents participated in his school - for example by contributing to the school's House Parliament which gives young people an opportunity to contribute their ideas. He pointed out that *'the majority of ideas, the ones the kids have come up with, are the things we are already debating in our leadership meetings.'* He acknowledged the positive and unique contribution young people can, and do, make: *'The truth is they come out with some really good stuff. So very often they come out with an absolute gem of an idea.'* As an example, he referred to a discussion in school about installing vending machines, selling fizzy drinks and snacks. He said *'the kids are responsible enough'* to overturn the decision on health grounds. He saw this as a *'perfect example of them taking wider responsibility for things that are going on.'*

6.5. The Challenges for Adolescents as Perceived by Adults

The adults were asked for their views on what they see as the challenges and benefits inside and outside of school for young people. The following sections present significant and relevant themes which emerged from the data.

6.5.1. The Constraints of the English Secondary Education System

The current education system was described by Alan (DA) as a *'system that caters for a typical student, where the reality is, no student fits that profile anymore,'* recognising the individuality of young people. Alice talked about school as a restrictive environment which is rule-bound and procedural. She described the role of the adults as *'getting the job done'* and suggested young people are given little *'leeway.'* Simon (TA) mentioned the current agenda on 'resilience' in schools saying, *'trying to get them to be resilient...it can be a bit of a struggle, but we have like a PSHE course, and we look at that in PSHE lessons.'* Young people can be seen as the victims of a flawed education system (Alan, DA) and he suggested that some of the blame lies with the government for their lack of understanding of adolescence. As a professional in education, he takes some responsibility for the pressures that he believes young people face: *'We heap a huge amount of pressure on children, when, at puberty, and all the things that are coming with their day-to-day lives, are hard enough to manage.'*

The tragedy of high rates of suicide amongst teenagers was referred to by Alan (DA): *'Listen, it's no coincidence that the rates of mental illness are as high as they are, and equally sad that the rates of teenage suicide are on the way up, and I think the government need to recognise that.'* Which aligns with findings that *'7% of British teenagers have tried to kill or harm themselves.'* (Layard and Clark, 2014, p.213).

Mary talked about the magnitude of expectations on her as a teacher in school: *'So we have housing issues, we have domestic violence, domestic disputes, criminal things, so a lot of what we see are not things that we are equipped to deal with and wouldn't want to be.'* Other adults expressed their views about the current English education system as a pressure on young people. *'A lot of kids struggle with knowing what they want. It's a huge thing for them to be deciding re GCSEs'* (Flora, HHS) and Alan (DA) pointed to the frustration of young people suggesting that they are not being served well by the current educational system, reasoning that there is a gap between the values the schools uphold, and the values young people discern from their place in society.

6.5.2. Pressure on Adolescents

Pressure in many forms, from peer-group relationships to staff expectations, was a theme articulated by the adults. Simon (TA) felt that pressure on students is a *'lot worse now than it has been before in regard to mental health.'* He gave a figure of *'20-30% really do struggle.'* Flora spoke about the impact of pressure which she described as *'stresses they just can't easily escape'* and which can lead to disaffection: *'they feel they're not being supported, not listened to.'* Amber (HHS) suggested that unrealistic expectations arise from the need to continually assess the progress of students and Pat (DA) acknowledged that staff can pressurise young people with a constant focus on examinations. This was a critical issue for the students. Amber (HHS) interpreted the young people's perception of this pressure as their lives being *'taken control of'* and Alan (DA) described the current system as *'unfit for purpose'* with schools acting as *'exam factories.'* He described DA, a small rural school as *'not an exams factory, we do know the kids inside out, is the truth'* and explained the frustrations he feels about *'an education system that has always been created the same way – so we're the same system that existed 50 or 60 years ago'.*

6.5.3. Transitions

Transitioning from one stage (primary school) to another (secondary school) was seen by Ann (DA) as problematic for some young people, especially when they are dealing with peer group relationships. Ann highlighted the significant role played by schools, pointing out that *'it's a lot of your adolescence really.'* Pat (DA) talked about the *'pecking order'* evident in peer groups, which new students must navigate when they arrive at secondary school. She acknowledged the positive aspects of growing up and the transitions made: *'the more they feel they are entering into that next stage, or those next freedoms, or those next things they can obtain which they couldn't earlier on.'* However, she continued *'they don't necessarily have a process of transitioning from the stage they are at.'* This connection between the two transitions of school and adolescent development is significant and highlights a crucial time of change (Martin, 2019).

6.5.4. External Influences

As well as the complexities of peer group relationships, the adults acknowledged that young people face challenges brought into school from outside. Alice (FA) viewed the role of family as less important to young people than spending time with their peers. She described the influence of social media as *'vast'* and said that *'they spend a long time on their phones outside of school.'* She went on to say that in the last ten years this has been a huge change and that *'they've got all this knowledge right now, at their fingertips, so I think they spend less time with just themselves and their families as in years ago.'* This issue is detailed in section 6.5.5. below. Alan (DA) reported the personal issues that some young people can bring into school: *'there's all sorts of horrendous stories that our children*

carry round all day’ and presented a powerful anecdote to illustrate the issues that some young people deal with:

‘a girl whose Mum sadly passed away, and a week after her Mum passed away, her Nan passed away. In one week that Year 7 girl has got to deal with that. Yet we’re still saying to that Year 7 girl ‘got to do your maths now’. She goes home every night and her Mum’s not there anymore. To be honest with you, I couldn’t care less what she’s doing in maths, as long as she’s all right, and she’s coming in every day, and we’re holding her together, that’s the best way...’

Dryden Academy, a rural school, is situated in an area with a mix of affluence and deprivation. Pat (DA) reported that *‘Really some quite tough things, like going on in cities, are happening here.’* There are supportive homes, she said, but there are Young Carers; parents with issues of dependency; households dealing with financial challenges; and incidences of domestic abuse. Flora (HHS) talked about some students’ home lives as being *‘chaotic’* and was aware of how that can impact on young people in school.

6.5.5. The Influence of Social Media and ‘County Lines’

A study on the impact of social media on young people and their families found that what appears as a routine activity for young people is a major part of their social and emotional development (O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). The adults in this research inquiry talked about the perceived pressure of social media. *‘However much you try to tell them be careful what you’re doing, don’t do this, do that ...I think they need more education on that.’* (Ann DA) and *‘Also their personal relationships being held across social media, friendships, falling outs, it all seems to happen on social media, and I think that needs to be addressed.’* (Ann). She was concerned that it *‘makes some students feel inadequate, cos this is what you should be doing, you should at least have three boyfriends, you know, weigh so much, and look like this.’* She reported that the school (DA) aims to address the problem. *‘We do a lot of things about internet safety, safety with social media, and what-have-you’* but suggested this was not quite enough. Mike (HHS) reported that *‘we are, I think, very good at tackling it at the source’* although it was not made clear what actions the school had taken. Alice (FA) suggested that social media *‘is a bigger thing for them than actually the lessons and learning,’* but *‘They spend a long time on their phones outside of school. And actually, a lot of the social issues, that we pick up on, they all start on their phones, a lot of the trends that they have.’*

Simon (TA) reported *‘issues with social media, them saying things, doing things, starting groups, posting things that offend other people.’* Similarly, Alan (DA) showed his concern that *‘there’s nothing that isn’t accessible to children now’* and said that young people are *‘exposed to a lot of stuff that they are not mature enough to understand’* which included ‘county lines’ a local crime wave

which involved young people in the distribution of drugs across county borders. The local police had informed the school (DA) that some young people were systematically targeted by criminals, a worrying trend for the school staff.

6.5.6. Amenities and Activities Outside of School

Young people reported a variety of activities and hobbies which they were involved with outside of school. However, some adults perceived young people as inactive: *‘a bit of a sad image for some of them who seem to be a bit like lost souls at the weekend’* (Ann DA). The assumption was that young people were disengaged in their communities. A small minority were seen as *‘Engaging in activities that are toxic, not helpful, you know they’re obsessively checking social media or obsessively working down the gym, or they’re engaged in drugs and alcohol and are unsupervised, largely’* (Mary HHS). She suggested that families are often oblivious to their children’s involvement. Another view was that *‘They’ve got all this knowledge right now, at their fingertips, so I think they spend less time with just themselves and their families as in years ago.’* (Alice FA).

Regarding the local community, some of the adults at DA showed concern about the lack of amenities for young people. Ann (DA) reported seeing groups of youngsters *‘hanging about the bus shelter in the village.’* The geographical nature of the area around the school (DA) includes small villages with no facilities: no shop, no post office, nowhere to meet others, which results in scarce opportunities for young people to socialise outside of school. Simon (TA) described the mix of young people in his school, the range of housing accommodation in the area, and the varied types of families: *‘Some pupils come from quite a deprived background, so they’ll be living in small flats, quite small houses, with lots of siblings, without a room to themselves and without the kind of resources they might need to do well.’* Mary (HHS) reported that young people took part in *‘Guides and Police Cadets, swimming, and have healthy friendships when they go round each other’s houses for tea.’* However, a small minority were *‘Engaging in activities that are toxic, not helpful, you know they’re obsessively checking social media or obsessively working down the gym, or they’re engaged in drugs and alcohol and are unsupervised, largely.’*

Colin (DA) reported *‘I don’t see kids playing like that, nowadays,’* when describing football games at a local recreation ground in his childhood. *‘I think they spend the majority of their time indoors, in their rooms.’* He expressed the view that *‘You felt safer in those days, than what there is today.’* However, Mike (HHS) saw a division: *‘a lot of lads will go and play football’* and *‘the girls will spend an awful lot of time in their rooms.’* Flora (HHS) had observed young people *‘hanging around outside MacDonalds’* and Amber (HHS) also mentioned the significance of McDonald’s in the lives of some young people as well as *‘gaming’* which is popular. These comments highlight mixed

perceptions of the lives of young people outside of school. Some views can be seen as assumptions - that young people spend time alone in their rooms or engage in harmful activities – which may be the case for only a minority.

6.6. The Benefits and Challenges of School for Adolescents as Perceived by Adults

The key benefits and challenges of school for adolescents, as reported by the adults, are presented in Table 7 below, with some direct quotes from adult participants and summaries of the key themes which emerged from the data analysis.

	BENEFITS	CHALLENGES
IN SCHOOL	<i>‘On the whole, children enjoy the school experience’</i> Amber Some students <i>‘see the longer-term benefits of taking their place in society’</i> Mary <i>‘Young people are very proud to be at the school’</i> Alice	Constraints of the Education System Gap in values between school and young people Performative agenda Transitions From primary to secondary school Transition from childhood to adolescence
	School Support Systems Special support centres PSHE lessons in resilience support young people Good safeguarding team Shield group for LGBTQ+ students <i>‘I think school is quite good at promoting access – they want children to be supported’</i> Mike	Burden of Adult Expectations and Exam Pressure Unrealistic expectations arising from assessment Pressure from staff Focus on exams detrimental <i>‘Their lives are taken control of’</i> Flora <i>‘A lot of kids struggle with knowing what they want. It’s a huge thing for them to be deciding re GCSEs’</i> Flora
	Opportunities for Student Voice and Participation Formal channels - Student Voice box, Google surveys, House Parliament, Service Areas, working with Governors, Student Panel School Council, Diversity Group, LGBTQ+ Society	<i>‘Students probably don’t feel they are listened to’</i> Alice School Council <i>‘that only gets the voices of the students who are willing to participate’</i> Alice
	Student and Adult Engagement in School Positive relationships between staff and students Young people know that staff care about them	Impact of the Peer Group Complexities of relationships, <i>‘pecking order’</i> Pat Struggle with friendships <i>‘They’re all so desperate to be part of their social group’</i> Mike They make <i>‘bad choices’</i> from <i>‘a desire to conform, or fit in, to be somebody’</i> Mary <i>‘They’ve got to navigate all these relationships’</i> Mary
		Limitation of School Facilities and Space Lack of a sports hall, old mobile classrooms, 60-year-old building (DA)
BOTH IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL	Personal Development Young people know their rights and are self-aware regarding mental health	Mental Health Needs Increase in students self-harming High rates of suicide amongst teenagers <i>‘It’s a very tricky time. Your body is changing, and your hormones are running riot’</i> Flora
	Social Media Influence <i>‘We are, I think, very good at tackling it at the source’</i> Mike	Social Media Influence Cyber bullying Internet safety - pressure to conform Unsuitable role models, exposure to inappropriate content
OUT OF SCHOOL	<i>‘They have active lives’</i> Flora	Economic Variation in Households Mix of wealth and deprivation
		Domestic Issues Abuse, drug and alcohol problems, Young Carers <i>‘Some students’ ‘home lives are chaotic’</i> Flora
		Safeguarding Concerns Criminal exploitation as in ‘county lines’
		Lack of Local Amenities No shop, no post office, nowhere to meet (DA)
SOCIETAL VIEW		Undervalued by society <i>‘Keen for them all to perform, to fit in nicely’</i> Mary <i>‘Society labels them. Society thinks teenagers are wasters that don’t contribute’</i> Mike

Table 7: Benefits and Challenges for Adolescents Inside and Outside of School as Reported by Adults

The adults reported that most young people enjoy their school experience. Alice (FA) suggested that *'young people are very proud to be at the school'* and it was recognised that some students are aware of *'the longer-term benefits of taking their place in society'* (Mary HHS). The schools were perceived as offering appropriate support to individuals when needed *'I think school is quite good at promoting access – they want children to be supported'* (Mike HHS). Other staff listed the range of formal channels for student voice which contrasted with the negative perspectives of the adolescents. This gap is discussed in the next chapter.

6.6.1. Student and Adult Engagement in School

The significance of student and adult engagement has been examined in Chapter Two and refers to the relationship with student voice (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006; Fielding and Moss, 2011). The data showed that young people appreciated the positive relationships they experienced with some staff. Overall, the adults expressed a strong belief in the positive relationships between staff and young people and viewed this as one of the key benefits for adolescents in school. Alan (DA) recounted a story of a boy whose Mum had died. This young person, who had told staff he didn't like school, returned to the school for support, even though he had left the school. This was perceived as an indication that the school could meet the needs of an individual. *'The place where he felt safest and where he knew people would listen to him and take an interest in him, and he came to school'* (Alan DA). Amber (HHS) similarly described the positive relationships that can exist between students and adults in school, with particular reference to how well teachers know their students: *'Knowing our students inside out, knowing what they need, what they care about and being sensitive to that.'* Pat (DA) suggested that young people *'know that everyone that works in education cares,'* and young people *'cope with the pressures of High School but only with quite a good support network around them.'* She felt that *'this school is pretty good for listening to students'* and that they *'feel heard.'* She pointed out that whether young people feel heard *'depends on which group of students you ask. Whether they feel listened to, or not.'* And went on to say that *'if they haven't passed it on, cos they don't feel anyone is ever going to do anything, then they probably feel they are not being listened to.'* She emphasised that all students, whatever their ability or interests, are given the opportunity to have their voice heard. Alan (DA) talked about a boy who had been excluded from a different school. DA accepted him and *'he's in every day, every day'* said Alan, with emphasis. Most of the adults articulated their belief that school offered the right support for students.

6.7. School Support Systems

The role of school support systems emerged as a key theme for the adult participants who described the resources available to students. Referring to the accessibility of support, Mary (HHS) described the *'messaging'* that the school promotes through assemblies and *'posters on all doors and in tutor*

rooms.’ Colin (DA) pointed out that young people ‘*should be aware that they can speak to a member of staff and that it would be in confidence as well.*’ Some of the adults reinforced the effectiveness of the initiatives set up in their schools. The significance of a teacher’s role was articulated: ‘*We are more often than not, the most consistent feature in a child’s life*’ (Alan DA) and ‘*we have a massive influence over them.*’ This influence was illustrated by the positive aspects of the school perceived by the adults: the targeted support given to young people through the school’s support centre; the informal positive relationships between students and teachers throughout the school; and the many and varied opportunities for young people to be consulted, which were interpreted by the school as meeting the need for the ‘student voice.’ Flora (HHS) listed the resources which could offer support to students: form tutors, year tutors, Heads of House, Pastoral Team (five team members), three counsellors, and Learning Support Assistants. The Pastoral Team signpost other resources for young people if they cannot offer appropriate help and Mary (HHS) spoke about the ‘*student leadership team*’ of young people who could be contacted for help with minor issues.

Regarding targeted help provided for young people in the school’s support unit, Ann (DA) said, ‘*we do offer a huge amount.*’ This view was echoed by Colin (DA) : ‘*the school bends over backwards to help and support them*’ pointing out that ‘*we’ve got a good safe-guarding team.*’ Ann suggested that ‘*the teenagers here have a really good relationship with support staff*’ and that young people can cope with pressure at school ‘*but only with quite a good support network around them.*’ The efforts of the support staff meant that: ‘*We usually help those students out. And hopefully get to what they actually do feel.*’ However, she was realistic: ‘*It’s not perfect. And sometimes it doesn’t work.*’ The support hub at DA is managed by two female staff members and is housed in a separate building, in the centre of a quadrangle in the heart of the school building. It was seen as an appropriate and successful resource for helping young people. Ann talked about a Social Skills group ‘*which one of our Assistants runs, twice a week, and that’s very good.*’ The aim was to support those students who were ‘*slightly intimidated to speak in front of their peers, but are more likely to do it, and do it with a group.*’ The group was described as ‘*very beneficial*’ to some young people because ‘*you know they can feel as though they’re part of something that’s important, not just sat in a form-group and no-one’s taking any notice of them.*’ ‘*The kids are very happy there*’ remarked Alan (DA). It is important to acknowledge that these responses are from the viewpoint of the adults, not the young people, and a different response was received from some of the students which is discussed in the next chapter. However, Alan (DA) pointed out that in a recent Ofsted inspection the school was told that ‘*the children spoke very highly of* (names the support service).’ He added: ‘*They know someone will listen*’ and said that the staff in the centre are known as ‘*school Mums.*’

6.8. Adult Suggestions for School Changes to Meet the Needs of Adolescents

Following on from the limitations of school as seen by the adults this section looks at some of their suggestions and recommendations for what more schools could do to meet the needs of young people. When asked if there was anything more that the school could offer, Pat (DA) felt that *'there's thousands more that we can do. We don't even scratch the surface of what I would love, what we could do.'* She went on to describe the limitations – time, capacity, and funding. By capacity she was referring to the number of staff needed. *'Every teenager...have some sort of mentor that they could go to, would be brilliant.'* Pat also wanted more staff so that the school could *'develop leadership and galvanise them into opportunities.'* These opportunities she described as visits outside of school and working with different people. There was a keen sense of frustration apparent when she talked about *'there's so much, we can't even do an element of what we would like to do.'* Explaining why she felt the school needed more staff, she went on to say that the role of teachers has changed over the past two decades: *'we have now got to be Social Workers, we've got to be Police, we have to do, put all sorts of care....'* This was echoed by Mary (HHS) who described the various roles that teachers have to fulfil in addition to their teaching role. There was evident concern about the lack of resources in place to enable the staff to fulfil these functions which Pat (DA) saw as essential to the young people and the school.

Alice (FA) saw the need for more extra-curricular activities with longer lunchtimes for young people to socialise. Her feeling was that more relaxation for young people could lead to better academic outcomes and suggested that Year 11 students would benefit from somewhere to relax – a 'common room' – treating them like young adults. This need was cited by Flora (HHS) as important for the health of young people. She advocated more activities for disengaged students in arts, music, and sport. Like Alice she wanted to offer informal sessions for students in a *'relaxed conversational space.'* She said: *'Kind of sometime just getting to know them over like a hot chocolate or something, just sitting and having these conversations.'* One suggestion from Flora was to offer *'Wellbeing Days'* and *'dedicated'* pastoral sessions with tutor groups as part of the mental health provision in the school curriculum.

Alan (DA) again focussed on the current English education system and described the limited funding for initiatives which could *'make the kids' lives easier'* and went on to say *'the reality is the occasions for doing these things are impossible'* pointing to time as a significant factor. He believed that more could be done *'in terms of, you know, mental well-being, in supporting children.'* He described how in 2019 a substantial number (15-20) of students at DA could not sit their exams due to anxiety. These were *'medically diagnosed conditions'* which prevented the young people from entering the exam hall

to sit their exams. Another limitation of the school as acknowledged by Alan, was that *‘we only have them for seven and a half hours a day.’* He pointed out some of the challenges for the school in terms of supporting young people. *‘If we then started to introduce other bits and pieces, in terms of support in their emotional well-being, to a greater extent we already do, is to sacrifice learning time.’*

6.9 Summary of Key Findings

The key findings detailed in this section relate to the research questions outlined in Chapter One and to the major patterns of converging and diverging adult views which arose from the data and which were interpreted and thematically analysed for meaning. The aim of interviewing adults was to hear their personal perceptions of adolescents and their experiences in school and to examine their understanding of the concept of school voice and how they position this within their schools.

There was an expectation that the adults might have a limited view of young peoples’ lives outside of school or that they would be more aware of the experiences of those young people who stood out, either academically or due to adverse circumstances in their lives. However, the adults’ narratives showed a wide range of understanding of what young people can experience, both in school and in society. I expected some reticence regarding criticism of the education service, but one senior manager, Alan (DA) articulated his views of the performative agenda in schools, suggesting that there is no room for caring aspects of the teaching role. He demonstrated compassion towards the needs of some individual students, those with challenges at home, could be seen as conflicting with his managerial role within the school and his position of authority. Through their responses the adult participants expressed knowledge and understanding of the young people in their care, with a range of perceptions about young people and how to meet their needs within schools. This diversity of perception amongst the individual adult staff could be due to differing background experiences – family, education, employment.

There was a strong sense that the adults work hard to help young people, despite the challenges they face, some of which are out of their personal control. Two managers, Alan (DA) and Mary (HHS) demonstrated that they aim to put into practice their personal beliefs and educational philosophies about young people, against a tide of unrealistic targets. Both these individuals, who were the gatekeepers for two of the schools in this research, appeared to have the interests of all young people at the centre of what they do – and demonstrated by their actions that they worked beyond the requirements of their roles. They were both person-centred in their approach and attitude and contributed a great deal to this research process.

One interpretation of the adults' views is that some students seem to inhabit a space that is unfamiliar to those adults who have stable and successful educational and home backgrounds. However, some staff members had experienced challenges in their earlier lives and these individuals demonstrated an empathic approach to students. The significance of this is that adults make constant judgements about young people and could underestimate the challenges that some students face. Those staff who empathise with young people are in a strong position to offer support. Adults can position young people as dependent on social media, however young people reported a wide range of activities undertaken outside of school, and people that they interact with, face-to-face. Alan suggested that the school has a significant role in the life of a young person as a '*consistent and massive influence.*'

When Ann spoke of young people '*hanging about*' in the community, it was a reminder that there is currently a lack of resources, such as youth clubs, for this age group. This absence has been seen as a major cause of the formation of gang culture, particularly in urban environments (Brenner 2022). Reinstating such amenities for adolescents in their communities might go some way toward ensuring positive social relationships. One young person who said they attended a youth club reported that '*it's just kind of a nice space to relax and to talk to other people*' (Fiona HHS) illustrating the significant impact such a resource can offer. Another key area to be considered, as mentioned by Mary, is the issue of communication. She suggested '*I think the key to the sort of happy, successful teenager is communication between parent and child.*'

The adults' stance on the schools' response to student voice was mostly enthusiastic and positive. Relationships between students and adults were perceived as positive and '*the school is pretty good at listening to students*' (Pat DA). Schools were described as places of safety with good safeguarding teams. However, the question about what more could be done, prompted expressions of frustration regarding the role of staff. The adults listed their perceived limitations of what school could offer students with an emphasis on the lack of certain essential resources, such as funding and increased workforce, which compromises their ambitions for young people. The importance of student mental health was seen as an area with limited support. In contrast to Pat, above, Mary admitted that staff may not listen to young people enough and could '*probably do with sitting them all down and going, how do you want us to communicate? Because we haven't, we've just assumed...*' This highlights an important discourse around the assumptions made by some adults.

School staff acknowledged that young people have widely different experiences, aligning with the spectrum of views from the young people seen in the previous chapter: Molly's '*hell*' to Terri's more positive outlook. Adults spoke of the range of home backgrounds of young people in their schools:

from single parents to newly merged families and reported that some students bring difficult issues from home into school which require support and understanding from staff. Differences in income amongst families was apparent, with a geographical divide between a wealthier population on one side of a major road near the school and more deprived rural villages on the other side (Pat, Principal, DA).

It was reported that there can be expectations from parents and students, that staff assume the role of social worker (Mary) or police (Pat) when trying to unravel the complex difficulties that some young people bring into school and which their families have to face. These roles are taken on by some staff, in the desire to meet the needs of their students, but it was felt that this can lead to unrealistic societal expectations leading to greater pressure on staff.

As has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, the adults' responses to the interview were keen and positive. They framed the schools' responses as aware of students' needs and offering the best to them. It is worth considering here whether this could be a result of a 'culture of positivity' which is part of the ethos of the academisation system. However, there also emerged a picture of frustrated staff who could see the limitations in what they were able to offer to students.

Key findings from this research inquiry into the perceptions of adults can be summarised as follows:

- School is a positive experience for the majority of young people
- School support systems help young people
- Formal channels of communication set up by the schools offered young people the opportunities of expressing their views and being consulted as part of the student voice agenda
- The current education system (pre-2024)⁷ puts pressure on young people through the performative agenda (exams and targets)
- Transition from primary to secondary education can be problematic for some young people
- The peer group is a highly significant factor in the lives of young people – more problematic than beneficial as perceived by the adults
- Young people experience challenges due to their physical and emotional development
- Social media is a concern – the inherent dangers put young people at risk

⁷ Since this thesis was written a new Labour government has replaced a Conservative government

- Home background is influential – either positively in a supportive way or detrimentally due to domestic issues
- Society undervalues young people leading to labelling, discrimination and stereotyping

These statements are summaries of reporting by the adult participants. The next chapter examines the divergences and convergences between the young people and the adults regarding perceptions of life as an adolescent in a secondary school and discusses the implications of the findings.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Converging and Diverging Views of Adolescents and Adults

7.1. Introduction

The previous two chapters have introduced the reader to the individual adolescent and adult research participants and reported on the findings from the data received, with reference to research questions (see Chapter One). It draws together the key themes that emerged during the analysis process and highlights the main divergences between the two groups of participants which became apparent through the data. The responses of the adolescents and adults were analysed and interpreted to assess whether differences of perceptions between the two groups could have implications for adolescents in school. The rationale for highlighting the divergent views is that this could reveal a significant gap in education policy and practice.

7.2. Convergences – Key Areas in which Adolescents and Adults Agreed

Things are difficult, it's just because we're teenagers and that (Molly, Y 9 DA)

I don't think their teenage years are particularly happy sometimes (Ann, Assistant SENDCo, DA)

There was some expectation, from this researcher, that the two groups would disagree on many aspects of school life. However, there was agreement on both the benefits and the challenges of being an adolescent in a secondary school. The quotes above illustrate a key area, the challenges, on which both adolescent and adult agreed. The list presented below highlights common themes which emerged from the data regarding the experiences of adolescents in school.

The Experience of Adolescence:

- In 'limbo' – not a child, not an adult
- Personal development – child to adolescent
- Need for independence

In School:

- School transitions – primary to secondary education
- Pressure from peer group – needing to fit in
- Positive school experiences
- Expectations from adults
- Responsibility
- Pressure of exams
- Frustration with school rules

- Importance of student and adult engagement
- Limitations of career choices
- Limitations of school facilities

Outside of School

- Family issues
- Social media
- Negative societal attitudes

These key themes are discussed in more detail in the separate sections below.

7.2.1. The Experience of Adolescence

Young people and adults reported that school can be a positive experience for most students. However, Simon (TA) pointed out that this sits alongside a need for improvements within schools. This was evident from the data received from the young people. However, both young people and adults talked about the uncomfortable state of being an adolescent for some – *‘not a child, not an adult’* (Elizabeth Y9). This was articulated similarly by Rose (Sixth Form): *‘It kind of goes from one end of the scale to the other. Some people treat you like you’re a child still, and then other people treat you like an adult...’* This reflects the developmental changes in adolescence which can lead to *‘some degree of turmoil, anxiety, and stability’* (Hendry and Kloep, 2012, p.13) which was evident from some of the data.

Some adults felt that young people have the maturity, at this stage, to deal with most of the problems they meet, whilst one staff member described the young people as conflicted - wanting their independence whilst reluctant to grow up. Whilst the young people seemed to recognise this conflict, for them it represented a choice between making friends and attending to schoolwork. The contradictions of adult expectations for this age-group were highlighted by both staff and young people which can lead to confusion, which was evident from the data.

7.2.2. In School

The transition from primary to secondary school was acknowledged by both groups as a significant event. The physical size of a secondary school site can be difficult for young people to navigate – this was articulated by some students as a problem when they were trying to make new friendships and keep up with old friends. Students are also trying to fit into a new regime and organisation and can feel *‘overwhelmed’* at times (John Y8 DA). This transition sits alongside developmental transition from a child to an adolescent, reported as challenging by young people and recognised by some adults from their own experience. The earlier onset of puberty may cause *‘fragmentations of adolescent*

transitions’ (Hendry and Kloep, 2012, p.37) leading to confusion for young people, particularly as they move into secondary education.

The emphasis on examinations was reported as challenging by young people who reported that exam preparation starts too early in their secondary school experience. Students in Years 7 and 8 are encouraged to contemplate subject options for GCSEs which becomes a distraction and a source of stress. A few staff articulated this challenge as one result of a competitive education system with schools described as ‘*exam factories*’ (Alan DA). However, the need for achievement was acknowledged by Sarah (Year 9 DA), ‘*we need to be more responsible, and more like, we need to think about what we’re doing.*’ Many of the young people were motivated to do well at school, often for their parents, which became an extra pressure. It appears that the current education system with an emphasis on academic achievement, can lead to increased stress for young people at a time when they can be pre-occupied with intense personal and physical developmental changes.

Peer-group relationships were a significant concern for both groups. The link between peer relationships and school engagement can have an impact: ‘*negative experiences with peers are associated with lowered achievement and academic motivation*’ (Li et al, 2011, p.331). However, the peer group can play both a positive and negative role in school engagement (ibid). The behaviour of the peer group could be frustrating for students especially if those individuals were seen as breaking the school rules. Georgina (Y8, DA) said she felt ‘*judged*’ by her peer group and a staff member (Pat, Principal, DA) pointed to the ‘*pecking order*’ that exists among the different age groups. Conforming to the attitudes and behaviours of those groups of young people at the top of the pecking order, was experienced as a continuous struggle. The young people talked about the challenge of finding their place in the social order, of trying to ‘fit in.’ Andrew (Y8, DA) pointed out that once he moved into Year 8, he realised that as an older student he was now able to wield power over those in the year below him. Some adults acknowledged these challenges whilst pointing out that ‘*the students here are very supportive of each other*’ (Ann, DA) which was echoed by John (Y11 HHS) ‘*they’re very good at like helping with the stress, anxieties and stuff.*’

There was some ambivalence from adults regarding student voice. Some teachers acknowledged that young people ‘*don’t feel listened to*’ (Amber, HHS) and are ‘*not heard*’ (Simon, TA). Other staff felt that their school clearly took account of the student voice agenda and gave young people opportunities to be heard through a wide variety of resources and initiatives. When asked if young people are aware of such channels of communication, Mary (HHS) agreed that some students might not know about them and consequently would not feel listened to by the school. She went on to say that young people do not have enough ‘*agency*’ and believes that they can therefore feel disempowered. Lily (Sixth

Form, HHS) summed this up as *'I think there needs to be more awareness, that, like, within the school system, like what the teachers need to do.'*

The constraints of the school system came under scrutiny from both groups. The students talked about the challenge of school rules and regulations some of which they perceived as unfair and inflexible. One adult (Alan, DA) suggested that *'the system is not evolving at the same rate as society.'* Another limitation reported was the poor physical condition of the school buildings and grounds at Dryden Academy and the lack of proper facilities for non-academic learning, particularly sports activities. The school does not have a gymnasium and was built in the 1960s (as was Harris High School) and both adults and students decried the poor state of the sports facilities: *'I feel like we should be around like a clean environment and I don't think I really like to look at rubbish on the field and we need to do something about it'* and *'During lunchtime, have better, like, facilities, like new goals, like the goals are ripped and everything'* (Fred Sixth Form HHS). There was limited agreement regarding the schools' response to meeting the emotional needs of young people. Older students, in Sixth Form tended to feel that the school support initiatives for mental health needs were insufficient and the adults agreed that more could be done in the way of funding to appoint mentors for individual face-to-face work with students.

7.2.3. Outside of School

Family dynamics were highlighted by adolescents and adults as impacting significantly on school life and for some students was problematic. Adults referred to *'a lot of split families'*, economic difficulties and drug-related issues: *'All sorts of horrendous stories that our children carry around all day'* (Pat DA). One student spoke of an expectation that he deals with daily chores at home. *'Confusing'* was how one young girl described her family, with seven siblings most of whom she had never met, and an absent father. Most young people reported positive relationships with their family: *'if I ask them for help and advice, they're always like, there for me.'* One girl described the support she received from home as helping her to *'progress.'*

The social lives of young people are often conducted through social media which was highlighted by adults who were concerned with detrimental effects. One student reported he spends about three hours a day talking to friends on his mobile phone. He then asked, *'Is that a lot? I suppose it is.'* A Sixth Form girl talked about rationing her phone use and acknowledged that overuse of social media can distract from schoolwork. Mixed messaging on social media, about unrealistic possibilities for young people, was a concern for adults who perceived the use of social media as creating feelings of

inadequacy. One girl described an incident when a presumed friend spread false information through social media to the peer group. Although schools have safety measures in place, with mobile phones banned from use in some schools, one adult reported: *‘they just go into the toilets to use them – no-one is naïve enough to think that they don’t’* (Ann DA). The testimony from adult participants aligns with findings that increased social media use by young people exerts additional pressure, with a negative impact on wellbeing (Guimetti and Kowalski, 2022).

7.3. Divergences – Different Perceptions of Adolescents and Adults

One unexpected view that emerged when interviewing adults at Dryden Academy was that adolescents might not report what they really thought. *‘They’d probably tell you they don’t like school that much. I mean they might have sat and told you something completely different. I mean there’s always those who say, ‘they never listen, they don’t care’*” (Ann DA). The reality was different: the young people voiced a range of opinions about their experience of school. Whilst some students were critical of the school system, they gave examples of their individual experiences and offered pragmatic solutions. They praised adults in school as well as expressing the pleasure they gained from different subject areas.

In two complementary and significant areas, student voice and student support, the data revealed a mismatch between the adults’ perception of the provision available, and the reporting from students. The key areas of difference which emerged from the reporting of young people and adults, are presented in Table 8, and discussed in further detail below.

Diverging Views	
Adolescent Reporting	Adult Reporting
Student voice Not being listened to by staff Lack of consultation Student and Adult engagement Fair and equal treatment needed Unrealistic expectations School Support Limited support – lack of understanding of mental health issues Tokenistic provision for wellbeing Identity Need to be treated as an individual Feeling judged by friends and staff Peer Group Relationships Centrality of friendships Social Media Significance of social media Future Future-orientated with hopes and ambitions	School staff listen to students A wide range of school consultation initiatives Students know that teachers care Good support services available Can be self-centred and inarticulate Pressures of peer group relationships Dangers of social media and the internet Young people often live in the moment

Table 8: Diverging Views of Adolescents and Adults regarding Adolescents in School

7.3.1. Student Voice

This key theme revealed a gap in perception between the two groups. Whilst the adults reported that their schools listen to adolescents' voices some students reported otherwise, acknowledged by Amber (HHS): *'there are young people who don't feel listened to.'* She referred to students who *'struggle to*

get through the day’ suggesting that those who need support may feel that their voices do not matter. The important concept of student voice as a resource for all students, was articulated by some adults in terms of formal channels of communication set up by the school rather than resources for individual students to be heard. *‘Student voice can be a key feature of an engaging classroom environment’* (Connor et al, 2024, introduction). This concept, of student voice as a tool for class teaching, was not apparent in the responses from the participants. It emerged through the data that the adults demonstrated differing perceptions of student voice and even those working in the same school had different interpretations: some seeing it as a participatory activity (School Council), others seeing the value of collaboration. The various definitions of student voice can be confusing (Conner, 2022). Mike (HHS) suggested that *‘the school prides itself on giving the children a chance to have a voice and therefore listening’* which was in contrast with the view of his colleague Amber (HHS) (see paragraph above). Most of the adults seemed to suggest that the formal range of communication channels within school fulfilled the student voice agenda. Simon (TA) listed a School Council, a Diversity Council, and a LGBT+ Society as opportunities for young people to be heard by adults. These specific resources may not include the voices of all adolescents.

One example given of an opportunity for student voice at Dryden Academy was through the staff recruitment process, in which young people can take part. *‘If we interview for staff, we have a Student Panel, always and their opinion is taken’* (Pat, DA). This activity may not capture a range of adolescent voices – particularly those young people who may lack confidence. It was reported that the school offered a range of opportunities for young people to contribute their views on important aspects of school organisation. This aligns with the view that student voice can be more of a benefit to the institution than the individual (Conner, 2022). The range of views sought by DA from students involved practical decisions such as: where to site the drinks machine, which charities the school should support, and other school improvements. One adult reported that students *‘regularly’* stop her in the corridor to talk about their concerns. *‘They are very, very open about the provision they get’* (Pat DA). A student at HHS however, described the conditions inherent in suggesting innovative ideas to school staff: *‘If it was for something to change, they would listen, but I would have to do it for myself. Like if I say I think a charity day would be good, they will probably agree, but I would have to do all the organisation myself’* (Pat Sixth Form). This attitude could deter some young people from making suggestions.

Alan (DA) reported that *‘Yeh, we do a lot of consultation with students’* but added that he believed *‘they’ve got to buy into what you are trying to do in the classroom’* and so he felt the best way is *‘to let them feel like they were consulted.’* He expanded on this: *‘And that’s the sort of approach we try to*

go with more...with the idea being that the kids take ownership for a fair proportion of what happens, in and around the building...although they are not at the final decision...making them buy-in and achieve well.'

One interpretation of this quote could be that the consultation fits the school organisation. Mary (HHS) listed the opportunities available for students' voices to be heard but acknowledged it was possible some students were unaware of such provision. Simon (TA) gave a list of areas which he considered were meeting the need for student voice and said, *'I think we're quite good at being able to give them sort of pupil voice.'* The use of the words *'sort of'* could suggest that the school had a limited view of the role of student voice and its benefit to students offering a tokenistic response. The importance of the definition of student voice has been discussed in previous chapters, with the conclusion that there is much confusion amongst practitioners and those who stress its importance. Without a clear definition of what student voice can offer to adolescents, which was apparent from the data, it could remain a misunderstood concept within schools.

7.3.2. Student and Adult Engagement

The engagement between students and adults is a key element which can influence and impact on student voice in schools (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006; Fielding and Moss, 2011). However, a positive relationship between students and adults is also important for different reasons since it impacts on learning and the experience of school (Conner, 2022). The data showed that this relationship is significant to young people, although one young person did not want to engage with teachers in a personal way. John (Y8 DA) said he found it hard to *'talk to teachers about stuff'*. He described difficulties in his home situation but said he didn't want to tell anyone because *'it makes people sorry...and it makes me have pressure on myself.'* Mike (HHS) highlighted the success of the support offered to young people: *'A lot of this is down to them building a trusting relationship with me'* acknowledging the importance of the student and adult relationship. There was some difference in how young people perceived the adults' attitudes towards them. One student felt she was criticised by adults *'on all sides'* (Elizabeth DA) and others talked about being misunderstood. The adults, however, reported positive relationships between staff and students, and demonstrated supportive attitudes towards adolescents. They described the good nature of young people: their humour, the ways in which they could be treated as equals, and their positive energy.

A major area of concern for young people was fair treatment from adults. Some students felt that they were treated unfairly by teachers and they gave examples of this: schoolwork not being marked, a lack

of feedback about their work, and favouritism by teachers. This mattered to Andrew (Y8 DA) who felt that his work was not valued, and Georgina (Y8 DA) said, *'I prefer my work to be marked and judged'*. She went on to explain that she needs feedback about her work from teachers because: *'Feedback and marking are really helpful, then you can learn what you did wrong then get it right the next time.'* Another practice that came in for criticism was the provision of computers which are available at DA at the end of the school day for homework. One interview group felt that it was a privilege afforded to certain students and therefore a measure of favouritism by some staff.

7.3.3. School Support

One of the biggest areas of divergence between the staff and the students, was on the matter of how a school supports students. An interview question about how the school supports the young people drew a consensus amongst the staff that the schools offer the young people a great deal of support through both a support hub (DA) and a range of initiatives for student participation. One school (TA) provided support workers for help with mental health and wellbeing issues and, through the PSHE (Personal, Social, and Health Education) curriculum, there were lessons on resilience (Simon TA). Adults reported that young people could talk about personal issues with individual staff members. *'We, as a school, take quite an emotional route to things'* and *'try to talk to them about emotions'* (Flora HHS). Form tutors, year tutors, heads of house, a pastoral team, a counsellor, and learning support assistants, were all available for supporting students at HHS. The pastoral team consisted of five pastoral workers who had been appointed to *'trial a whole new way of looking at things from a pastoral point of view'* (Mike HHS).

The support service at DA was reported by one young person as offering both a place of sanctuary and a place of sanction which could be confusing to students and could prevent them using the service. When describing the support centre within the school, Elizabeth (Y9 DA) said: *'That's also the place where a lot of people go, to get told off, to get punished. So, when you feel like you want to go there to talk, you feel like you are being punished'* and *'the atmosphere is just horrible.'* She reported that there was no privacy and voices could be heard from outside of the room, which could conflict with the need for confidentiality. One adult suggested that *'they can come and talk to so many people'* (Mike HHS). It also emerged from the data that students were not always aware of how to access the support available. Some adults felt it was quite clear and that all students were aware that they could speak to anyone on the staff (Colin DA).

7.3.4. Identity

Identity was a critical issue for students who articulated the need to be treated as an individual. Some adults appeared to judge adolescents as a homogenous group, rather than as individuals. One response from an adult was that adolescents can be self-centred and live in the moment, rather than considering

future events and consequences. However, some adolescents demonstrated an ability to look forward and described personal visions for the future. Another adult view which was not borne out through the data from young people, was that they cannot express themselves regarding how it feels to be an adolescent: *'They can't articulate it, not able to be objective'* (Pat DA). However, it became apparent that most students could articulate their views clearly and were able to be objective. One example was the testimony of Molly (Y9 DA) who reported that her adolescence was *'hell'* while other young people described vividly the challenges they faced, often with perceptive understanding. Students demonstrated an awareness of challenges but it was clear they had not yet found a way of resolving them. The Sixth Form students were aware of the pressures they faced but were unsure how to get appropriate support. The provision for student support was dismissed by some students as inappropriate and inadequate.

7.3.5. Peer Group Relationships

Adults referred to peer pressure and the difficulties faced by young people in navigating the complexities of relationships. The adults spoke less about the positive nature of friendships in the way that the young people had, although it was acknowledged that adolescents receive support from each other. This was a key theme for most adolescents, who talked about their friendships changing and evolving after transition to secondary school. During the early years at secondary school, old friends from primary school were often discarded, with new friendship groups being formed. Andrew (Y8 DA) described them as *'new alliances.'* Closer relationships were formed as the young people got older and by Year 9, one girls' group reported that they felt they could now trust the people around them. Trust was a key issue, central to being part of the community of a school. Young people reported that they couldn't always trust their peers; they were confused about loyalties and said that they wanted to be part of supportive and stable friendship groups. Sarah (Y9 DA) described *'The popular group, the dodgy group, they go round and just say what they think. And they'll just put you down. It's not very nice.'* This view was echoed by the others in the same interview group. Most young people, however, felt that friendships in secondary school were better than those in primary school. At the same time, it was clear that there could be friction: *'girls can be horrible'* stated a Year 9 girl.

7.3.6. Social Media

The young people and adults agreed on the significance of social media as described in the previous section, but in other ways the issue was viewed differently by the two groups. Adults tended to focus on the inherent dangers, whilst for young people they see it as a central part of their daily social lives. Staff suggested that schools need to do more work on the dangers of social media, the internet, and cyber-bullying. The students, however, did not talk about this theme with the same concern, although

some individuals recognised the disproportionate amount of time they spend each day on social media.

7.3.7. Future Visions

Pat (DA) talked about how the young people are desperate '*to get to the next stage.*' However, some young people said they feel pressurised by school to look ahead, even soon after they arrive at secondary school, with some feeling a sense of trepidation for '*the next stage.*' Most adolescents demonstrated that they could look ahead and described their visions for the stage beyond school, either in employment or training. These visions contrasted with what the young people described as a pressure to conform. There was a view that schools prioritise higher education whilst some adolescents wanted an opportunity to take a different route. Regarding examination options John (Y10 HHS) felt that: '*You don't get much choice in the matter*' which was echoed by Diana (Y11 HHS) when suggesting changes: '*staff maybe listen more to what the students want to do instead of GCSE's*'. These approaches to the future demonstrated that individual choice is important to adolescents in school and that they can imagine their own futures but need a range of options.

7.4. Summary

The aim of this chapter was to compare the responses of adolescents and adult staff in secondary schools with reference to key research questions and to examine the commonalities and differences revealed through the emergent data. The divergences were examined to gain an understanding of the potential impact on adolescents in school.

A key difference between the adolescents and the adults was the length of their life experiences. The adults reported, with hindsight, on the formative experience of adolescence and their motivations for working with adolescents in schools. Although the adults could remember their own experiences of adolescence, they view young people through the lens of an adult. However, the findings suggest that the two groups share common perceptions about the experience of adolescence with the adults acknowledging the challenges of physical and emotional development. Two key themes emerged as significant to young people: their individual and personal challenges and school practice, such as fair treatment and equality. School-based issues centred on school rules and support services. Most significantly some adolescents did not feel that their voices were heard.

Student voice and school support were contentious issues: these significant themes produced most divergence. The importance of student voice and taking the views of adolescents seriously, references

a key strand of the conceptual framework. However, the response from adults was mixed and showed a confusion in understanding the concept which could have a negative impact on adolescents. Regarding school support, some students were aware of what they needed in school to feel supported and safe. Not just the physical school environment which they described as limited, but the issue of who to trust. The Sixth Form students, at Harris High School, were clear in their criticism of the resources offered by the school for their wellbeing and gave pragmatic solutions that they felt could meet their needs more adequately. These student visions are presented in Table 3 in Chapter Five. The adults gave lists of school initiatives which were judged as fulfilling the role of student voice but which tended to benefit the institution more than individual students.

There were discrete yet significant differences in what the adolescents and adults reported, illustrated in Table 7 above. The young people reported the challenging experiences in school, some of which were not touched upon by the adults. How adults perceive what matters to young people is significant and has been examined in Chapter Six but is re-examined briefly here. The principal areas of divergence appear to be student individuality, support for mental health, consultation within school and respecting student voice. This latter theme was the most significant of the divergent views. The differences that emerged between the two groups touched on two important aspects of the conceptual framework: student voice and school support. This suggests that some adults in schools differ in their interpretation of student voice. Since the needs of adolescent students are important, the definition and interpretation of student voice needs to be clearer and more consistent. Being heard by adults is of significant importance to young people. Through this research it emerged that some young people still feel overlooked and left out of decisions made by school management. If adult staff are confused about the definition of student voice it may not be prioritised.

Communication between adolescents and adults is a significant element of student voice and was reported by young people as fluctuating from good to indifferent. Some adolescents reported that adults were unavailable to them when needed or gave inappropriate guidance. Other students praised teachers who had gone out of their way to help them and were available when needed. Some adult staff reported on teachers who had had influence on their lives at school, usually in terms of attention and support. Adult participants described their relationships with adolescents as positive and suggested that students know the adults care about them.

Some older adolescents, in Years 11 and Sixth Form, perceived negligent practices by school staff regarding consideration of their mental health. However, adult participants listed a range of initiatives and opportunities within schools for student support and student voice. A few adults voiced their

concern that not all students were being heard. It appears that despite provision set up by schools, some students continue to feel marginalised and are critical of what they perceive as limited and inappropriate support. Some adult participants reflected on their time as adolescents and were critical of the lack of support they had received. Some adults reported firsthand experiences of challenges in their own schools and were determined to redress the balance by providing appropriate support to individual students.

Despite the limitations of school perceived by some young people, it emerged that most adolescents manage and enjoy secondary school. A minority struggle with academic work and socialising, as reported by adults, yet some of those students were able to point to areas of school practice which they consider need to be reformed. Adults suggested that their schools provide a wide range of opportunities for student voices to be heard, most of which appeared to be practical decisions for the benefit of the institution. Mary (HHS) suggested that current school initiatives are not enough: she talked about '*not reaching the students*' which points to the need to re-evaluate the effectiveness of school support and student voice.

A few adolescents spoke of feeling powerless and misunderstood by adults in school. One practical suggestion from a student was for schools to provide a quiet, confidential space for older adolescents where they could spend time with either trusted adults or older peers: a space where they could feel respected, heard, and supported. This suggestion was echoed by a staff member (Amber HHS) who argued that this would have a positive impact on learning.

Both groups, adolescents and adult staff, appeared to be caught up in a flawed system. Whilst there was disagreement over the detail of what young people experience and need in school, there was general agreement that the current school system is not fully meeting the needs of all young people. The limitations of the school system were articulated by the adults in terms of lack of funding and resources. The young people expressed their views regarding what more was needed to meet their needs, in terms of personnel and facilities, as well as treatment as individuals. The constraints of the system, concluded from the responses of both groups, led to limited person-to-person support, and a misunderstanding of student voice. The current school system appears to generalise about students without enough consideration of diversity. This theme was articulated by Sixth Form participants and by the undergraduates who, with hindsight, suggested more options need to be offered to adolescents in school. In the next chapter the significance of these responses from both adolescents and adults is discussed and expanded upon with a view to implications for education policy and practice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Discussion

8.1. Introduction

The previous chapter examined the significant converging and diverging perspectives of the adolescents and the adults which emerged through the data. This chapter discusses key findings which align with the core themes of the conceptual framework described in Chapter Three. The discussion regarding the implications of the findings for the recommendations presented serves as a bridge to the concluding chapter.

The themes below were examined for layers of meaning regarding adolescent experiences in school. The main research questions informed the data collection process, yet during the interviews some young people developed a different, yet relevant, trajectory providing an extra dimension to the data. The process of interviewing appeared to stimulate and allow for more expression from the students than was originally expected and some of them took the opportunity to reveal additional information. It felt important to follow the direction in which the interviews were taken. The interviews provided a distinct experience from the classroom for adolescents to voice their opinions in a safe and formal space which benefitted the young people and demonstrated the significance of student voice.

8.2. The Experience of Adolescence

The key aim of this research was to reach a fresh understanding of the experience of adolescence through student voices. Initially, the complexity of the concept of adolescence was examined through the literature with the outcome that definitions vary widely. Yet some aspects of adolescence seem to be universal: it can be a time of uncertainty and preoccupation with self (Smyth, 2013) when some young people find life challenging (Lohmann, 2015). A significant issue raised by young people was the feeling of limbo: 'not a child, not an adult' (Elizabeth Y9 DA). Yet they demonstrated self-awareness and were able to express the frustrations of their experiences. I observed how young people listened to each other and demonstrated empathic support. On one occasion four girls talked about a challenging experience and shared their feelings, highlighting the value of peer group support (Waldrip et al, 2008) and how central it is to the lives of adolescents.

In addition to descriptions of adolescence as a time of conflict (Hall, 1904; Winnicott, 1965; Smith, 2016) the students spoke about confusion. Confusion resulting from examination pressure and

perceived unrealistic expectations of staff. They commented: 'We're stressed from exams' (Rose, Y9, HHS) and 'stress with homework, deadlines and stuff' (Willow, Y9, HHS). One unexpected finding was the strength of views on identity: 'Finding out like yourself and who you want to become' (Lucy, Sixth Form, HHS) echoing the literature (Erikson, 1968; Smyth, 2013). Adolescence has been seen as a 'struggle to feel real' (Winnicott (1965; p, 122). One adult described how she felt unsupported by her school during her struggle with identity (Amber, HHS – see Chapter Six). The need for support and understanding from staff was a common request which needs to be considered when implementing student voice in schools.

The challenges of adolescence were acknowledged by adults who suggested that young people want independence yet are reluctant to move into adulthood. The personal narratives of adolescence ranged from one perception of it as 'hell' (Molly Y9 DA), to an acknowledgment of the freedom it can bring (Terri Y8 DA). Molly went on to describe 'the shell you've built around you' as if she felt in need of protection (see Chapter Five).

The findings contradicted some of the discourses around adolescence which emerged through the literature. The voice of Terri, above, acknowledged a positive image, rather than the turbulent emotions that have been highlighted by some theorists. The reality appears to be that both characteristics can exist and that individuals experience adolescence differently. Most adolescents reported that their peer group relationships were a central focus of their lives and similarly, the importance of family. This highlights an awareness of the diverse types of relationships. A significant observation, described in an analytical memo, was how well-informed some of the older students were regarding their mental health. This was unexpected – not only were these adolescents aware of what they needed but had pragmatic solutions as to how this could be implemented within school. The suggestions and recommendations of the students were acknowledged and are presented in this thesis.

8.3. Adolescents in School

8.3.1. Transitions

Alongside the biological transition from child to adult (Smith, 2016) adolescents experience a significant transition from primary school to secondary school. The bridge between primary school and secondary school can be challenging for some young people. The key areas that were highlighted as challenging focussed on peer relationships: making new friends, fitting in with a new peer group, and retaining previous friendships. The significance of transition was embedded in the Every Child Matters report (DfES, 2003) recognising the role of schools and other agencies in supporting young

people through this stage. A more recent report focussed on the significance of transition and its links with student wellbeing (The Children Society, 2024) which found a lower overall happiness rating among 10-17-year-olds in Year 7 students as compared to Year 6 students. This startling finding suggests that the transition to secondary school can impact adversely on young peoples' happiness levels. A review of school transition programmes with suggestions from children and young people could inform and possibly reform this significant stage to ease the move for all students.

8.3.2. Challenges in School

Young people reported that they experienced pressure from the current exam-focussed school curriculum, seen as an outcome of the performative agenda of education. Some adolescents talked of additional external pressures in their lives: working part-time to assist the family finances or looking after siblings whilst parents worked. Another unexpected pressure reported was the expectation from schools that students would follow a university course beyond Sixth Form. Some Sixth Formers described their alternative visions beyond school. Some individuals were unsure about what they wanted to do. School staff need to consider whether the university trajectory is the best option for all students and provide a range of creative alternatives.

8.3.3. Peer Group Relationships

A key pressure reported by adolescents was their interaction with the peer group. They talked about feeling judged by, and trying to fit in with, other students. However, they also reported that they received significant support from their friends which was not always forthcoming from the adults around them. Terri (Y8, DA) talked about her two friends, whom she trusted, but who bullied her, demonstrating the complexity of peer relationships which can lead to unexpected consequences. Student testimony suggested that the ambivalent nature of peer relationships can be a challenge whilst also a support. Jimmy (Y10, HHS) spoke about the significant role of his friends: 'My friends are really important to me. They help me get through stuff which I don't think I could do on my own.' Understanding this crucial element in adolescent's lives could help to develop a better relationship between adults and students by considering how to exploit this strong bond, for example the implementation of peer mentoring. The adults reported that schools offer support for peer group relationships through school pastoral support teams. However, some young people reported that this provision was not easily accessible or effective.

One unexpected finding was how boys spoke highly of their friendships which demonstrated that they need friends, which is not always appreciated by adults. This drive could lead, in a worst-case scenario, to a boy joining a local gang, as an alternative friendship group. Since adolescent boys need this closeness of relationship, if they cannot find it through appropriate channels, for example belonging to a youth club or activity group after school, then the temptation could be to find

acceptance through a gang. This is a critical issue that needs further research to gain a better understanding of the needs of young men.

8.4. Student Voice

A key research aim was to examine the role of student voice yet the term ‘student voice’ was not used by adolescents in their responses. It was apparent, however, that there was a need to be heard. Rose (Y11, HHS) shared her concern about quiet students, like herself, who could be overlooked by staff. This was an unexpected yet significant finding. All students deserve to have their voices heard, in whatever form is appropriate for them. Some adolescents demonstrated that they could feel marginalised, whether because they were too quiet (Rose, above) or had different visions for their future (Pat Sixth Form HHS). These individual differences highlight how important it is that school staff respect the voices of all students and make appropriate provision to achieve this.

It was not clear whether initiatives to promote student voice in schools as reported by the adults, were successful. In fact, the opposite seemed to be true since the provision which ranged from a Student Voice Box (HHS) to participation in a staff recruitment panel (DA) were unfamiliar to most of the adolescents in the research. There are two possible explanations: that only a minority of young people participate, or the provision is not sufficiently promoted. One senior manager, Mary (HHS), suggested that staff could listen more closely to adolescents and ‘probably do with sitting them all down and going, how do you want us to communicate? Because we haven’t, we’ve just assumed...’ This was a clear recognition of a significant aspect of student and adult engagement that had not been exploited. The young people requested more formal input such as individual face-to-face counselling and other opportunities for their voices to be heard by school staff (see Table 4 in Chapter Five).

One of the significant findings reported by older adolescents was that the provision they were offered by the school for their mental health was limited and directed them mainly to websites. Diana (Y11, HHS) had this comment to make: *Setting up online, setting up these little tasks that people can choose to do, I don’t think that is very helpful. Why would someone spend several hours in a day to look at these videos that we have information on and we don’t find very useful?*

Her comments show an awareness of the inappropriateness of this particular provision and was echoed in the data by other students. A review of services for the mental health of young people has suggested that the uptake of services correlated positively with their perception of being taken seriously and receiving support from adults (Gilmour et al, 2019). This is significant since it highlights the need for adults to engage fully with adolescents and support them at an early stage. The practice described above by Diana, appears to disregard individual adolescent needs and, it can be

argued, consequently diminishes them (Lesko, 2001; Ecclestone, 2007) by not taking them seriously. Some adolescents are treated with indifference by schools as evidenced by the reports from excluded students (Davies, 2001). Rose (Sixth Form, HHS) articulated the mixed messaging she heard from staff: *'They say 'take time for your mental well-being' whilst also giving you like five different deadlines.'* This is an important observation and suggests that the school failed to consider how the students would receive this. Another example of a diminished attitude towards adolescents.

Lucy (HHS) summed up with this: *'It just goes into one big circle. So, I feel schools need to focus more on students' health.'* The data showed a mismatch between what some adolescents described as limited or inaccessible support, and what the adults perceived as adequate provision (Chapter Seven). A study looking at the impact of school support staff on the mental health of secondary school students found that the development of supportive relationships with non-teaching staff was beneficial (Littlecott et al, 2018). When schools offer a limited or tokenistic response, then their responsibility for student mental health and student voice is compromised. In this instance, adults are guilty of underestimating the damage that this can cause.

As has been evidenced through the data, adolescents are competent enough to formulate sensible and appropriate solutions to important school issues. The Every Child Matters Report (DfES, 2003) acknowledged that service providers need to consult with service users who are in the best position to know what they need. However, whether the schools in this research inquiry consulted regularly with the students was not made clear. One adult, Mary (HHS) suggested that her school was not reaching all students. It could be argued that if the provision for student voice in schools was successful, then the adolescents would not be voicing the concerns that they reported through this, and other, research.

8.5. Student and Adult Engagement

The significance of student and adult engagement has been explained in previous chapters – this area links closely to the success of student voice in schools (Fielding and Moss, 2011) and can impact on the mental health of adolescents. From the data it emerged that it was important to students that they received fair treatment. Some school rules, for example on school uniform, were perceived by adolescents as unfair. One interview group of boys felt that girls were treated unequally by staff giving them more choices regarding uniform regulations. Conversely, the girls said that the uniform rules were more relaxed for boys. Neither group appeared satisfied with school rules regarding uniform. Improved communication between student representatives and staff on this issue could provide a solution with options to suit both the student population and the organisation of the school.

Younger adolescents were critical of some classroom practice, especially if they felt they had worked hard. The marking of schoolwork and feedback from teachers was important for them so that they could be clear about expectations. A government document, referring to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), states that the government ‘recognises children’s rights to expression’ (DfE, 2015, p. 10). Children and young people in the report requested: *‘Respect: to be treated with the expectation that they are competent rather than not’* (ibid, p. 10). This summarises one of the key themes of this research – that young people are competent. Societal attitudes have positioned adolescents as incompetent (Thorne with Saunders, 2013) and therefore diminished.

One important aspect of student and adult engagement is the perception of students: *‘Pupils should believe that the teacher feels positively towards them. The more the teacher is able to see the world from the pupil’s perspective, the more likely the teacher is able to help’* (Gatongi, 2007, pp. 205-11). This view was echoed in the data by Rob (Y11, HHS) who suggested that teachers need to have *‘stronger bonds’* with students. The responses from this research inquiry can inform education practitioners of adolescent student perspectives.

8.5.1. Adult Expectations and Priorities

Some young people reported that school staff expected too much of them. Homework and revision were cited as areas which overloaded both younger adolescents and Sixth Formers. Students reported the pressure from preparation for GCSE examinations and course options were reported as limited to those which fitted the requirements of university, rather than a range of options for alternative futures. *‘You’re being told to take it down a specific route, so you don’t get much choice in the matter’* (John, HHS). Younger adolescents in Years 7 and 8 reported the pressure from an early emphasis on examinations. It was evident that undue pressure was perceived by all age groups resulting from the schools’ attitudes to student futures. Improved collaboration between adults and adolescents could help to ease this situation.

8.6. Adolescents Outside of School

The lives of some adolescents outside school were described as *‘sad’* (Ann, DA), pointing out that some young people *‘hang around the bus stop’*. Colin (DA) presented a negative picture of adolescents – staying in their rooms, not engaging in outdoor activities, as he had done during his own adolescence. However, the adolescents quoted a range of activities and showed awareness of the benefits for their mental health. *‘I like doing active things, like going out with my friends, playing sports, talking with my family, and stuff like that’* Tony (Year 8, DA). Pat (Sixth Form, HHS) was

aware that activity is ‘*a massive push to mental health.*’ This contrasts with the negative picture of an adolescent, alone, with a mobile phone. The use of social media was a concern to adults, however, more than to the young people. These findings gave a fresh image of young people – active, self-aware, and looking after their health.

8.7. Reframing Adolescence

One important finding was that the voices of the adolescents confirm the belief, articulated in Chapter One, that there is an urgent need for a reframing of adolescence lives. Lesko’s work (1996; 2001; 2012) and that of Lesko and Talburt (2012) stimulated an interest in the importance of seeing adolescents as they are, since so much damage has been done by the diminishing of this age group through adult assumptions. The students, however, demonstrated an awareness of the provision needed to meet their individual needs and from that position suggested pragmatic solutions. I considered whether their responses could be as a consequence of recent advances in technology providing a wealth of information. I also reflected on whether the voices of young people had been muted by their school and consequently not usually given any attention. This would mean that being given an opportunity, through the interview, to have their views taken seriously was an unusual experience. I was constantly impressed by the perceptive views expressed by the adolescents, adding further weight to the call for their voices to be heard.

8.7.1. Societal Attitudes Towards Adolescents

We often dismiss the feelings and experiences of the young as ‘what do they know?’ (Thorne, with Saunders, 2013, p. 29)

The quote above encompasses a negative and damaging societal attitude towards adolescents which has been discussed throughout this thesis. The suggestion is that adults do not always listen to young people or pay proper attention to their views considering them as lacking feelings and experience. One consequence of this attitude is that it denies adolescents the respect from adults that they deserve. Society has long stereotyped adolescents in ways that are negative and diminishing (Ecclestone, 2007 and Lesko, 2012) and the ‘*inability to talk and think about youth outside the discourse of ‘adolescent development’*’ (ibid, p.189) is an attitude echoed by an adult Flora (HHS): ‘*People don’t stop to look or don’t have the opportunity to look past the hood up.*’ This attitude of assuming the hoodie-wearing individual is to be feared, rather than considering the individual, creates a barrier between adults and adolescents which needs to be removed. The barrier prevents positive communication. This links to the significance of the student and adult engagement concept and how that, when nurtured, can benefit all adolescents.

When society dismisses adolescents as articulated above (Lesko, 2001; Ecclestone, 2007; Thorne with Saunders, 2013) it can lead to marginalisation. Similarly, if young people are not considered worthy of attention there is a danger that they can become invisible. Which can leave them, in the extreme case, unprotected. The Education Matters report (DfES, 2003) followed on from an inquiry into the death of a young child, Victoria Climbié, who was ignored by agencies who had a duty to protect her (DfES, 2003). It was found that there was a lack of collegiate thinking and practice. One of the main tenets of the Education Matters agenda was that professionals work together across disciplines and services in order to keep children safe. Schools currently have safeguarding policies in place and social workers and teachers work closely together. The most recent version of the government's safeguarding directive was merged with the Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019) which pointed out that: *'Inspectors will always take into account how well learners are helped and protected so they are kept safe'* and that: *'all practitioners should make sure their approach is child-centred'* (ibid, p. 6). The crucial point here, for this research inquiry, is that the current government recognises a child or person-centred approach: *'A child-centred approach means keeping the child in focus when making decisions about their lives and working in partnership with them and their families'* (ibid, p. 9).

Another issue of concern is the lack of adequate and appropriate provision for adolescents in their communities during their leisure time. A lack of community amenities means that some adolescents can be isolated and potentially put at risk. Well-resourced and managed youth clubs and sports facilities can provide safe spaces for young people, to be themselves, to be with trusted and trained adults, and to explore a variety of new experiences. Fiona (Sixth Form, HHS) described her youth club as *'a nice space to relax and talk to other people'*. Youth clubs can offer alternative activities to school and need to be available to all adolescents wherever they live.

8.8. The Covid-19 Pandemic – Impact on Learning and Research

Although I did not intend to research the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic its effect was pervasive and my respondents spontaneously referred to it once data collection resumed. Some adolescents referred to the impact of the pandemic: *'We've missed so much learning in this past year and a bit'* (Tom, Y11, HHS) and *'We missed most of those beginning years'* (Willow, Y9, HHS), but also the relief of meeting up with friends and staff. During this unprecedented event, adolescents were learning online from home. Families were expected to offer some support with schools offering guidance for parents on overseeing students' work. There was a slow build up to a return of normality in institutions. Against a background of uncertainty and anxiety in schools and universities, it took time to pick up the threads of normal life. Revisiting schools meant wearing a face mask for the first few weeks and months and social distancing was adhered to in school buildings. The eighteen-month gap

between interviewing young people in school and revisiting them for further interviews was challenging and fresh solutions had to be devised. Interviewing online was a new experience but the data which emerged was equally rich.

8.9. Summary

It could be concluded from the data received, that adolescents and adult staff in four secondary schools were similarly caught up in the constraints of the current education system. Whilst there was some disagreement over the detail of what young people experienced and needed in school, there was general agreement that the current school system presents challenges and barriers to learning. The limitations of the school system were articulated by the adults in terms of a lack of funding and appropriate resources (such as mentoring and improved sports facilities). However, this may not be the response of other respondents in different schools. The adolescents in this inquiry suggested practical solutions to meet their needs, in terms of additional school staff and improved facilities, as well as asking to be treated as individuals and having their voices heard.

The mental health of adolescents can be linked to academic success, but for some students with different abilities or who lack support and encouragement from outside of school, there needs to be alternative provision for non-academic subjects such as sport, performance and creative arts, and other skill-based subjects. I heard articulate young people reporting vital information about their individual needs. Other students, who did not volunteer for this research, might be feeling similar anxieties about their school lives but lacked the confidence to express themselves within a group. Considering the needs of all young people is a challenge that needs tackling by schools for their academic outcomes and mental health.

The policy of positioning children and adolescents at the centre of education (DfES, 2003) seems to have been lost. There seems to be little progression from earlier decades in terms of acknowledging the rights of children and young people in school, with the data suggesting that some schools have paid scant attention to this key area. There could be many reasons for this omission including the pressures on teachers with substantial amounts of paperwork to complete, full teaching timetables, and unrealistic expectations from society, or funding issues for the provision of extra support staff.

The latter issues were articulated by some of the adult participants who gave their perspectives on the limitations of the current English education system. One adult respondent (Alan, DA) perceived the

current education system as aiming to fit young people into a fixed model, rather than adapting the system to meet the individual needs of all young people. This was evident from the issues reported by adolescents of early examination preparation and limited options for future visions. It appeared that the schools generalised about the needs of adolescents without consideration of the wide diversity of experience of individuals, both at school and outside in the community.

Effective communication between adolescents and adults who work with them is paramount to the success of young people in school. Adults showed that they are aware that school provision could be failing some students and not reaching the whole school population. In one study it was found that both staff and students wanted an improvement in the whole school environment (Kidger et al, 2009) with holistic changes supportive of students' mental health. This research inquiry corroborates that view with recommendations presented in the following Chapter Nine.

Any gap between the perceptions of adolescents and adult staff is of concern since it could mean that not all students are receiving the support they need by not being heard. Whilst some adults suggested that adolescents are not equipped to deal with critical issues, most of the young people in this inquiry demonstrated they could think for themselves and imagine their futures. The young people had some answers to the challenges they say they face and provided constructive and reasonable solutions. They asked for more time from staff, more opportunities to be heard, and to be given the respect they need. The school environment may not be conducive to paying enough attention to the voices of adolescence, however it is the duty of the government to respect the rights of all young people, in the most effective way (United Nations, 1989). But firstly, it needs to be accepted by the government that all young people matter. Young people have for some time been marginalised and treated as bystanders (Mason and Fattore, 2005) without government policy constructed to include and involve them more inclusively.

A person-centred focus and working in partnership with adolescents were key threads in this research inquiry, linking closely to student voice. The data showed that adolescents can think clearly and articulate their needs, whilst being aware of their responsibilities. It emerged that young people were not asking for their school lives to be completely altered, but that some fine tuning, especially regarding student voice and mental health support, could have a significant impact.

The concluding chapter reflects on this research inquiry and presents an argument for its contribution to knowledge with recommendations for future research, education policy and practice.

CHAPTER NINE

Conclusions

9.1. Introduction

The previous chapter discussed key research findings and implications for schools. This concluding chapter is a summation of the research inquiry and offers recommendations for further research and education policy and practice. The potential contribution to knowledge is presented with reflections on the scope and limitations of the inquiry.

The key aim of this qualitative research inquiry was to examine the experiences of adolescents in English secondary schools, as reported by them to gain an updated understanding of how young people perceive their lives inside and outside of school and to consider the significant role of student voice and how it impacts on young people. The inquiry was conducted from a person-centered positioning. The significance of the person-centered approach for education is the focus on *'health, not illness, on capacities rather than limitations* and a belief that it *'empowers and promotes learning, wellbeing and resilience'* (Zucconi, 2016, p.6). With the former quote in mind, it was imperative to consider adolescence in a new light to balance negative and damaging societal attitudes and stereotyping (Lesko, 2001; Ecclestone, 2007; Busso et al, 2022). Negative societal assumptions can lead to the marginalisation of a few young people. If they are not considered worthy of attention there is a danger of them becoming invisible and unprotected. The link between safeguarding and the person-centred approach is illustrated by a government directive which merged with the Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019) and states that: *'Inspectors will always take into account how well learners are helped and protected so they are kept safe'* (ibid, p.6) and that: *'all practitioners should make sure their approach is child-centred'* (ibid, p.6). The crucial point here, for this research inquiry, is that the government recognises that: *A child-centred approach means keeping the child in focus when making decisions about their lives and working in partnership with them and their families'* (ibid, p.9). This demonstrates the strong link between the person or child-centred approach and reframing adolescence so that young people are safe. Reframing adolescence (Youngblade and Theokas 2006; Lesko and Talburt 2012)) was a key aim of the research and was achieved by uncovering fresh and unexpected information from the data. The positive attributes of young people have been highlighted (Finneran et al, 2023) acknowledging that their contribution can be helpful and appropriate. The well-informed and self-aware responses of adolescent participants revealed new insights into what matters to them. Their responses demonstrated the potential of student voice as a balance to what has been described as the suppression of young voices (Hogg et al, 2020).

A recent recommendation to centralise issues regarding children and young people (Children's Society 2022) resulted from findings that showed an increase in the numbers of calls to Childline for support (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2018). It was reported that some children had no-one to talk to about issues in their lives. These findings underpin the rationale for this inquiry – to listen to the voices of young people.

9.2. Reviewing the literature

A selected range of literature, relevant to research aims and linked with the conceptual framework, was examined for an updated understanding of adolescents in school. An exploration of the concept of adolescence since the start of the twentieth century was undertaken which revealed that most theorists considered the physical development of adolescence to be the main characteristic of this age. However, more recent work has widened the concept of adolescence to include duality: vulnerability and adaptation (Busso et al 2022).

The role of student voice was examined to uncover both the potential and challenges. The significance of student voice programmes became apparent and is acknowledged as an essential component of education (Conner et al, 2024). However, a lack of agreement regarding definition and confusion of practitioners led to a call for more research (Conner, 2022) which could mean that schools' interpretations differ. One significant theme which links with the potential and efficacy of student voice is the significance of the relationship between adults and students (Fielding and Moss, 2011). Findings from international studies revealed that the perception of adolescent students across the globe echoed those of the young participants in this inquiry. In one study young people reported the limitations of student voice programmes and said that action from staff was rare (ISC Report, 2023). This generalisation of adolescent perceptions points to the importance of listening to all students.

The person-centred approach (Rogers, 1961) guided this research and has a long history, yet it was apparent that the approach is still relevant to education. The discourse on person-centred education is ongoing (Ang in Wyse et al, 2015; Gray and Woods, 2022) although it tends to be positioned within early years and primary education. Gray and Woods conclude that there is evidence to show that the multi-directional, relational impact of person-centred practice impacts on student and adult relationships. They suggest that positioning students centrally and exploring their positive qualities can encourage young people to be aware of themselves as learners. One aspect relevant to this research is that the basic components of person-centred education include choice and autonomy, aligning with student voice.

The academisation of the English education system has impacted on young people (Hill, 2020). This was evident through the data which illustrated how the performative agenda can add pressure on young people. The person-centred approach, however, has a positive impact on learning (Rogers, 2014). Some adult participants reported their perspectives on the limitations of the current English education system. Alan (DA) suggested that the current education system aims to fit young people into a fixed model, rather than adapting the system to meet individual profiles. This was evident from reports by adolescents of early examination preparation and limited options for future visions. Schools appear to generalise about the needs of adolescents without considering diversity.

9.3. Framing the research

The conceptual framework focussed on adolescents and student voice in schools. Student voice programmes offer opportunities for young people to be taken seriously in accordance with the United Nations (1989) and to be heard. However, some student voice programmes appear tokenistic. The data showed that young people were aware of this limitation: *some people who like, just say that they go to the teachers and like 'Oh we'll do something about that' but nothing really happens* Edward (Y10 HHS). One adult reported: *'you don't have a voice during your teens, and you feel quite oppressed'* (Amy UC). This quote emphasises the seriousness of not listening to young people and the importance of implementing student voice initiatives as efficiently as possible.

The person-centred approach to education underpinned both concepts: adolescence and student voice and was the lens through which I viewed this inquiry. These three areas interlinked continuously throughout the inquiry. It was important to capture young people's perceptions of education as reported by them, rather than an adult version.

9.4. Data Collection

The qualitative research design of this inquiry aligns with the person-centred approach and references researcher knowledge and background (Heath et al, 2009). The intention was to listen to the voices of volunteer students in secondary school and to include those who might not have had their voices heard (Creswell, 2013). The design provided scope for listening to adolescents and adults, since the interviews were semi-structured and the research questions open-ended. Small group interviews worked well with students since they had a chance to hear the views of their peers. The adults were interviewed individually in rooms of their choosing. These design choices provide rich data.

Recruitment of local secondary schools led to a modest sample of four schools, forty-three student participants, and nine adult participants. Three schools were mixed and local and one was single-sex and situated in a separate county, because of casting a wider net due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Ethical guidelines of respect for participants and a duty of care were followed (British Educational Research Association, 2024). Safeguarding was a key consideration and confidentiality, and anonymity were observed.

The interview process became a vehicle for the thoughts and opinions of adolescents. The younger adolescents responded in a direct way to the interview questions, while older adolescents, in Sixth Form, demonstrated an expansion of the issues raised. An example of an insightful response regarding the education system is presented below:

The education system has not changed much since it was created, like it was, to be fair, when it was first a thing it was a lot more kind of practical skills. Which I don't understand why they got rid of them. When you still need practical skills. And you never get, it's like you kind of leave High School and it's like, 'Well, go, live.' (Rosie, Sixth Form, HH)

This powerful statement from a young person demonstrates an awareness of the limitations of the education system.

9.5. Summary of Key Findings – the Adolescents' Responses

The data revealed a complexity of views, and the adolescent participants demonstrated competency and co-operation with the interview process. The responses of the young people were accepted at face value with the aim of demonstrating trust. Treating young people as the experts on their life experiences can lead to a better understanding of their needs (Castro et al, 2017). In response to a general question '*What is it like being an adolescent in school?*' Molly (Y9 DA) said '*hell*' and Terri (Y8 DA) described it as a time of '*freedom*'. Lucy (Sixth Form HHS) articulated: '*you're finding out like yourself and who you are and who you want to become.*' These examples illustrate the individualism of the students and their unique experiences.

Young people reported adolescence as a time of anxiety, brought about in part by the perceived pressure of academic achievement. Peer group relationships were described by the participants as central yet challenging. Unrealistic expectations from adults and being judged by others increased the pressure. On the positive side, some students felt a sense of freedom and independence and talked about the importance of being treated as individuals:

My parents think I have to go and be someone like my dad. He works in a factory, but I don't want to do anything like that, so I want to be more, like, educational, instead of ...I don't want to be like in a shadow, I want to be myself (Andrew Y8 DA)

Some teaching practices were criticised – it was important for students to have their work marked and to be acknowledged as individuals. They perceived unjust treatment from some staff. Inequalities were highlighted – boys suggesting girls were treated differently to them regarding uniform rules. However, girls felt that boys were given unfair advantages. The schools' performative agendas were mentioned in reference to options for university which, it was reported, were promoted over other visions beyond secondary school. Some older adolescents perceived this as a barrier, especially those who wanted to join the world of work, rather than enter higher education. The response from students regarding mental health was unexpected and important since there is a link between mental health and academic success (Reuport, 2019). The students highlighted the tokenistic response from school when they reported the schools' guidance which focussed on the use of websites rather than person-to-person support.

For some students, with different aptitudes or who lack support and encouragement from outside of school, provision for non-academic subjects such as sport, performance and creative arts, and other skill-based subjects is vital. Students who did not volunteer for this research, might experience similar anxieties about their school lives but lacked the confidence to express themselves within a group. Considering the mental health needs of all young people is a challenge for schools.

Some young people reported that the transition between primary school and secondary school was a challenge. A recent report on transition and its links with student wellbeing (The Children Society, 2024) found a lower overall happiness rating among Year 7 students as compared to Year 6 students (those still at primary school). A review of school transition programmes which consider children and adolescent voices could inform and reform this significant stage to ease the move for all students. Some of the key themes which the adolescents perceived as the most challenging experiences of being an adolescent in school were:

- Unrealistic expectations
- Judgement from others
- Responsibility

The young people described an increase in expectations as they got older: *'You are expected to do what other people can do.'* Lucy (Sixth Form HHS). Some students talked about being judged by others, which often meant their peer group, but in some cases referred to adults. *'Some people treat you like you're a child still'* (Rosie Sixth form HHS).

The complexities of peer relationships were a core concern for all the adolescent participants: from the significance of friendships to the challenges of fitting in. *'In Year 7 I was bullied twice. I was bullied by what I thought were two of my best friends'* Terri (Y8 DA). Keeping friends from primary school was important as was meeting new friends and merging the two. *'New alliances'* was how one student described this process (Andrew Y8 DA). One pressure felt as they entered secondary school was the danger of joining the 'wrong' group or crowd. Reviewing transition from primary to secondary school is vital to ensuring positive outcomes for all students.

Despite these challenges, most of the young people in the inquiry appeared to manage school. They praised the teaching staff and said they enjoyed lessons and learning. *'It's good to find out different things and try and improve what you're bad at, or like what you find different'* (Terri Y8 DA). Some students appreciated individual attention from adults and talked about the importance of being acknowledged, however briefly, by a member of staff.

9.6. The Adults' Responses

Adult perceptions of adolescent experiences ranged quite widely. It was evident that most adults had a good knowledge and understanding of young people. However, they viewed young people through an adult lens and with hindsight their personal experiences of adolescence revealed different responses. A key interview question asked the adult participants to consider how it might feel to be an adolescent. *'It's a very tricky time; they're still in a child's brain'* Flora (HHS). Ann (DA) suggested that *'maybe we're not very tolerant of teenagers and you don't hear a lot of really positive things'*. Colin (DA) observed *'they spend the majority of their time indoors, in their rooms...you don't see them out on the streets, playing.'* The evidence, from the reporting of the young people, was different. The young people could articulate what it was like to be an adolescent and produced pragmatic solutions. Some adults who had experienced challenges at school were critical of the lack of support they received. One adult (Alan DA) suggested that the caring aspects of the teaching role were compromised which suggests a limitation of the performative agenda.

Most adults gave a positive overview of the student voice resources in their schools although there was some confusion regarding its interpretation. The data highlighted discrepancies between the perceptions of adults and adolescents regarding the positioning of student voice in schools. Whereas some young people were critical of the lack of student voice provision, adults described the variety and breadth of opportunities their schools provided: *'We do a lot of Google surveys which can be anonymous, so they can just respond to those...they're constantly going down to the Computer Room to complete a survey or...yeh, they do that a lot.'* (Pat, Principal DA). The assumption appeared to be that the regular use of surveys could provide an accurate assessment of student mental health and fitted into the student voice agenda. Some young people, however, reported a preference for individual support and more regular, direct contact with staff. Young people did not refer to student voice resources, as described by adult respondents, and only one individual was a member of a student panel. The student support hub (DA) was perceived as a place for sanction as well as for support (Elizabeth, Y9, DA), revealing a contradiction of purpose. Fiona (Sixth Form, HHS) described provision as *'very generalised'* and that *'they give you a very general response, or solution to a problem and they don't necessarily follow it up.'* This latter observation is critical – throughout the literature children and young people asked for feedback and action from adults.

The pressure of exams is a shared area of concern for students (Roome and Soan, 2019) and the adults agreed that this constituted an unrealistic challenge, especially in the early days of transition. Schools were described as *'exam factories'* (Alan, Assistant Principal, DA) and there was some criticism by other adults of the performative agenda in schools and how it impacts adversely on adolescents' lives. The constraints of a flawed system appeared to impact adults as well as young people. The adults also observed the impact of complex family situations which sometimes spread into school and were aware of the financial challenges faced by some families. Social media was a concern for adults, highlighting the existence of inappropriate role models. To young people, however, social media was central to their lives.

It became clear through the data that school staff have complex roles beyond teaching or support duties. A senior manager listed the range of responsibilities: *We have housing issues, we have domestic violence, domestic disputes, criminal things, so a lot of what we see are not things we are equipped to deal with and wouldn't want to be'* (Mary, Assistant Principal, HHS). Relationships between students and adults were perceived as positive: *'The school is pretty good at listening to students'* (Pat DA), which contrasted with students' perceptions. It was evident that positive student and adult engagement was important to both groups.

9.7. Recommendations from Young People and Adults

The recommendations and suggestions presented here emerged from the data from both adolescents and adults.

Transition from primary to secondary schooling was reported as a challenging time for some young people. Consultation between staff and young people could ease this stage. Similarly, student mentoring schemes which link secondary students with primary school pupils could provide the support that some individuals need. If primary school pupils were matched with a named secondary school student, available in the early days of transition, this could provide supportive contact.

The students highlighted other key areas in which they envisaged change: school rules and classroom practice, mental health support and advice, and student voice. The younger adolescents emphasised teaching and learning, whilst the older adolescents were more interested in student voice describing how they wanted to be treated in an appropriate manner by adults. A significant issue for older students was their schools' attitudes to future outcomes. Schools could reimagine the futures of young people to include a wider range of possibilities, such as apprenticeships, full-time employment, or different areas of skills training, for adolescents to consider, and to offer a range of options to help achieve those goals. The ideas and suggestions put forward by the small group of students in this research inquiry suggest there are many more creative solutions to be considered by adults.

Some of the adults suggested peer and adult mentoring as a helpful resource for mental health, although most of them were confident that school support systems were meeting the needs of the students. However, a few young people were critical of what they perceived as an inflexible and flawed system. From complaints about the lack of privacy in the student support space in school (DA) to tokenistic resources for mental health, young people asked for better resources to meet their individual needs. One suggestion was that further extended teacher training in the complexities of mental health would benefit young people. The mental health agenda in schools is a high priority currently and training is on offer for staff, however, this must fit with the individual needs of adolescent students. Consulting young people on preferred forms of support could be productive, with a range of options varying in scope and intensity.

One adult participant, Alan (DA), suggested that young people have their own values at odds with the current education system, leading to tension between this age group and the adults who work with them. This tension could be eased by setting up regular, formalised communication between students and adults, as suggested by one student (Mark Y10 HHS). However, this could be problematic due to the multiple roles that teachers undertake. Two areas in short supply evident from my experience in schools, are time and resources. There are many demands made for staff, apart from their teaching roles, such as regular staff briefings and training sessions after school. Some of the adults appeared conflicted between what they would like to offer students and what it was possible to provide within the institution. Young people, both those in school and those who had left school, praised individual staff who gave them extra time. Some adolescents reported that staff only took notice when there was a conflict.

Table 9 below represents a combination of the recommendations from adolescents and adults for changes to education practice and policy which merge with the conclusions stated in this chapter. Some of the recommendations would constitute a reform of the current education system – with a greater emphasis on the needs and rights of children – which might not be attainable in the current political climate with its emphasis on achievement and the apparent indifference of government to the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (Children’s Commissioner, 2020). Both staff and students appeared to want change despite the gap between differing concepts of school support and student voice.

Education Practice	Education Policy
Regarding Students: Student mentoring scheme for transition – linking primary pupils with secondary school students to ease the move. All students matched to a named peer or adult mentor at transition. Development of stage of transition with more support for individuals made available. A range of support options – face-to-face/anonymous surveys/peer-mentoring. Increased range of exam options at Year10 with post-school options of apprenticeships/employment/university Regular formalised consultation/collaboration with students regarding curriculum, school facilities, classroom practice Provision of dedicated space and time for ‘downtime’ for students	Regarding Students: Implementation of updated school voice initiatives in all schools in collaboration with young people Children and young people positioned at the heart of educational policy by adherence to UN guidance on children’s rights Creation of student panels for collaborative and consultative work on education policies Teacher education to include updated overview of needs of adolescents in collaboration with young people Expansion of local Youth Clubs in all areas for leisure, health, socialising, and positive adult role models
Regarding School Staff: Refresh knowledge/understanding of young people through regular in-service training, to include student input Support for staff mental health through regular peer supervision and mentoring	Regarding School Staff: Increase in numbers of teachers and support staff Review of teacher education to include modules on understanding of student mental health, student voice, and adolescence Regular mandatory assessment of teacher workload and professional status - pay and conditions reviewed Finance ring-fenced for teacher mental health initiatives A dedicated national helpline for staff and regular peer supervision

Table 9: Recommendations for Policy and Practice Regarding Adolescents in Secondary School

One significant issue of concern reported by both groups is the lack of adequate and appropriate provision for adolescents in their communities outside of school. Well-resourced and managed youth clubs and sports facilities can provide safe spaces for young people, to be themselves, to be with trusted and trained adults, and to explore a variety of new experiences. Fiona (Sixth Form, HHS) described her youth club as *‘a nice space to relax and talk to other people.’* Youth clubs can offer something different to school and need to be available to all adolescents wherever they live.

Additional training for teachers has recently been recommended to comply with children’s rights (Children’s Commissioner, 2020) and reform of the Key Stage 4 curriculum at a time when young people are considering future plans, could provide better opportunities for individuals, especially those students who envision a different future from the standard trajectory of higher education.

9.8. Reflections on the Research Inquiry

In reflecting on the research process, it was important to consider whether new learning regarding adolescents’ experiences and student voice had been acquired. Unexpected findings and new themes were uncovered by the process. Some adolescents talked about feeling powerless within the education system and reported that they were not listened to by staff, or that staff did not follow up requests for help with action. Young people also talked about unrealistic pressure to attain academic success whilst striving to navigate both the complexities of friendships and secondary school. Other students were critical of the options schools offered for their future lives.

One area worth considering was whether the person-centred approach to education can fit within the current performative agenda in schools. Using the approach within the interview led to a positive and respectful relationship with each group which was a crucial factor in capturing their voices. The relationship between myself (the adult) and the participants (the adolescents) was central to the interview process. The person-centred approach facilitated helpful responses from participants and led to capturing rich data. The Rogerian philosophy of the person-centred approach concurs with the agenda of student voice, since both promote the individual views of young people. Michael Fielding has recently revisited the significance of personal relationships to education (2021) and suggests that the current education system follows an impoverished and disillusioned ideology. However, he expands on this view by stating that *‘teaching subjects or getting results is only justifiable if it does*

actually help students to become better people’ (ibid, p.102). This view can be interpreted as a compromise between a performative agenda and a person-centred approach.

A significant limitation of this research inquiry was the modest sample size. This resulted from a limited response from local schools and because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which led to English schools closing for a prolonged period. However, the data received demonstrates that the sample size did not alter the significance and quality of what was captured. The young people demonstrated a range of views and opinions regarding their experience of adolescence and the importance of student voice. Their recommendations provide a clear vision for change in schools (see Table 4, Student Visions for Changes in School, Section 5.6, Chapter Five). Only a few staff volunteered for interviews. However, the data received from the adults surprised me with the breadth of opinion that was expressed. My contacts in two High Schools, Alan (DA) and Mary (HH) gave up a lot of their time and fully supported the research process. In their separate interviews they expressed their passion for working with adolescents and their concerns about a flawed education system.

On reflection I could have adjusted the questions used in the interviews to ensure I was being thorough regarding the experiences of adolescent and adult experiences. The adults described a pupil survey (PASS) as a useful tool for student mental health. It might have been fruitful to explore the adolescents’ perceptions regarding this survey and similar resources named by the adults (School Council, Student Suggestion Box, as examples). However, the fact that most students did not mention these resources could mean that either they were not important to the young people, or they had no experience of them.

One area that could have been developed was the recruitment of schools. A wider and more diverse group of schools might have yielded different data, but my criteria, outlined in Chapter Four, was to select ordinary state secondary schools in my local area, which consists of a narrow demographic. Whether the data can be generalised for different school populations is open to discussion. The young people I met were from rural and suburban communities and there was little difference between their responses. It would be interesting to compare the data with private schools, single-sex schools, and special schools. However,

the aim was to capture the voices of a general population in local secondary schools. Despite these reservations, the data shows that the key aims of the research, to capture the voices of some adolescents and to present a fresh understanding of their experiences in education, were achieved, since the responses were broad and often complex.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be underestimated – both globally and locally. It disrupted learning, led to many students feeling left out, and had a negative effect on young people's development. Some students struggled with being away from school and learning at home. There was confusion over school examinations and expectations from schools. A high risk of anxiety was found amongst adolescent girls and this increased for all students on return to school (Widnall et al 2020; 2022). Both adult and adolescent participants agreed that young people missed being at school and that most did not enjoy learning from home. The young people reported: *'We missed most of the beginning years'* (Willow DA), *'A lot of work to get on with'* (Rosie HHS) and difficulties with *'being stuck at home''* (Tania HHS). For additional data from participants on the impact of the pandemic see Appendix 16.

A key aim of this research inquiry was to reframe adolescence considering work by Lesko (1996; 2001) and Lesko and Talburt (2012) who suggested that a diminished image of adolescence was produced through negative societal assumptions. By capturing the voices of small groups of adolescents in school the data shows that their views and opinions demonstrated a self-awareness and understanding of the significance of student voice. The data received was detailed and informative – resulting in pragmatic solutions for educational change. I would argue that this aspect of the inquiry was achieved, and that the quality of the data went beyond expectations. The next section extends this conclusion.

9.9. Potential Contribution to Knowledge

This research inquiry aimed to capture the voices of adolescents for two reasons: to develop an updated understanding of their experiences and to reframe their image. I would argue that despite the modest sample size of this research inquiry these aims were achieved, providing insights into adolescent lives. The findings show that the adolescents were thoughtful in their responses, highlighting issues of concern which they felt were challenging. They talked about the benefits of school and their appreciation of certain teacher characteristics: being

trustworthy, paying attention, and acting when asked for help. They critiqued school practices which led to them feeling overlooked and without opportunities for their views to be heard. They described the process of adolescence as challenging, regarding the reactions of other people, their peers, and the adults around them. They made significant and realistic recommendations for adults to consider regarding their education, their mental health, and their future lives. A positive image of adolescents and their aspirations emerged by their articulation of the areas that mattered most to them.

The adolescents reported significant limitations in their schools, both around provision and adult attitudes towards them, with recommendations for how these could be addressed. There was an unexpected strength of feeling from older adolescents about their mental health and their schools' responses. It would be a disservice to these young people to ignore their views. They need to be taken seriously, and we, the adults, need to consider how to make better provision for adolescents. Despite the recent emergence of student voice as a tool for learning and agency, it appeared that some adolescents do not feel heard. This suggests that there is a significant gap in perception between schools and students which needs to be examined and repaired if the needs of all adolescents are to be met.

I suggest that this research inquiry contributes to understanding adolescence and adolescents, through paying close attention to student voices. Their narratives demonstrate that, in the main, young people have busy and interesting lives out of school, often contributing to the society around them, are interested in a wide range of activities and hobbies, enjoy learning, and appreciate the efforts of adults. They showed that they are competent individuals, not a homogenous group, and requested that they are respected for their perceptions of the education they receive. They were aspirational and presented a range of pragmatic solutions to the challenges they outlined.

9.10. Future Research

This research inquiry did not intend to compare responses within a diverse population, yet this could be a major area for future research. There was little diversity within the interview groups reflecting the demographic of this mainly rural area. The data revealed slight variations in how different genders dealt with the interview situation. Interviewing same-sex groups was different to interviewing mixed

groups although the responses were similar. There could be benefit in separating the students by gender to provide a more comfortable space in which they could talk openly. Age differences were not formally compared. However, the middle adolescent group talked about a lack of appropriate support for mental health which was less important to younger adolescents in Years 7 and 8. The core themes which were important to most of the young people were consistent with all genders and ages. Aligning with the person-centred approach, consultation with young people could ascertain what areas of research would benefit them the most.

Some adults highlighted a need for additional mentoring of students in school. More time and opportunities within the school curriculum for regular discussions between adolescents and adults could lead to better understanding. However, this could present a dilemma for schools currently due to the performative agenda. How schools could fulfil their responsibilities towards adolescents, within the current educational framework, would be a significant research project informing education policy and practice. Whilst adults reported plentiful opportunities for student voice in their schools, the impact on young people was not clear. This assessment needs to be clarified and could be a significant direction for further research.

One unexpected finding was how boys in one small group talked about peer group relationships. They emphasised the importance of friendships – whether individual or in groups – and some individuals were dependent on the support they received: *‘I’ve got a certain few friends that if I was ever in trouble, I know they’d have my back’* (Mark, Y10). How boys relate to their peer group and its impact on their lives could be an area for important further research.

Another direction for further research would be to follow-up individual young people, particularly those from Sixth Form, who articulated their visions for the future. An exploration of how school-leavers manage the next stage in their lives could add to understanding older adolescents. Provisional research questions are suggested below:

- How did your life change beyond school?
- With hindsight, how do you feel now about the limitations of school as reported when you were there?
- How do you perceive the impact school has had on your life as an adult?
- With hindsight, what would you say to your 17/18-year-old self? How could you have done things differently?

An updated picture has emerged of adolescents in school: competent, self-aware, concerned about issues outside of themselves and with solutions for change. Their recommendations need to be the basis of dialogue between adolescents and adults. An assessment of schools' positioning of student voice would constitute an important research agenda as well as part of Ofsted inspections of schools. The barriers appear to be funding and teacher workload which are dependent upon government educational policy. Examining these barriers more closely could assist in appropriate implementation of student voice in all schools. Further research with a wider, more diverse, and larger sample of young people would bring an increase in adolescent voices to the attention of a broader audience with the expectation of improved resources in all schools.

9.11. Summary

Some aspects of schooling appear not to have changed over decades and consequently the needs of some young people may not have been met. The evidence lies in the testimony of the young people reported in this thesis. The concerns of young people were like those found over two decades ago (Davies, 2001). Some young people are still reporting that they have felt misunderstood by adults and that their voices have not been heard by staff. I recognise, alongside participants, constraints within the education system which affect student outcomes (Rollett et al, 2021). This makes it imperative that schools acknowledge student voice. However, the definition of student voice and its interpretation need to be clearer for practitioners. If adolescent voices continue to ask for change, this suggests that the education system has not adapted to the needs of a new generation. The adolescents in this study showed a willingness to examine and understand their unique issues and challenges and to conceive of ways of resolving them.

A recent report regarding the happiness of children in the UK states: *The World Happiness Report (2024) found that the UK was one of the countries where children had the lowest life satisfaction* (The Children's Society 2024, p.8). At the start of this thesis, in Chapter One, I quoted statistics about self-harm and suicide amongst adolescents. These statistics were not the driving force for this inquiry, but they are a stark reality of the outcomes for some adolescents. After a six-year period of research the happiness of young people continues to be reported as low. By paying attention to and listening to adolescent voices we may find out how to remedy this statistic.

The data showed that there was a gap in perception of opportunities for student voice in schools, with the adults suggesting their schools met this need, whilst some adolescents felt overlooked and unaware of what was available. It was evident that there were tensions between the values of school

and the social groups of young people who were critical of school rules. Distractions existed on all sides: home, school, social media. As students progressed through school, they described taking on the mantle of a senior student (Andrew DA). These challenges were being dealt with alongside adolescent development. The discrepancy between adult and student perceptions needs further exploration since it impacts on young people.

It could be concluded from the data received that adolescents and adult staff in four secondary schools were similarly caught up in the constraints of the current education system. There was some disagreement over the details of what young people experienced and needed in school, yet there was general agreement that the current school system presents challenges and barriers to learning. The limitations of the school system were articulated by the adults in terms of a lack of funding and appropriate resources (such as mentoring and improved sports facilities). However, this may not be the response of other respondents in different schools. The adolescents in this inquiry suggested practical solutions to meet their needs, in terms of additional school staff and improved facilities, as well as asking to be treated as individuals and having their voices heard.

The research findings challenged the deficit narrative of the lonesome, bored teenager that has come to be a common currency (Chapter Two, section 2.5.) The young people talked about their busy and active lives outside of school and demonstrated self-awareness. The following statements are an interpretation of the requests from young people in this inquiry:

- To be seen as individuals
- To be heard and taken seriously
- To be treated fairly by adults
- To be treated as competent

All adolescents are worthy of attention. I have worked with the most challenging of individuals and know that their voices are worth listening to and their views worth considering. Creating a research inquiry out of a firmly held conviction was a challenging task. I wanted to be fair and open-minded. I approached the research believing that the insights of all young people could be of use to pedagogy: that new visions of the role of education for young people could be created, and that adolescence could be reframed. Young people demonstrated that they appreciate their voices being heard by adults and being taken seriously, relating to their human rights (United Nations, 1989). The significance of student voice threads through this thesis – by implementing student voice in schools the safety of

young people is not compromised, we gain knowledge and understanding and can be in a position to reform educational provision for their individual needs. Student voice impacts on all children and can reach those who might have been overlooked. A further benefit for all young people is the positive correlation between student voice and learning.

It became apparent through the data that both groups, adolescents, and adults, are working within a flawed education system. This suggests that the responsibility lies with government to position children and young people at the heart of education policy again. Education reform is needed which acknowledges the rights of children and listens to their voices. The role of the teacher is a diminished one in the opinion of some in society. One adult, Mary (HHS) described how her role as a teacher expanded into social work, policing, and counselling. Addressing the needs of teachers, and considering their mental health, would improve the chances for all young people in schools. However, as the following quote illustrates, there needs to be much more reform for a better educational future for young people: *If schools and other social institutions are to prefigure radically different futures, they will need to do more than embrace consultative or participatory processes*’ (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.151)

The above quote is included here to reinforce the view that schools and other institutions need to improve what they are currently doing to create imaginative futures for young people. It suggests that some schools consult young people but that this does not go far enough. As Fielding and Moss above warn, more than consultation is needed, and the rights of children must be taken seriously, followed by action (United Nations, 1989). Although this research inquiry has focussed on adolescents, the significance of listening extends to all ages of young people. In the classroom, whether primary or secondary, there is a *‘need to listen to every child so that the teachers’ attention is distributed effectively and evenly*’ (Hargreaves, 2017).

The data revealed that young people know and understand the challenges facing them and are fair and measured in their views; they can be trusted in assessing what works and does not work for them in their schools. Their aspirational voices can inform both educational practice and policy if they are afforded the right and appropriate opportunities to do so. In a society of accountability, adolescents need to be offered the opportunity to assess the education they receive through open dialogue with school staff. A student House Leader, involved in consultation with staff reported that: *‘We had one meeting and then we never had a meeting again. Like nothing we said, happens.’* Jimmy (Y10 HHS). He continued, *‘Students listen a lot more than teachers.’* These significant observations need to be taken seriously.

From the testimony of a small sample of adolescents, from Year 7 to undergraduates, it appears that student voice is not prioritised in schools. For student voice to impact on adolescents it needs to be backed by government. The UK government recognises that young people's rights need to be acknowledged (DfE, 2016) following consultation with children and young people who asked for:

Respect: to be treated with the expectation that they are competent rather than not (ibid: 10). This request echoes the data from this research inquiry and confirms this researcher's core belief.

Recognition of the person-centred approach has also been demonstrated by government, and I include this quote as confirmation of both a key belief and a key recommendation of this research inquiry: *All practitioners should make sure their approach is child-centred* (Ofsted, 2019).

I suggest this approach needs to be adopted so that the voices of adolescents are taken seriously (United Nations 1989). My professional concern centred on those young people without a voice: children in care and children excluded from school, but adults need to listen to the voices of all adolescents, many of whom are aspirational and self-aware as evidenced in this inquiry, so that educational policy and practice can ensure improved outcomes for every young person.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

1. How are you today?
2. You spend a lot of time in school – out of all your experiences here what do you enjoy most?
3. Is there anything you find difficult in school? Can anyone help you with that?
4. Out-of-school, what do you enjoy doing?
5. What is it like for you being an adolescent?
6. Tell me a bit about friendships (prompts: How important are your friends to you? Do you ever feel friendless? How do you choose your friends? Do you have more, or less, friends as you get older? Can you think why this might be?)
7. How important are your parents/carers to you at this age? (Prompts: Do you listen to them? Take their advice?)
8. How much do you feel that school staff listen to you? In what ways?
9. In an ideal world, is there anything more or different that the school could do for you at this stage?
10. Is there anything else about being a teenager in school that you would like to describe?

ADD: If anything, we discussed today has unsettled or upset you please talk to: DESIGNATED MEMBER OF STAFF or contact one of the special helplines such as Childline, contact number.

Remind group that it is important to hear their views and that their contribution is valued and will be written down and shared with the school in a short report. It may help to change things for young people in schools.

APPENDIX 2

FIELDNOTES – DRYDEN ACADEMY – AUTUMN TERM 2019

The following notes record my data collection from 2019 to early 2020 – when schools closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The story of my first encounter with a school to be used for my data collection goes as follows:

Day One – 10.9.19

I was full of apprehension on embarking on the short journey to the school. It is a small rural Academy, which, from the outside, looks very much like most of the schools I have worked in for the past thirty or forty years; a single-storey, long, low building surrounded by tennis-courts and sports areas. I parked my car in the school carpark and got out to find the entrance. Initially, I was confused as it was not clear where the entrance to the school was. Inside the single-storey building, probably dating from the 1960s, I entered a small reception area. To one side was a computer screen, midway up on the wall. Beyond the computer was an office reception desk. But my eyes caught the word 'visitors' on the menu of the screen so I proceeded to enter my details. My photo was taken and before long I received a visitor's badge and lanyard. I sat down to wait for my appointment and took a good look round whilst soaking up the atmosphere – it seemed lively and animated. I could hear various voices inside reception and out in the corridor. The room was bright and cheerful. There were plenty of people coming and going – adults and children. I felt like I could be in any school across the county – the design of the building was the same as those I worked in all those years ago. Only the technology gave away the era.

At this point, I was feeling positive about the school. I felt welcomed, people were friendly and there was a pleasant atmosphere. The Assistant Principal was helpful, professional and interested in my research. We had a productive meeting. Some of the comments he made were interesting – that the children would be very happy to help with my research 'kids love to be involved in things.' He also gave me an honest and open description of the school's recent history involving Ofsted – the school had been in 'special measures' and nearly closed down – it was now at a 'requires improvement' stage. He pointed out that the research would be evidence to be used in the section on student voice that Ofsted will be inspecting.

I had already learnt from him that the acronym PSHE was not used in the school – instead, it was described as CC – Character and Culture. He was also the Head of PDBW – Personal Development, Behaviour and Welfare. Interesting to see how these titles can reflect the ethos of the times.

I was interested in the Academy status of the school – it is run by a Trust that included two other schools in the county – one on the coast and one in the city.

I considered myself very lucky to have found access to this school so easy after hearing from others that schools can be off-putting and resistant to allowing researchers in. The response from the school was warm and welcoming, even though I realised they would be gaining from engaging in the research through the evidence for Ofsted. Having said that, it was obvious that what I wanted to do, and how I wanted to do it, fitted very neatly with the ethos of the school, even though I had very little knowledge prior to our meeting, of what the school was interested in and prioritised.

Day Two – 7.10.19

When I arrived at the school it had been arranged for me to speak to a Y11 assembly. This plan was in order to give me a feel for the school and its organisation and for the students to familiarise themselves with a new adult in the school.

Day Three – 14.10.19

My next visit to the school was on a wet Monday morning in mid-October. The atmosphere seemed different – more subdued, perhaps due to the weather. I was in school that day to address an assembly group briefly about my research and ask for volunteers.

Day Five 16.10.19

My next time in the school was one morning in mid-October when I was there to address the Y8 and Y9 assembly. The first attempt at recruiting volunteers had been a mixed experience. At this point I was nowhere near the numbers I needed to constitute a good sample. The plan at this stage was to wait until the school had names of volunteers and then the Assistant Principal would contact me. It was the Half Term break so there was a natural pause – in which I could only hope that the young people and the staff would not forget my request for help.

Day Six 5.11.19

I next entered the school after the Half Term break, in order to get up to date with the Assistant Principal. He had informed me by email that he had 18 names of pupils from Y8 and Y9 who wanted to be involved in the research. This was most encouraging. However, he said most were from Y8 and he had decided to lean a bit on the older age groups. This was a bit concerning as I wanted volunteers but as I felt Y8 could be rather young for the research, although a lot of them would be aged 13 and considered teenagers, maybe it was needed. He also had another staff member show interest which brought the staff group to 4 individuals. We decided not to use the poster for advertising as he told me that posters can get lost. He felt it more helpful to address the young people directly. I offered also to talk to them again, if needed. After our meeting which was most helpful, I parked myself in the staffroom in order to a) photocopy forms and b) to have a presence in order to network with staff. I also spent some time in the school office in order to staple the consent forms.

Day Seven 8.11.19

I came into the school to meet up with the group of Y8 and Y9 pupils who had volunteered to help with my research, at the end of the afternoon. It had been decided in a meeting earlier in the week that I would see the group in a classroom for the last period of the day. When I arrived in the school reception, I was told that the Assistant Principal was not in school. I was not particularly worried by this, so I went straight to the staffroom. I sat in the staffroom sorting out materials for my session.

Day Eight 13.11.19

The arrangement for this visit was for me to meet a staff member who had agreed to do an interview. I came to the school well prepared – I had spent time going over the questions, rearranging the order, then putting them back to the original order. I had practised using a new digital recorder and was looking forward to this, my first, interview. As I was early in arriving that afternoon at the school, I asked to see the Assistant Principal but was told he was off sick. So, I took myself to the staffroom to wait until my appointed hour with the staff member. The room was empty, and I took the opportunity to look round at the walls and the posters. There were lots of documents and posters outlining teaching methods and grading.

Day Nine 21.11.19

I was in school this afternoon to interview the Principal, Pat – my first interview. I came to this interview with some trepidation. I had only seen the Principal of the school briefly in the staffroom at the mornings' Staff Briefings, in the corridor working with some pupils, in the office talking to staff, but we had not spoken 1:1.

I arrived at the school keen to start the interview. The interview went well and the Principal gave me some rich data – she expressed her own personal views about the education system in general as well as giving me full details of her own background – she came across as an ambitious and determined individual with a love of the children she works with. We gelled quite well during the interview so that my earlier misgivings were over-ridden by a new respect and admiration for this diligent and energetic individual. She had lots of say and said it loudly and with passion. She was keen to know when the school would hear my ‘results’ and I reassured her that there would be a summary by the next Autumn but that maybe I could give her an informal, verbal over-view before that time.

Day Ten 22.11.19

I arrived early at the school in order to see a staff member for her interview. In the meantime, I went to pick up my box of Information and Consent forms to be handed out during my introductory session with Y8/9 in Period 5. As the AP was in his room, I managed to get a time from him for our meeting next Thursday.

I then went to the staffroom as I had an hour to wait until seeing the young people. I went to the room assigned to me to get ready to receive the group. By 2.30, the beginning of Period 5, there was no sign of any pupil. It was nearer to 2.40 when 3 or 4 young people trickled into the room. I recognised one girl whom I had shadowed a few weeks ago. We waited for the others but when no-one arrived the young people volunteered to fetch them for me. The AP had written an email to all staff asking them to send pupils to me after registration. Finally, about 2.50 (20 minutes late) I had a complete group.

My next task that afternoon was to interview the Assistant SENDco. We met in the library, at the end of the school day. The interview went as planned for the first 15 minutes. Then we were interrupted by a member of staff who didn’t realise, at first, that we were recording an interview. I had to stop the recording and, after a while, when she left, I tried to resume it. Unfortunately, my lack of experience with the new audio recorder meant I could not easily find where we had left off. I decided to end the interview at this point and re-start on another date. We managed to find another suitable time during the following week to continue. We had tackled the first 5 questions, so we were already half-way through. We would complete questions 6-10 in a weeks’ time.

Day Eleven 28.11.19

I came into the school to interview the Assistant Principal and also complete the second interview with the Assistant SENDCo. The interview with the AP was held in his office which he said would be private. I felt that the interview went well – he was enthusiastic and had a lot to say in answer to my questions. It helped that we had already been working together on the research project so we felt comfortable in each other's company – at least I know that I did. I felt as if he considered each question carefully and was relaxed enough to put forward his own, personal, opinions about such issues as the limitations of what the school could achieve, the problems with the current education system and the characteristics of the young people we were discussing.

After that interview session we had a brief chat about the next stage of the process – as usual he was very accepting of what I wanted to do in the school and agreed to most of my suggestions. We discussed how to reward the young people and he reasonably suggested I should ask the young people themselves – I wondered why that had not occurred to me at the time.

It was then time to interview the Assistant SENDCo – this would be the second half of our interview, which had been interrupted on the first occasion. I found her in the school library which is also used for support for individual pupils. Although I had informed her that we needed a quiet and private space she took me to a corner of the library. The AS was as thoughtful as she had been during the first part of our interview. She gave each question a lot of thought and, I felt, touched on some serious and important issues to do with the young people in school. So, the interview went as well as it could in the circumstances – i.e. in a less than perfect space. And I was glad that we could complete the interview after the unforeseen interruption of the first attempt.

Day Twelve 2.12.19

This was the day I would interview the young people for the first time so I was a bit apprehensive. I had arranged to interview two separate groups, one after the other. I had the use of the same classroom where I had met the 19 volunteers, so I was familiar with it. I had enough time before the interview to move the tables into a group and prepare myself. When the 3 young people, 2 girls and a boy, came into the room they were quite reserved, maybe a bit apprehensive. They sat around the table and I gave them a brief introduction to what we would be doing. Like them I was feeling a bit nervous too.

They were quiet and listened to the questions. During the interview no-one talked across anyone else and it felt as if they were listening to each other. They sat at the table and I gave them a brief introduction to what we would be doing. At times they would refer to the answer one of the others had given. Mid-way through the interview their voices (on the audio recording) sound quite weary as if they found the questions challenging. But then they got more enthused and involved in answering and went into some detail. I modified some of my questions as we went along as it felt appropriate and gave them more idea of what I wanted from them (I felt). They were respectful of each other and seemed to be listening to each other's response. They took the session seriously and gave some quite personal detail in some of their answers – i.e. about their personal and family lives. It felt as if the questions were appropriate and resulted in some useful data.

My fieldnotes for 2019 finish with the above entry. Looking back, I am not sure why I did not record the second interview that afternoon in the same way. During the next week, I interviewed one staff member and one group of Y8/9 on the same day (13.12.19). I did not write field notes for those events either. Could it have been that time was much tighter, at the end of term, a few days before they broke up for the Christmas holidays? I miss the detail that field notes can give you. I wrote summaries for every interview, so I do have some detail for these last interviews.

2020

Day One: 27.2.20

After a long break from research, I came back with new enthusiasm and energy. On a wet and blustery February morning, I met with the Assistant Principal, Alan, at Dryden Academy to update on my research so far and with several questions for him regarding next steps. As usual he was helpful and supportive. Whilst I waited to meet him, sitting in Reception, I observed the environment. There was a notice about Year 11 and how long they had before their exams. I talked about my research so far and how I had now transcribed all seven of the interviews I had undertaken last term. I asked for his advice regarding interview some of the children again, in a 1:1 situation. He agreed and although he offered to speak to the children himself, I offered to talk to each young person to ask if they were interested. My newest idea was for me to do some voluntary work in the school's support hub, Engage. Alan agreed with this plan and gave me the names of members of staff who should be involved. He then went on to tell me that the school had just changed their behaviour system. Last term I was aware of the use of something called Isolation which meant a young person would be sent out of lessons, away from others to another room and stay there for maybe up to an entire day. Alan pointed out this did not achieve anything. He said that he and the Principal had decided on three new rules for the school: Ready, Respectful, Safe. He felt that these simple concepts would cover everything

needed and the young people would understand them. Anyone not behaving appropriately could be sent, now, to the Reflection room (part of the Engage hub) where they could 'take far more ownership of their behaviour.' When I asked how that would happen, and what would the young people be given to do, he told me that there was an assessment tool that is used to help the young people see where they were going wrong. At the same time, if the issue was more personal then there would be 1:1 mentoring available from the specialist staff within Engage. Group discussion could also be held between groups of young people in the same situation. Alan described it as 'much less heavy handed' than their previous system of isolation. There was also a restorative part of the system, whereby a young person could discuss their behaviour with the class teacher. The meeting was positive and helpful as usual and Alan agreed with my plans. He emailed the other schools in the Trust to see if I could do some research there and later, when I got home, I had an email from him saying one of them, Harris Academy, had agreed.

Day Two 5.3.20 Harris High School

1.40 – a very cold, grey afternoon. My first visit to my second school. Arrived 20 minutes early, so sat in car and took in my surroundings. The school building possibly from around the 1960s? A three-storey building to one side, a single-storey building ahead of me, with a sign for Reception. Unlike Deane Academy no banners proclaiming their exam results on the outside of the building. Inside the school, the Reception area is spacious and warm. I sit waiting for a while, observing the bustle and friendly atmosphere.

I met Mary a bit later than expected and she apologised for being tardy and offered me tea or coffee, which I declined. I asked how long she had and she said twenty minutes so I realised I needed to be succinct and focussed. Fortunately, she was very positive and enthusiastic from the start and told me 'Just tell us what you want us to do.' She told me that the Assistant Principal of Deane Academy had told her it was a 'very good project' so that could explain her willingness from the start to accept me and my research. I only had a few things to ask her – I outlined how things had been done at Deane Academy (all part of the same Trust) and asked if she wanted to do the same or different. She was happy, she said, to follow the same procedures as we had at Deane. We talked about when I could go into the school to recruit young people (the next week). The pupils are in Houses and assemblies are conducted in House groups rather than year groups as at Deane. We talked about the large numbers of young people in school (1450) and whether that would mean I would get a lot of volunteers. She said the assemblies are 500 pupils – which was a bit unnerving. She agreed I could talk to staff at a morning briefing, which I found out is at 8am on Mondays and Fridays. Lessons begin at 8.30. It was a quick and efficient meeting with Mary being very helpful and enthusiastic and agreeing to all my

suggestions. I was so pleased to be so easily accepted – no doubt Alan at Deane had helped to pave the way with his recommendation. She took me into the school office to copy my DBS – it was a quiet room with lots of desks and computers. Then we were out into the Reception area where the bustle had died down and things were calmer.

Day Four 9.3.20 Dryden Academy

A cool, windy and wet March morning and I drive to Deane Academy to ask four young people if they would be willing to help me with my research by doing 1:1 interviews following our interview group. Alan came to meet me and we went to his office. He had a list of the six children (I had forgotten there were two more I wanted to interview) with the rooms they could be found in. I told him I would find them and talk to them individually. I found the school building a bit of a maze – I had not had a tour so did not know my way about very well

APPENDIX 3 - FIELDWORK PROGRESS CHART – Sept 2019 – Dec 2021

Date	TRANSCRIPT	Participant(s)	School	Data progress
21.11.2019	Interview 1	Pat - Principal	Deane Academy	Transcribed and analysed
28.11.2019	Interview 2	Ann - Assistant SENDco	Deane Academy	T and a
28.11.2019	Interview 3	Alan – Assistant Principal	Deane Academy	T and a
2.12.2019	Interview 4	Focus Group 1 – Y8 x 3	Deane Academy	T and a
2.12.2019	Interview 5	Focus Group 2 – Y8 x 4	Deane Academy	T and a
13.12.2019	Interview 6	Colin - Caretaker	Deane Academy	T and a
13.12.2019	Interview 7	Focus Group 3 – Y9 x 3	Deane Academy	T and a
7.4.21	Interview 8 ONLINE	Alice -class teacher	Field Academy	T and a
11.5.21	Interview 9 ONLINE	Simon – Head Y8	Tower Academy	T and a
28.5.21	Interview 10 ONLINE	Amy – MA student	University	T and a
3.6.21	Interview 11 ONLINE	Carol – BA student	University	T and a
21.9.21	Interview 12	Ms Floom Teacher of MFL	Harris High	Transcribed
5.10.21	Interview 13	Focus Group 4 – 6 Form x 5	Harris High	Transcribed Analysed
5.10.21	Interview 14	Focus Group 5 – 6 Form x 5	Harris High	Transcribed
22.11.21	Interview 15	Focus Group 6 – Y 11 x 3	Harris High	Transcribed
25.11.21	Interview 16	Focus Group 7 – Y 9 and 11 x 6	Harris High	Transcribed
29.11.21	Interview 17 ONLINE	Mike – Pastoral Support	Harris High	Transcribed
1.12.21	Interview 18	Alex – trainee teacher	Harris High	TO BE TRANSCRIBED
6.12.21	Interview 19	Mary – Assistant Principal	Harris High	TO BE TRANSCRIBED
6.12.21	Interview 20	Focus Group 8 – Y7/8 X 5	Deane Academy	TO BE TRANSCRIBED
14.12.21	Interview 21	Focus Group 9 - Y10 x 7	Harris High	TO BE TRANSCRIBED

22 Interviews at 4 High Schools + 1 University - 53 individuals, 43 students in 9 focus groups + 2 university students 1:1 online, 10 adults: 7 x 1:1 face-to-face in schools + 3 adults 1:1 online

APPENDIX 4

ANALYTICAL MEMO

15.10.21

Starting the transcript after a gap of ten days since interview at Harris High, aware of my lack of memory of the individuals in this group. Three of the young women come back to me visually, but two of them are a blur – mixed up with the first group. Interesting start to the interview – the same pause after my initial question about what they like about being in school as in other interviews with yp at Deane Academy. Lucy refers to the expectations and points out differences in ability. This sounded as if it came from the heart. As if her unique abilities were not considered, but the expectation was/is still that each individual student can achieve to the same level as others, despite differences. Touches on the issue of treating young people as a homogenous group, without individuality. She talks about a ‘barrier’ between those yp who can (described as ‘book smart’) and those who can’t. This division is concerning.

These young women display an understanding of the system which they are caught up in – they know.

17.10.21.

The yp report on Wellbeing Day in lockdown and how ‘it was probably one of the worst things’ (Megan) whilst I had heard one of their teachers describe this activity in more positive terms (see transcript of Ms Floot).

There’s a repetition of the word ‘understand’ from the group as in ‘they just don’t understand’ when referring to teachers, and perhaps to adults generally. This reflects earlier interviews with Years 8 and 9 at Deane Academy. The concept of being misunderstood on different levels and for different reasons runs through these transcripts.

Suggest that staff have a limited view of a yp’s life and their family situation. But adults do understand this – maybe they don’t demonstrate/acknowledge this understanding enough to yp?

Echoes of earlier interviews – pressure to look at their future.

Lucy talks positively about the help she has from individual teachers who ‘lead you down the right path.’ She also says that wellbeing events did opposite – they ‘stressed people out.’ Again, the irony is not missed. My question here is: did the school a) ask the young people what they needed from a WB input or b) asked for feedback after the event?

The young women are clear that they want appropriate and individualised help and advice. The talk about being told to ‘go on a website’ (Rosie, Lucy) and feel this is not helpful. Their frustration comes across – that their personal needs are not always being met in school. However, at the same time, most of the group do acknowledge that they can get good support from certain teachers. Their concern is that ‘a lot of students in this school probably don’t’ (Lucy). This suggests that the wellbeing agenda in school is hit-and-miss; it works for some individuals but others miss out, especially those with more complex needs like Rosie (who talked about her ADHD diagnosis). Insensitivity of some teachers comes across – Rosie saying that when she got upset in a lesson ‘on abuse’ she left but was told to go back to the room.

APPENDIX 5

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL STAFF

1. In your work with young people what do you find are the main characteristics of this age-group? i.e. their behaviour, attitude, likes/dislikes.
2. How does the school listen to this group? Are there formal or informal channels of communication? How important are their views to the school body?
3. If you cast your mind back to your own adolescence, what stands out for you at that time?
4. What would you say to your 15/16-year-old self, if you could go back in time?
5. How do you think we treat adolescents, as a society?
6. What sort of challenges or rewards do you find when working with this group?
7. Is there anything more the school could be offering to this age-group, in your view?
8. Have you any questions or comments about the research being undertaken in this school?

APPENDIX 6

LETTER TO HEADTEACHERS

25th June 2019

Email:

Susan.Davies@uea.ac.uk

Dear

Re: PhD Research Study into the Voice of Adolescent Students

I am a first-year Postgraduate Researcher undertaking a full-time PhD inquiry at the University of East Anglia, examining the experiences of adolescents in schools. My supervisor at UEA is Dr. Agnieszka Bates: Agnieszka.Bates@uea.ac.uk. My background is in Education and for 30 years I worked for Norfolk County Council as an education-co-ordinator.

For my data collection I need to talk to small groups of young people from Years 10 and 11, in order to gain their views on what it feels like to be an adolescent in school, and to hear from staff members about their experiences of working with this age-group. My intention is to start the data collection in the Autumn term after gaining ethical approval for my research by the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at UEA. All information received from participants will be confidential and no names will be used.

I feel that this research is very timely and could lead to some significant data for future school practice regarding the well-being of young people. It would be helpful to set up an initial, informal meeting so that we can discuss my research plans in more detail. I am available Monday to Friday and can be contacted on email above, telephone number: 01603 270952, or by post at the address above.

Thank you for your time.

Best wishes,

Mrs. Susan Davies

Postgraduate Researcher, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia (UEA)

MA, Diploma in Counselling and Guidance in Education, Certificate in Education.

APPENDIX 7

INTRODUCTION SESSION

On theme of: 'Who Am I?'

(1 session x 50 minutes)

Title: 'Who Am I?' – looking closely at self-identity

Aim: to build up a sense of trust; to get to know one another; to facilitate students' understanding of being a young person in an English state secondary school

Method: small group discussion, listening to others and sharing ideas/experiences – use of extracts from literature, songwriting, art about the nature of adolescence. Facilitated by researcher.

- Introduction – understanding research and why? How can it help?
- **'What is an Adolescent Person?'** – listen to the ideas of others with your own experiences – examples from literature (Charles Dickens, William Golding, Joanna Cannon, J.D. Salinger, Patrick Ness, Tracey Thorn) and songwriting (Neil Young, The Who, Nirvana) and theorists (Hall, Erikson, Winnicott). Discuss in the group if you recognise yourself from these descriptions.
- Give your own views of what being an adolescent is like. Talk or write about what you like to do and what matters to you.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE AN ADOLESCENT?



YOUR VOICE IS NEEDED!

Please help with my research

Come and talk about being a young person

Tell me what matters to you at this time in your life

I am a University Researcher looking for VOLUNTEERS in Years 9, 10 and 11 to be interviewed about this stage of life – there will be one small group session and a small audio-recorded focus-group interview – each will take up one lesson. All information will be treated in strict confidence and no names used in the final study.

**Give your name to your Classteacher if you are interested.
THANK YOU!**

APPENDIX 9

PROGRESS OF DATA COLLECTION TABLE

2019 – 2021

Research participants and schools – (all names are pseudonyms)

5.10.21	Student Focus Group Interview + Summary	Focus Group 4 – 6 Form x 5 Fiona, Pat, Jane, Marie, Sarah	Harris High	Computer + hard copy in HH folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A
5.10.21	Student Focus Group Interview + Summary	Focus Group 5 – 6 Form x 5 Megan, Lily, Lucy, Jess, Rosie	Harris High	Computer + hard copy in HH folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A
22.11.21	Student Focus Group Interview + Summary	Focus Group 6 – Year 11 x 3 Diane, Rob, John	Harris High	Computer + hard copy in HH folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A
25.11.21	Student Focus Group Interview + Summary	Focus Group 7 – Years 9 and 11 x 6 Paula, Tania, Rose, Mary, Willow, Tom	Harris High	Computer + hard copy in HH folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A
29.11.21	ONLINE 1:1 Staff Interview 8 + Summary	Mike – Pastoral Support Assistant	Harris High	Computer + hard copy in HH folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A
1.12.21	Staff Interview 9 + Summary	Amber – Trainee Teacher	Harris High	Computer + hard copy in HH folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A
6.12.21	Staff Interview 10 + Summary	Mary – Assistant Principal	Harris High	Computer + hard copy in HH folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A
6.12.21	Student Focus Group Interview + Summary	Focus Group 8 – Years 7 and 8 x 5 Jaida, Maddie, Ava, Charlie, Holly	Deane Academy	Computer + hard copy in DA folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A
14.12.21	Student Focus Group Interview + Summary	Focus Group 9 – Year 10 x 7 Fred, Edward, Tom, John, Mark, Jimmy, Jack	Harris High	Computer + hard copy in HH folder Summary on Desktop in DC folder T and A

APPENDIX 9a

INTRODUCTION TO STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

This appendix introduces the student participants and their views. Significant, or typical, quotes are included. The descriptions of the small group interviews with young people are arranged, for ease of reading, in age-groups, from the youngest at 10-13 years old to the oldest at 18-21 years old, rather than chronologically. This model refers to Figure 1 in Chapter Two (section 2.3) which positions adolescence in the life span of an individual. The adolescence period, for the purposes of this research study, is divided into early, middle, and late adolescence and relates approximately to the school year groups as shown below:

- | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Early adolescence | 10-13 years old | Years 7 and 8 |
| 2. Mid-adolescence | 14-17 years old | Years 9, 10, 11 and 12/13 (6 Form) |
| 3. Late adolescence | 18-21 years old | University undergraduates |

Early Adolescents and their Views

Years 7 and 8 Interview Group – Dryden Academy

This interview was held when I returned to the school following the Covid-19 lockdowns. I had also interviewed four small interview groups in the same school during the autumn term of 2019. It was possible to return to the school in September 2021 where I had to re-recruit more volunteers. After speaking to a mixed assembly group of Years 7 and 8 the following group of student volunteers met with me in a prepared classroom in December 2021. This group consisted of the youngest students; some had just moved from their primary school so were still settling into secondary school life. This is important since the transition period was mentioned later by some groups as a time of upheaval.

Jaida (Y7)

Jaida reported that she was afraid of speaking up in class or going to staff for help.

In her view adolescents are ‘*not teenagers, not children*,’ linking with similar views of other students that this period is one of limbo.

Maddie (Y7)

Maddie said she found maths difficult and was often ‘*overwhelmed*’ with stress. She was critical of some of her peers, especially those who she deemed ‘*rude*.’ Sometimes, at home, she didn’t feel ‘*motivated*’ and spends time with her pets. She pointed out that whilst comfortable talking to some teachers she needed to know ‘*what they were going to do*’ about issues, a view shared by other students.

Ava (Y8)

Ava said, *'I get scared to ask teachers about stuff.'* Throughout the interview she repeated *'I don't know how to say this'* or *'I'm not sure of the word.'*

Charlie (Y8)

Charlie felt that other students in his top set were *'smarter'* than him. He said he enjoys sports and being with his friends. He talked about friends being closer now at this age and how they had *'bonded'* over time. His parents are *'quite important'* to him, and he said if he gets stressed at school he will usually listen to their advice.

Holly (Y7)

Her main activities out of school were seeing friends and being with family. She said her friends would help out if she was either *'angry or sad.'* She described her parents as *'very, very important'* to her but said she didn't always listen to their advice.

Year 8 Interview Group - Dryden Academy

Three young volunteer students arrived in the designated classroom for this first small group interview which was held in 2019 before the Covid-19 pandemic arrived.

Georgina

Georgina said that the behaviour and attitude of her peers matters to her. Some girls, she said, shun the uniform rules by *'rolling up their skirts.'* She explained why her friends mean so much to her; *'at this age, you kind of need a friendship group'* and she suggested this is *'cos girls go through a lot more than boys at this age.'* She talked about her large family, with a stepfather and a stepmother, saying that family is important to her.

Terri

Regarding the importance of friendships in school, Terri believes that *'friends are the family we get to choose.'* She reported that both her parents go out to work, leaving her and her brother alone after school. *'Family can be like, really good for you, when they like, help you or encourage you'* she said. *'My parents always try and help me, if I ask them for help and advice, they're always like, be there for me.'* This positive perception of parents was echoed by other students throughout the interviews.

Andrew

Andrew said that he tries to cover up areas of his life in school. He said, *'I like most of what I learn'* but he felt that *'Teachers do not always listen to who has the right answer in class.'* It seemed to be important to him that he did not get a 100% school attendance result, because he missed two lessons when absent from school for dental treatment.

Year 8 Interview Group – Dryden Academy

This group of four young people seemed more intimidated by the situation, and there was a long silence in response to my initial question about what they enjoyed in school. There seemed less cohesion in the group in the sense of peer support, in comparison to an earlier group. However, in my analytic memo of this interview I report:

On a third listening, I realise that they were trying to give full answers, but maybe were not sure how much they could say in front of each other – it was not clear if they knew each other very well – so maybe that influenced their reluctance at times. They were easy to engage as the time went on and we had some positive interaction during the session. AM 2.12.2019

Edward

Edward revealed that he struggles with *'getting the words in my head down on paper.'* Later he said that he has *'a certain kind of dyslexia.'* He said he doesn't always receive the help he needs and that when he asks for a special type of paper to help with his writing, some teachers don't respond. He said his parents are quite important and when we touched on friendships, he said he enjoys talking to his friends. Regarding the future, he said *'I don't really think about it too much.'* Despite not worrying about life beyond school, he had thought about becoming a teacher, *'but then I realised I'd have to stand up in front of thirty or something, children, and I can't do that.'* He joked about giving detentions to children, which raised a laugh amongst the others. Edward was the first to suggest a school-themed reward for their participation (offered at the end of the interview) with *'we can miss out any lesson we want.'*

Mary

Mary said it was important to her that there was one teacher for one subject rather than two, which seems to occur in some subjects. She went on to add: *'but there's like nothing we can do about that, really'* suggesting a powerlessness which some other students referred to when talking about the school curriculum. She said that teachers exert a lot of pressure, whilst at the same time realising that it would be for her own good. She said she found it hard to fit in with her peer-group. She picked up a point articulated by others, that in Year 7 she had some friends, but as they moved around in different sets, it was hard to keep up these relationships. But, she said, *'you just find your friends.'* When asked about the support offered by the school, she explained that some young people don't like asking for

help and that the staff do try and listen. She was aware that she spends too much time on social media and said that she tries to come off it, if she thinks *'I've been on it too much.'* Mary said that she has three jobs in mind, an author, a mechanic, or an artist, but she pointed out, *'they're very different jobs, now I come to think of it.'*

Tony

Tony pointed out that some teachers give individuals the chance to speak up when they need help whilst it could be difficult for the teachers to try to help a whole class. Tony showed an insight into the problematic nature of peer-group friendships, saying there needs to be a balance between socialising and lessons. He also gave some views on how support in the school could be improved, suggesting that there need to be more Teaching Assistants. Tony said his parents want the best for him. He talks for about three hours a day on his phone and agreed *'it's quite a lot, isn't it?'* which caused laughter in the group, which he accepted. When Mary complained about some lessons Tony suggested *'it depends on your mindset.'* He said that having a positive attitude means the lessons go more quickly and *'you get more out of a lesson.'*

John

John articulated his belief in a balance between schoolwork and friends: *'School is more important than friends'* he said, *'but you can hang out with your friends, sometimes, not all the time.'* This view contrasts with most of the other students who situated friendships in the centre of their lives. He said that *'out of school if I don't go on social media and stuff like that, I play with my little sister.'* His response to whether the school listens to young people was: *'If you need help in class, then maybe then they're a bit too busy, but actually they have to teach everyone, and they can't just get to help you.'*

Mid-adolescent views

Year 9 Interview Group – Dryden Academy

This group differed from the previous two groups in that it was all older girls. This seemed to make some difference to the interaction. It was a more informed discussion and I felt more connection with the individuals. The students had so much to say it could have been productive to have carried on the interview for longer. The girls were not hesitant in putting across their views. I did in fact plan to return to the school to interview one girl, Molly, in a one-to-one situation, due to the strength of her views about adolescence for her being *'hell.'* Unfortunately, this plan was interrupted by the UK government closure of schools during the Covid-19 pandemic when there was an 18-month gap between my data collection sessions at Dryden Academy. Molly had by then moved year group and the imperative for this research enquiry was to recruit new students for further focus group interviews.

Elizabeth

At times, Elizabeth said, she has been '*really down*' and feeling '*powerless*.' When she described '*all people saying mean stuff*' it sounded as if her relationships with other people were challenging for her.

Molly

Molly described her adolescence as '*hell*.' This was the most extreme response to the question about being an adolescent. She used a striking phrase '*the shell you've built around you*.' Her sense of outrage regarding fairness in school stood out. Like her classmates, peer-group relationships seemed to be central to her, at the same time she observed that '*girls can be horrible*.'

Sarah

Sarah reported that she was home-schooled during her primary school years. She described her home life as '*confusing*.' Her father left the family before she was born, and she lives with her mother and two sisters. There are several siblings she has never met. Within school she described the different peer groups as '*the popular group, the dodgy group*' who go around saying what they think, judging others. It sounded as if the opinion of her peers is important, yet she said, '*it doesn't affect me*.' The friends she has now are '*decent people*' unlike the girls she thought were her friends at primary school. Sarah made an interesting comment about the student support service in the school, which she sees as a place where pupils go '*to get told off, to get punished*.' On the positive side, she appreciates the freedom to go out with friends. She sounded pessimistic about the future and said she was frightened of '*the environment and what society's coming to*.' At the end of the interview, when asked her views on naming this age-group, Sarah said '*Why can't we just be called humans? I don't know why we need these different age-categories?*'

Year 9 and 11 Interview Group – Harris High School

This interview took place post-Covid. I did not change the questions for these small group interviews and therefore did not ask a question about their experiences of lockdown since I thought it might overwhelm the rest of the interview and take too much time. My analytical memo of this interview, however, points to the fact that it was brought up spontaneously:

'The young people in this interview talk about Covid at the start of the interview – Willow describes clearly the bleakness of being in lockdown and missing out on the important socialisation which they say means so much to them at school.' **AM: 17.2.22**

This was information I was not expecting, although it was still very early days after the opening up of schools. Because of the disturbance created by the pandemic, and the need to complete my data

collection, I decided that unless there was a significant amount of data referring to the situation, or if individuals needed to express their views, I would not refer to the pandemic in my questions.

Paula (Y11)

Paula gave short responses to the questions, often only one word, after longish pauses during which perhaps she was giving them some consideration and thought. At one point she talked about having been bullied at school with the unfortunate outcome that the school did not support her.

‘When I was being bullied, happening at school, and I have been to a teacher, and nothing’s been done about it. It just got worse after it got reported.’

This was reported later to the school safeguarding team. Regarding the importance of parents, she remarked that *‘they would be the first person I would go to for advice, usually.’*

Tania

Tania had praise for the student support service in school:

‘There’s a specific pastoral for each one (House) so it’s like each one, so they get to know you on a different level.’

This was one of the few remarks which acknowledged the pastoral system within the school with an explanation of how it helped students. Tania was very appreciative of the support of her parents, saying:

‘They’re everything to me, my parents. If I’ve done the most stupid thing ever, they’ll always be there, no matter what.’

Rose (Y11)

Rose talked about herself as a quiet person: *‘I get quite anxious talking to people’* and how unfair it was that sometimes people like her are overlooked. She added that having a group of other young people to listen to her was helpful.

Mary (Y9)

Mary talked about her relationship with her Mum which led to her getting upset. Willow gave her a hug and Rose leant across the table to pat her arm. I asked if she wanted to continue, and she said she did. She carried on with the interview quite confidently and said it was probably a good thing to *‘get it all out.’* She talked about bullying in one of her responses which gave the impression that school life had not been easy for her.

[Later, my school contact told me that Mary had asked if I was returning to the school as she had got a lot out of this group discussion which suggested the interview had been useful for one student].

Willow (Y9)

Willow was one of the few students who mentioned the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic:

‘When like Covid hit like, it was like, one and a half years ago it was really weird because obviously like my year group (Year 7) had just come up to the High School, so it was like we missed most of those beginning years so when we came back it was like really nice to have all your friends around you and stuff.’

She talked about the stress of class work and homework *‘like deadlines and stuff.’* She suggested that

‘In an ideal world everyone would be just like put their hand up ‘Miss can I have 5 minutes outside?’ and just go, have a breather, and come back in and then get all your work done’.

Tom

Tom mentioned the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic:

‘we’ve missed so much learning in this past year and a bit’

As he left the room, he said to me *‘Have a good day’* which was a nice, personal touch.

Year 10 Interview group – Harris High School

This group was the largest group I interviewed, with seven young people, all boys. It was also the last interview I was to undertake.

Fred

Fred had praise for some of his teachers :

‘I could speak to my Head of House cos I get on well with him. And my tutor.’

Like many students he was appreciative of the role of his parents in guiding him: *‘I think they’re quite helpful. If I’m annoying, they tell me about what I’m doing and how to improve it.’* When the discussion turned to school organisation and rules, Fred spoke out on the areas that he felt were unfair, pointing out his perceived discriminatory practice by teachers: *‘It’s like if girls go against the rules, it’s all right. But if it’s a boy, it’s no, you’re in detention.’*

Edward

Edward said that boys were treated unfairly regarding school rules. He said boys should be allowed to wear skirts in the summer if shorts are not allowed, as they are currently. He was open about his difficulties with Maths, calling himself *‘stupid.’* He said he struggles with Science *‘I don’t really understand any of it.’* He said he did very little outside of school and that he didn’t have many friends.

He described himself and his immediate peer-group as *'losers.'* He felt that some school sanctions were unfair:

'Sometimes teachers like maybe give out unfair punishments, unfair detentions.'

He also supported the view that there were differences in practice towards girls and boys:

'There does tend to be like in school a difference about how they treat boys and girls. I just find it like, really, hypocritical.'

Tom

Tom said he didn't really have any *'challenges'* in school as he gets on well in most of his lessons. He said that reading was one of his hobbies, outside of school. He was clear about the importance of friendships, saying that

'They brighten up my day. I love all my friends and I just think they're all amazing.'

He was positive about teachers saying that if you need help

'You just need to get to the right teacher...they will help you out.'

John

John talked about how he likes to spend time with his grandparents. He said he enjoys PE and seeing his *'mates,'* mainly. He was critical about his father, saying *'I think my dad spends a bit too much time on his PS4 (a gaming device).'* When asked about changes within school, he said:

'We should do something about the rubbish. Because I feel like we should be around a clean environment, and I don't think that I really like to look at rubbish on the field and I think we need to do something about that.'

Mark

Mark enjoys much of school which he described as: *'It's a very sporty school.'* He also praised the curriculum: *'I enjoy the new GCSE lessons.'* He talked about the complexity of peer relationships

'And you have like certain friends who drag you into being a bit naughtier, like going out and getting into trouble.'

When discussing teacher/student relationships he mentioned one teacher pointing out what it is that students appreciate:

'Everyone feels kind of close to (names teacher) cos no matter what you tell him he always listens to your opinion, gives you good advice back.'

At the end of the interview, he stated:

'I wish we could have one of these meetings (the interview) with the Head of School so they could hear what our opinion is.'

Jimmy

Jimmy said:

'My friends are like really important to me they help me get through stuff which I don't think I could do on my own. But I like, I think I can benefit them quite a lot.'

He showed appreciation of his parents, *'I feel both my parents are massive to me.'*

Jack

Jack talked about how some student behaviour in class can have a *'negative impact'* on the student/teacher relationship. On friendships he said,

'They are one of the most important things in your life at the moment.'

Year 11 Interview Group – Harris High School

This was a small group of three individuals.

Diane

Diane said that she and other students had been *'forced'* to take a language module alongside their other GCSE options. She was critical of the support available in school, although she said that she had not made use of it for herself: *'I've never really gone to the school for help, but I think they could probably do a lot more...setting up little tasks that people can choose to do, I don't think is very helpful.'* She talked about educating herself – being independent and capable of making her own choices in life, whilst listening to the views of her parents. She advised: *'You just have to learn from your mistakes, you have to use your own experiences, to improve your ways of doing things, I think.'* Diane had less conviction about the significance of peer relationships: *'However important they are, they don't really matter at this point in life. You're all moving apart in separate higher education.'*

Rob

Rob pointed out that he likes to do things his way and feels that the older generation do not understand young people, reflecting the views of others. He showed an awareness of the lack of support for students with mental health issues saying: *'they (teachers) could turn their heads a bit more to your problems.'*

John

John said: *'I just think the overall stress of school is challenging. Trying to get all your work done in time...I find that quite hard sometimes.'* One way he manages stress is to do origami in his spare time. Friends are extremely important: *'They mean a lot to me, and they help a lot with life,'* adding *'My bonds with my friends have got a lot stronger.'* He also said *'I don't really have a clue what I want to do after'* demonstrating that not all young people have a clear vision of their future. He had some criticism of the support from teachers:

'I only feel comfortable talking to a few teachers at school because most of them, I feel, they only care because they're paid to care.'

An analytic memo entry for this interview follows:

How thoughtful and mature they appear in their comments and views – at just 16 years old. Is this a change brought by societal changes (i.e. modern-day technology) or is that their voices have in the past been 'muted' so we have not heard them speak in this way? AM 23.11.21

Years 12 and 13 Interview Group (6th Form) - Harris High School

There were five small interview groups at Harris High School. Two groups were made up of female students only and one group was boys only. I have since considered whether a single sex group meant that the participants could be more open and honest in their responses. The girls were willing to describe and share personal difficulties in school as well as support each other in their views. In the all-boys group, there tended to be more awkwardness and some distraction. But it was not clear if this would be due to the gender makeup of the group. These students appeared easier to interview which could be down to their age (17 and 18 years old) or it may be due to the fact that by the time I conducted this interview I had more experience in the process.

As mentioned above, two groups consisted of just young female students. These groups were all students in 6th form. The difference between them and the younger students was immediately apparent. These young women came into the meeting room full of confidence and assuredness. They were friendly, cheerful, and entered immediately into the spirit of the process. It was as if I was interviewing adults, as if we were equals. It meant that the interview was almost a discussion between us as they were able to put their own views, listen to each other, and support each other. They took the process seriously and seemed comfortable about answering the questions. My staff contact, Mary, ably assisted in making the whole exercise more enjoyable – she provided a trolley of refreshments for us all, of tea, coffee, and biscuits. This meant that I could offer this to the students, thereby making

the whole occasion more informal and sociable. I was very grateful to Mary for arranging this – it had all been her idea, not mine – and meant that the interviews felt relaxed and comfortable.

Fiona

Fiona was a quiet member of the group. She talked about her friends as offering something special: *‘They can give you an outside perspective, which is really helpful, if you’re too far in.’* She considered the role of friends in a critical way, demonstrating, to me, her intelligence and insight. *‘If you feel that they haven’t been in the situations that you’ve been in, you might feel a bit withdrawn from them.’*

I imagine she is quite self-sufficient, yet she related to the others in the group in a positive manner and demonstrated, by her responses, that she listens to them.

Pat

Pat was friendly and full of energy with a positive attitude. She was confident in her responses and articulate. She shared personal issues of her mental-health difficulties as well as critiquing how the school supports young people. Pat is taking a different route in her future career, not applying for university, and she was keen to talk about this. She is positive about being in 6th Form saying, *‘I met new people, and yeh, it’s just been great getting to know new people, you get to notice like what sort of people have the same interests as you, as well.’* Her parents are important to her, and she acknowledged this:

‘My parents are quite strict with school. Because I had that, like, strict parenting of, like ‘look you need to do this or you won’t be able to do this or do that’ in 6th Form it has definitely helped me a lot, because now I know how to routine myself and it’s the same as like saving money.’

Jane

Jane seemed self-assured and able to express herself easily. She came across as confident and knowing her own mind. She described the work she wants to do when she leaves school:

‘I had a placement as a Prison Officer, actually, ready for when I leave, but I couldn’t get any, like, recommendations from any teachers, because I think the Head of Year said that I had uni-potential, but she doesn’t think I can go straight into full-time work, especially in such a dangerous environment.’

She was referring to the schools’ policy of students moving on to university beyond 6th form, something which she did not want to do. She said the schools’ insistence on this traditional route had been unsettling for her, making her feel *‘put-off.’* Jane was clear in her vision of her future yet expressed how she felt thwarted by her perception of the school’s attitude towards her. Like Pat, Jane emphasised how important her parents are to her: *‘I think, like, parental relationships are very, very*

important. Like, everything that I do and know now is based on what they've told me to do, and it's worked out pretty well.'

Marie

Marie could not think of an answer to my first question about the positives of being in school. Later she joined in with more detailed responses. She was thoughtful and open, I felt, and showed self-awareness and maturity. Like some of the others, she was willing to share her own firsthand experiences in the group but tended to be more tentative in her views: *'I think it's like the workload that you get. I think it can be a bit excessive sometimes and I think teachers don't tend to help you, enough, maybe?'* She described how 'working-out' was a release for her after school: *'It sort of takes my mind off things that are going on, uhm, sort of like in school and stuff. Cos it can, it sort of boosts my energy and makes me feel good, so I guess it's sort of like a distraction from uhm, school, really.'* In this way Marie contributed some interesting data about the negative effects that school and schoolwork were having on her, whilst showing how she had decided to manage this issue. She gave an interesting response to the question about parents, again demonstrating her maturity. *'I listen to them more now, I think. Now I think as I'm a bit older, realising my responsibilities, and like the importance of things and that I really should listen to my parents. And to be honest, I've come to the realisation that they are 99.9% always right.'*

Sarah

Sarah sat on her own at the table (the others had got themselves into pairs) and seemed slightly outside of the group, both physically and socially. She was more reserved than the others and the most reticent, and sometimes she responded to questions by saying that she agreed with the rest of the group or that they had *'summed it all up.'* She talked about her main friendships outside of school, which indicated that she is not so involved in the social groups within school: *'I think friendship groups have got smaller, but friendships are important, but I think that a load of friendships from my perspective, they are not built in school. They're built outside of school. At clubs and things like that.'* She was positive about the role of teachers and acknowledged the challenges regarding well-being and how it is addressed in school: *'I think with well-being they do try. But sometimes I think you've got a problem but sometimes they're trying to half help you.'* When asked about what term she preferred to use as a descriptor of adolescents, she said: *'Young person fits the age group quite well. A lot of people are trying to become a young adult but sometimes the maturity isn't there, so young person covers all of it, in my opinion.'*

Year 12 and 13 Interview Group - (6th Form) - Harris High School

This second group at Harris High school followed on immediately from the interview above. The girls piled into the classroom in much the same way as the previous group, chatting, laughing, and being high-spirited. After helping themselves to refreshments they began the session with due seriousness and respect.

Megan

Megan came across as a confident young woman showing her support of others in the group throughout. She took her time answering and was thoughtful and insightful. In response to the question about the benefits of school there was a long pause. She pointed to the irony of teaching staff giving *'five different deadlines'* to the students whilst, at the same time, telling students to *'look after their mental health.'* Megan talked about *'seeing my friends, I like meeting my friends and family.'* She talked openly about *'when you don't feel mentally well'* and described how it felt to be told to *'just look at this leaflet'* when she had sought out emotional support from the school. This response had made her feel *'obviously I'm beyond, like I'm not worth support.'*

Lily

Lily demonstrated her self-awareness, sharing with the group how she suffers from low mood and the challenges she faces with learning (see quote below). She talked about the unfairness of some practices in school but also reminded us that teachers did what they could to support students. She was aware of both sides of an argument and was not afraid to go against the views of the group. Because she did this in a gentle and thoughtful way it was accepted by the others. She said that *'lesson times are nice when you talk to your teachers about different things.'* She observed that

'The education system definitely, like, is just, like, built around book-smart people anyway. All exams are, is like how much information you can retain. It's not like really testing your knowledge. It's testing your memory. And some people struggle, like, I don't like exams. 'Cos I struggle to recall so much content.'

She talked about her interests outside of school, one of which is dancing, a way of coping with the challenges of school: *'I'm like really good friends with the girls I do it with and it just kind of it makes me forget about everything.'* Lily showed insight into the complexities of relationships: *'Sometimes I think if we all feel the same, if we're all in a bit of a 'down' mood at the moment it's hard to pick each other up when you're all feeling the same.'* When I asked her to elaborate on what was making them all feel 'down' she said: *'its school, school is like a part of it. And I think as well like I think we're pressured to, like, know so much at such an early age. Like what we want to do. That stressed me out.'* An illustration of Lily's kind and thoughtful personality came across as the group left the room. She

wished me ‘good luck’ with my research, the first young person to have made that personal connection with me, in that way.

Lucy

Lucy seemed open, honest, and self-aware. She shared the challenges she found with schoolwork and the pressure exams. The fact that some students are seen as ‘book smart’ led to: *‘You’re expected to be that kind of person and when you’re not that sort of person, when you don’t have that capability, it becomes like a barrier.’* She spoke about the weight of expectations. Like Lily, above, she felt judged by the school: *‘You’re expected to do the same amount as other people when you don’t always have the same ability as other people. I feel that’s where it gets hard cos, you are expected to do what other people can do, but you can’t do that, but teachers don’t realise that.’* Lucy said that sometimes she did not feel like an individual in school, a statement made by other young people. She was critical of the wellbeing initiatives set up by the school and said that a school wellbeing event had not worked, but had *‘actually done the complete opposite, and stressed people out.’* However, she acknowledged that some teachers listen and can be trusted. *‘They speak to me, help me, provide me with the right support.’*

Jess

Jess was more reticent than the others. On re-reading the transcript I could see, however, that she gave her views about peer relationships at school: *‘I think they’re really important especially during school because if you, you’re all like in the same situation, you can relate to one another and you can assist each other, and you can help one another out.’* She was critical of the amount of pastoral support that is available and described how she would turn to a certain teacher for help adding: *‘That’s not enough, because he (a teacher) can’t deal with every single person. Like that’s not OK.’* She expressed her frustration over what she saw as a lack of understanding from the school:

‘If someone has a day off for ill-health you come back and can’t do your work and that just makes you feel worse. You don’t want to do it and, but they, I don’t think that schools understand that you can have bad days when you feel awful, you don’t want to come in, but it’s not because you’re physically ill it’s because you feel like just not up to having...and I think some people don’t understand that, so maybe they should look into that more’.

She pointed out the mixed messages from the school: *‘How can we be confident in your own body, if we’re just shut down by the school?’* This appeared to be a strong indictment of the response she had perceived from the school leading to a feeling of confusion.

Rosie

Rosie was apt to talk out of turn, which could be explained by her ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) diagnosis which she reported. Unlike the other young women in the group, Rosie sat away from the others and did not always seem to be engaged in the process. However, once she saw that I was not challenging her, and that I would listen to her views, she relaxed and took the process seriously. She talked about being new to the school and said she had been challenged on many fronts by the school system. Rosie described challenges in her family which impacted on her experience of school. Whilst the others talked about the importance of family and how much they were supported, Rosie reported that: *'I don't really have a good relationship with my parents. It's like, uhm, we don't really talk about anything. They're very, they're not exactly, supporters. Uhm, just kind of like, a lot of, 'Go off and do your own thing'.'* This highlighted some of the differences between Rosie and her peers. It appeared that she had a lot to deal with: being new at the school, a lack of support at home, alongside a diagnosis of ADHD. Like the rest of the group, Rosie was critical of the support in school:

'And like, so I'd speak to a teacher about you know mental health and stuff, but it was kind of like the whole thing that 'Everybody's feeling the same. Just look on this website' and it's like I know that other people are feeling the same way as me but I'm not like doubting, or like, disregarding their feelings, but like I came to talk to you about me.'

This is a very significant comment. It is easy to suggest that other people might feel the same, but as Rosie so clearly articulates, this does not help the individual with their own feelings, which are unique. This tends to suggest that this school does not always take a child-centred approach to supporting students. Offering a website address to deal with a personal issue appears an easy solution, which obviously, in the case of Rosie, was unhelpful.

Late Adolescent Voices – Online Interviews

The interviews below were held online, one-to-one, with older students at university. For reasons explained earlier (Section 4.2) these interviews were not originally planned for the data collection but were in response to unprecedented events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it provided an opportunity for older students to voice their experiences which I would not have captured in my original plan. The experiences of both these young women were similar, in that they reported a lack of support when it was needed, at school. With hindsight, they both talked about what they would have liked from their schools, with an agreement that neither of their voices had been heard by their schools at the time.

Amy - Undergraduate Student - University of Compton – Online Interview

Amy is a student at University of Compton where she is doing a BA in English. She said she wants to teach in a secondary school so that she could help this age-group. Amy and I were not able to meet in person due to the Covid-19 restrictions, so our first encounter was online in our own homes – she seemed to be in a sitting-room, and I was in my home office. In accordance with the unpredictability of online interviewing, Amy's dog came into view briefly, but this did not disturb the interview process. Amy demonstrated a positive attitude towards the research and was keen to answer questions. I found her honest and open. She offered detail of some personal issues, for example, she talked about her depression which began at school in Year 11. She said that her experience as a student in a secondary school was quite negative and that *'I didn't feel particularly listened to.'* She said she'd had behaviour problems at school and later became depressed. She said she received no support from school. *'They never found me, and I never found them'* she said, which I found a powerful statement showing that she was unable to seek out the help she needed. She was clear that her school gave no opportunities for young people to *'voice an opinion.'* She went on to say, *'you don't have a voice during the teens'* and *'you feel quite oppressed.'* Despite this Amy said: *'I remember at the time enjoying school for the large part.'* She talked about her teachers who were *'brilliant and did care.'*

Carol - Undergraduate Student - University of Compton – Online Interview

The second volunteer to be interviewed online was Carol. Like Amy she was part of a university BA module group, intending to become a teacher. Interviewing an undergraduate, as opposed to a school student, revealed a more reflective response to the questions. Carol questioned her own behaviour when she was at school. Her memories seemed to be evoked by the interview, and she brought some individual hindsight, like Amy, to her responses. Carol she that she wanted, eventually, to work with children with special needs. She told me she had liked school in general particularly the *'kind of structure, going in every day'* and *'seeing my friends like every day.'* She went on to explain that when she was 12 years old, she received a diagnosis of autism. She said: *'I don't like to identify with it, but I could probably talk for hours about the fact that I was not supported by the system.'* She explained how, fortunately, she was eventually supported by a teacher, a Special Educational Needs and Disability Co-Ordinator (SENDCo). Carol had also been excluded from school on occasions and didn't like *'being kind of different.'* She said that she felt she was *'misunderstood a lot.'* She often argued with teachers and said she was *'not pleased or proud'* about the way she acted. She wondered if the traits she had through autism *'didn't fit into a mainstream kind of setting.'* When asked about her friendships Carol gave a vivid account: *'I remember at one point, this is Year 10, I would have been 15, I used to sit in the middle of my two groups, three girls on one side of me, and about six or seven girls on the other side of me. And I used to feel amazing, like look at me and all my friends and stuff like that.'* However, she did say that she thought *'some friendships were potentially fake, but at the time I would say they were important.'* Another interesting comment from Carol was that: *'It felt*

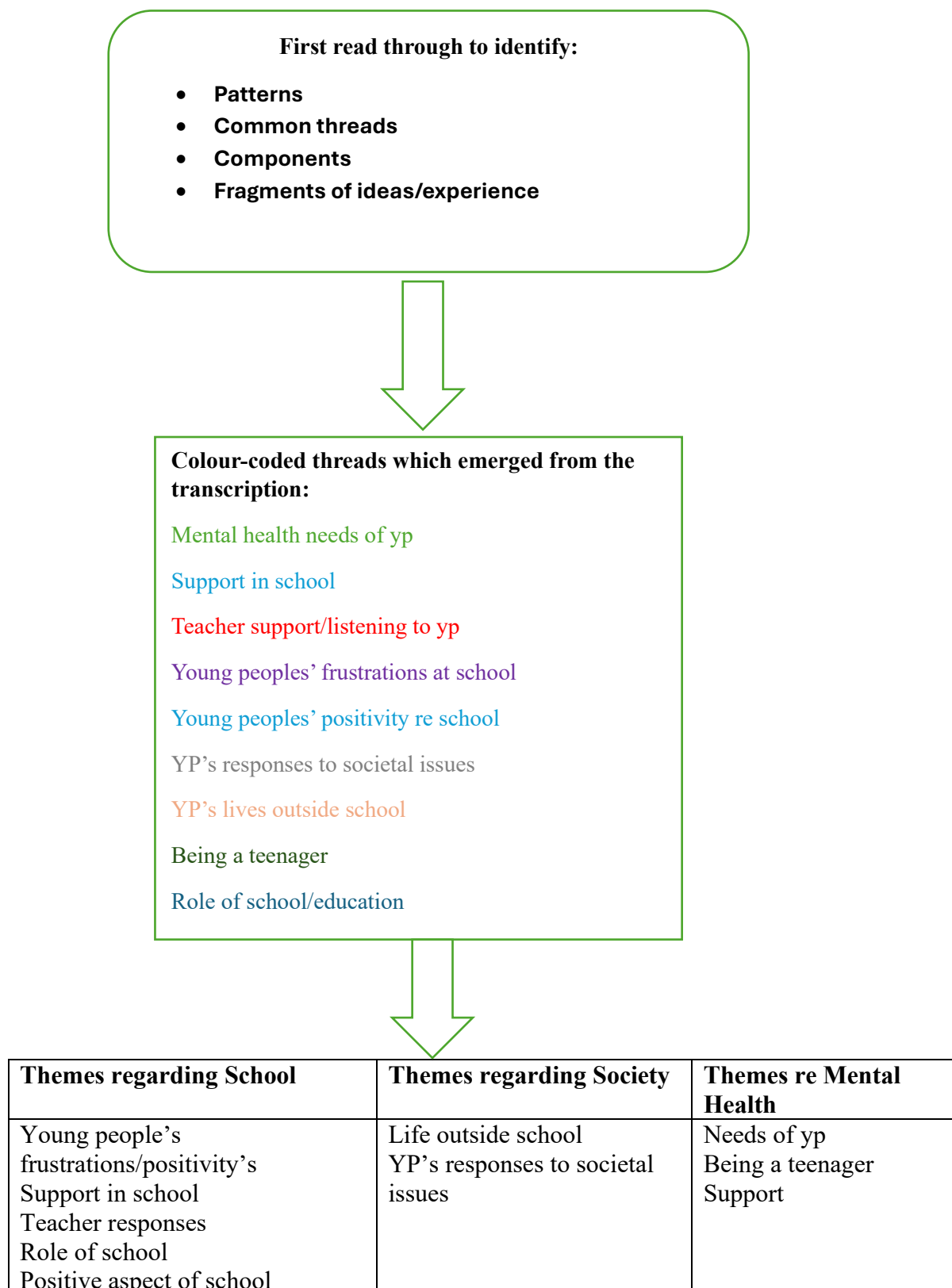
like we were against the teachers, so you felt like a force, I guess, in a way, when you go through all that stuff, as a teenager.’ This statement conjures up an image of the power that can be felt when part of a group. Like Amy she did not feel that her voice was heard at school. She suggested that it was not the norm, at her school, to give opinions until 6th form. She had a strong view about how she perceived her school manipulating the voices of young people and gave the following example:

‘When Ofsted was coming, and they would pick the students, that were like the good students, like I wouldn’t get, they wouldn’t pick me to go to speak to the Ofsted inspectors because they knew I would be honest, completely.’

APPENDIX 10

Process of Thematic Analysis - 12th January 2022

Interview 18 – Amber, staff member, HH (interviewed 2021)



APPENDIX 11

CODING on Interview 7 – Dryden Academy underlining=A Priori coding Colour: BLUE=school support PINK=trust YELLOW=powerlessness GREEN=negativity towards school ORANGE= positivity towards school LIGHT BLUE=fairness RED=communication difficulties PURPLE=peer group relationships DARK RED=being judged	Words in italics are <i>IN VIVO</i>
Interviewer: So, the first question (Question 1) is You spend a lot of time in school, out of all your experiences here, what do you enjoy most? Elizabeth: <i>Going home.</i> I: Any more than going home, as well as going home... E: Probably that brief bit in the morning, before Form, like when you just get in and you can just say ‘Hi’ to everyone. I: Mm. So, seeing your friends... E: Kind of. <i>Not much happens in the day.</i> You can just do what you want. I: And that is your highlight of all your experiences? E: There are different parts, on different days, but that’s like the key point. I: OK. Molly: <i>I quite enjoy the artistic lessons, and things, we do. Things like art, and drama, and technology.</i> I: Right. Sarah: <i>I like PE and Science.</i> I: They’re your favourites. S: Yep. I: And you’ve all mentioned, well two of you have mentioned subjects, you’ve mentioned getting here. What about anything that goes on between lessons, the social side of it, is that important?	<i>NEGATIVE VIEW OF SCHOOL</i> <i>NEGATIVE VIEW OF SCHOOL</i> <i>POSITIVE VIEW OF SCHOOL</i> <i>POSITIVE VIEW OF SCHOOL</i>

S: I like lunch break. I: OK. Thank you for that. On the other side of that, (Question 2) is there anything you find difficult in school? And if so, can anyone help you with that? You were nodding... M: Well, <u>things are kind of difficult, it's just because we're all teenagers, and that. We all have these very solid opinions of other people, and sometimes they are not the nicest.</u> I: What was the word you used before you said 'opinions'? M: Like solid. I: Solid. I see. You mean like fixed. M: Yeh. I: Give us an example of that, no names, but what would you call a fixed opinion? M: <u>Someone going up to you, like you are on multiple occasions, and perhaps saying that you, I don't know, perhaps just saying that you are kind of not intelligent, not a nice person, but doing it on multiple occasions.</u> I: Right. So, criticising you. M: Yeh. I: So, is it name-calling? M: Depends. Sometimes. I: Right. So that would be like verbal bullying, wouldn't it? M: <u>Yeh.</u> E: Very few people do it cos it's just too easy to get told off for. I: Really. M: <u>They might have said it, they might not have said it, they can't prove it. (voice rises) But if you go up to someone and punch them, you're going to get sent to Engage and they've got proof that you hit them.</u> I: Right. So, are you saying that people get away with verbal bullying? M: Not really. I: You're saying, 'not really' and you're nodding... E: <u>I just really don't like school, honestly.</u>	POSITIVE VIEW OF SCHOOL I – A/B II-B II - B UNFAIRNESS OF SCHOOL SYSTEM
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I: Don't like school. That's fair enough. Not everyone does. E: Being social is difficult, lessons are difficult. Homework is difficult. I: Right. E: There isn't much that isn't difficult. I: What's the social side being difficult? That's to do with the bullying, is it? E: No. They just find it difficult to talk to people, to communicate to people. I: Has that always been true? Or is it now that you are older? E: Always, I think. I: So, it could be that it's about something that's your particular thing that you find difficult. It's not about the school particularly. E: It wasn't about Primary School, but here it's a lot more difficult to be social with people, cos they're in separate groups. Like, <i>(addresses girl in group)</i> your <u>friend group is very separate to my friend group, separate to the boy's friend group. The different groups compartmentalise the school.</u> I: That's a very good word. E: <i>(whispers)</i> Is it a word? I: OK. So, it's quite divisive, it sounds. Between people. And people are in their little groups. What do you think? S: Just what people think of me. Like the <u>popular group, the dodgy group</u>, they go around and they just say what they think. And they'll just put you down. It's not very nice. I: That isn't very nice, is it? Can anyone help you with those things? <i>(pause)</i> Do you go and talk to people? S: No. It doesn't affect me, but they just look everyone up and down, if you know what I mean, and they just kind of judge them. I: Mm. Judging is the word. E: But if they say something bad you can't just change your outfit. You've just got to stick with it. You just want to get to	SUPPORT SERVICE AT SCHOOL NEGATIVE VIEW OF SCHOOL FEELING POWERLESS FEELING POWERLESS COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES PEER GROUP RELATIONSHIPS GROUP DIFFERENTIATION GROUP DIFFERENTIATION/ PEER GROUP BEHAVIOUR
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school you can't change what you're wearing. You don't know what they're reaction is going to be until you get to school. I: So, appearance matters. M: On the side of being able to get help from people, it, the fact that we have places you can go to get help. But sometimes it's almost as if they will push you away cos you don't have the proof that they apparently need to be able to do anything against it. And they are not that great. And also, the atmosphere in there is just horrible. S: Cos that's also the place where a lot of people go, to get told off, to get punished. So, when you feel like you want to go there to talk, you feel like you are being punished. So, you feel like you've done something wrong. I: That's interesting. So, you are saying the same place where you need to go for help, feeling a bit vulnerable, will also be the place where you would be told off, disciplined? M: They're not that great. In Year 8 I sent a report and they lost it. I: Who lost it? M: Engage. I filed a report, and they lost it. I: So, a complaint against...people, or something? M: Yeh. Some girls had gone through my bag in Year 8 and they have been kind of mean since Year 7 and I didn't want to deal with it anymore. So I filed my report, and I waited a couple of months, and I thought they were doing stuff but they just lost my report, and I just had to sit there and asked them if they were doing anything, and they just said 'We didn't know anything was going on'...a report and they lost it. And they still haven't found it to this day. I: So, this was when you were in Y8, you're in Y9 now? M: Year 9. I: Has it got better since you've been in Y9? M: Yes, sure. I don't think I've had to file any more reports. I: Well, that's good, isn't it?	<i>'THE POPULAR GROUP, THE DODGY GROUP'</i> PEER GROUP BEHAVIOUR PEER GROUP BEHAVIOUR /POWERLESSNESS SUPPORT SERVICE IN SCHOOL UNFAIRNESS OF SCHOOL SYSTEM UNFAIRNESS OF SCHOOL SYSTEM ANECDOTE
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I: That's a shame. E: <u>Even my parents say that my Dad said the other day that, cos I was feeling really down</u>, and generally stressed, if someone offered me a million pounds to go back to your age, I wouldn't take it. I: Right. E: <u>We're not children. And we're given so much responsibility. And we meant to be so mature. But we're not adults. Some adults are expecting us to be light-hearted, like children, and the next they're expecting us to act like adults. That might just be my family though.</u> I: No, I think that is what people say about adolescence. That you are sort of caught in the middle between two stages. So, it can be difficult for some people. <i>(pause)</i> Do you feel that as well? M: <u>Yeh, definitely. Like, honestly, being an adolescent, and stuff, is kind of hell, because ...</u> I: Wow. That's strong, isn't it? M: <i>(laughs)</i> <u>In a way it is, because like at this age, as previously said, you understand things a lot more. And because at this stage in your life, stuff would probably have happened that's slightly negative, and you were too young to do some things and too old to do others. Just stress. And everything is judged.</u> I: Mm. E: <u>You can't do anything. Everything you say, everything you wear, do.</u> I: Mm. It's a grim picture. Did you feel like this a year ago, would you say? Has it changed in that time? E: <u>A year ago, I was really obsessed with stuff and I had really strong interests, so I kind of didn't notice the social side of the world.</u> Were you here last year, ME? S: <u>I joined two weeks after Christmas.</u>	I-B I-B PEER GROUP RELATIONSHIPS PEER GROUP RELATIONSHIPS I-B IV FEELING POWERLESS I-B IV I-C
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I: So, you were here for most of it, for two terms. What was it like for you joining? That must have been quite difficult when everyone was in friendship groups, and you like joined in January. S: Yeh. <u>Well, I knew people here from Primary school, so I settled in quite well.</u> I: Right. And do you think things are as bleak as these two are describing, for you? No? Tell me a bit what it's like for you. S: Uhm. <u>Well, sometimes you are not understood because you are going through changes and everything. But you also have that sense of freedom, as well, because you can just go out with your friends, and just do everything you want, as long as you are sensible and that. But some people go too far and get a bit stupid.</u> I: Is this at school you are talking about? S: Er, no, <u>just like normal teenagers and that. Yeh, you have to be mature, but like they don't, some people don't, understand that. So yeh you have to have some kind of adult thoughts. If you know what I mean.</u> I: Yes, I do. S: <u>In fact, you can do more what you like than you can as a child.</u> I: Right. And maybe, it's the case that some people reach that point earlier than others? Cos you are all developing at different rates, aren't you? Physically and everything, and so maybe your mental health or intelligence develops differently? <i>(pause)</i> I think that is true cos I have always taught in High Schools and I remember some kids being quite young and in the same class as those that were more mature, you know. E: <u>When you are our age, you definitely clash with your parents.</u> I: Ahuh. E: Like, <u>I have caused so many arguments in my family, mainly with my Dad. We're very opinionated people. So, I think that</u>	I-B <i>‘BEING AN ADOLESCENT IS KIND OF HELL’</i> I-B BEING JUDGED BEING JUDGED I-B II II-B I-B
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<u>mental health is really big and the only reason it's become so big nowadays because life threats, and the wars, and stuff, have gone. So now we are looking more into mental health. It's become more prominent because we have the time and the resources to look at it. And my Dad says a lot of people who say they have got mental illnesses are just using it as a label to hide behind. And get away with work because he's met people who do that. So, he's assuming that everyone who does that, everyone who has a label, does that. And he believes that people who genuinely have mental health illnesses, if you don't label them, it would be better for them because they would be able to live a normal life without trying to live up to the label they have been given. And I disagree with that strongly. And that ...</u> I: And that's why I am interested in your view. What do you think of that? E: <u>I believe that people can, some people are using it as an excuse, but I don't think that's a common thing.</u> I: Mm. E: I think that's a kind of 1 in 50 maybe. I: Right. E: <u>Because a lot of people can have various scales – so someone could say they've got ADHD, that doesn't mean they are bouncing off the walls all the time, they could be relatively low on the spectrum, but that doesn't mean that they don't have it, and it doesn't mean that they've got to act a certain way because of it. And if people want to be diagnosed they should simply be, so that they have that kind of assurance of that if they think that acting in a way that really isn't normal and they want to know why they are acting in that way then they can know, why maybe they don't fit in, or why they act in a certain way. They don't think that they're just weird and an outcast, they know that they're acting for a certain reason.</u> I: Mm.	IV I-E I-B I-B I-C I-C I – ISSUE OF MENTAL HEALTH I-C IV
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E: Does that make sense?

I: Yes. Definitely. But then nobody is weird and an outcast, are they?

E: *(laughs)*.

I: Do you think there is anybody in the school that is described as 'weird'?

M: I think that people in this school immediately put labels on people who are slightly different as the 'weirdos' or the 'freaks' of the school.

I: Right. So, I like the way you are saying slightly different.

You are saying some people act slightly different to the 'norm' or 'normality,' although that is hard to define. Mm. **(Question 4) Are there any positive sides to being a teenager then, do you think?** *(pause)*

E: You can fit into better clothes.

I: You like fashions?

E: No, I don't like modern fashions, but I can get into 1950 and 1920s clothes easier when I am the size closer to a small adult.

I don't like modern fashion.

I: Anything else. Do you feel that you kind of understand more things at this age, or appreciate things?

E: I don't know. I am probably at the same reading age as I was when I was eleven. Maybe I've improved a little bit.

(pause)

I: Is that a worry?

E: No.

I: Right.

E: I had no friends at Primary School, so I read to kind of chill and my teacher, my Year 6 teacher absolutely hated me! And I talk to people from my Primary School and they say, Yeh, she really had it, she didn't like you. So, I read instead of talking to other people and so it meant I was at a very good level, I believe. I was reading young adult books when I was, like, ten.

I: Yes.

VIEW ON MENTAL
HEALTH

PERSONAL VIEW OF
ADHD

E: <u>I was always proud of myself, but now I've just kind of stopped reading as much.</u> I: Well, it's not something that you want to do all the time, is it? You might go in and out, you might come back to it, at some point, as an interest. E: <u>I like reading. It's just homework and classwork.</u> I: All the stuff you're meant to do, isn't it? What about you? Do you feel there is anything positive about being a teenager? M: Uhm. <i>(long pause)</i> <u>I don't know.</u> I: You can't... M: <u>There are kind of few interesting things, like you have freedom.</u> I: What's that? You mentioned freedom, as well, didn't you. Do you mean you don't have to stick to the rules? Or...what do you mean by that? M: <u>Freedom to go out for longer.</u> I: At home you are talking about. Like in the evenings? M: Yeh. <u>And like you are slightly more independent.</u> I: Right. Yeh. M: And like I guess <u>it means a bit more positive things to a lot of teenagers because it means they do get a bit of time on their own, not in school, just by themselves, or with mates.</u> I: That's an important time, isn't it? M: <u>Few people live near me. I just stay in the house.</u> I: OK. The next question is about friendships. M: <u>Oh, God.</u> I: So (that sounds interesting) (Question 5) just tell me a bit about friendships. Do you want to start cos you just made that interesting comment under your breath. <i>(general laughter)</i> I'm intrigued. M: <u>They're all over the place.</u> I: Right. So, what does that exactly mean? M: <u>We're all like, in my friends circle, all like 13, 14, and we all have our own opinions about things and sometimes we don't</u>	II-BEHAVIOUR OF PEERS I I I-B LACK OF FRIENDS II-COPING STRATEGY
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agree with each other. <i>(laughs)</i> And then also because in our school you have to be very careful about who you trust. I: Really. M: Yes, you have to be extremely careful who you trust. I: Do you mean amongst the pupils or do you mean generally? M: Amongst the pupils. I: Right. <i>(pause)</i> Have you had an experience where you trusted somebody and it went wrong, or? M: Oh, well, I told some girl something, this happens all the time to many people, but I told this one girl something and then the next thing I knew she told this twisted story of it to the entire school. A couple of months ago I thought well I'll spill all my secrets to everyone. But a lot of people think they have firsthand information then say someone close to the person who the information is relevant to, said it. So someone else found the information and then they said that <i>(names a girl)</i> had told them that and I kind of didn't trust her for a while because I believed that she had been telling everyone everything but it had been someone's idea of a twisted joke to try and break up a group. Also, there's this Year 8 and I told them who I liked and now he keeps frightening, no not really frightening, but 'I'll tell her 'You want to chat. Literally no, mildly. He's so small too. I can't keep track of where he is, where he is going. I: Do you think it is something about being girls? Do you think girls are more difficult to trust? M: <u>Girls are more up-and-down.</u> I: Mm. M: <u>Whilst boys are more just laid-back. But girls can be quite horrible.</u> I: Moody, I suppose you would call it. Yeh. M: Yeh, I just describe it for myself <i>(indistinct)</i>. I: And does that mean you don't trust some close girl friends? M: Oh, no. I trust all of them. They are all really nice people. I: Right.	II-C II-COPING STRATEGY II-PROUD OF ACHIEVEMENT II-CHANGE OF BEHAVIOUR I-E NEGATIVITY TOWARDS SCHOOL I-UNCERTAINTY I-FREEDOM I-E I-B I-E I-SENSE OF ISOLATION
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M: But some other girls in separate groups, I don't really, I don't talk to them. But I just don't, I wouldn't tell them anything, like all my secrets. I: All your inner thoughts. M: Yeh. I: So, it sounds like there's a lot of gossiping goes on as well, yeh? E: <u>I have a very strong self-defence mechanism where when I am overwhelmed or emotional, I try and push all of my friends away, make them all hate me. I tried that. But usually, it just ends up with me just running away, not actually running away, just not eating much with them, not...</u> I: Withdrawing. E: <u>Withdrawing, Yeh.</u> I: Yeh. E: Like I really don't like my friends, but I can't bear to not be around them. I: Ah, that's an interesting one, isn't it? That push-pull sort of thing. You want to be with them but then you can't. So, friendships are quite difficult you are saying. Do you have more now, or better now than when you were younger? Do you have better friends? (pause) Do you think your friendships are of better quality, or something? M: I think we understand each other more, because we just normally go through the same thing, but we have girls and boys in our group so sometimes the boys can just annoy all of us. I: I see. Right. That must be effective – having boys in the group. Does it? M: It's quite nice. (pause) They're funny (laughs). I: Does it not mean that you can't talk quiet, how shall I say, intimately about girl things? If a boy is there? Or doesn't it matter? M: Uhm. They understand a lot, but sometimes we just break off go on walks or something.	'OH, GOD' (relationships) NEGATIVE VIEW OF PEER R/SHIPS DISHARMONY IN R/SHIPS ISSUE OF TRUST ISSUE OF TRUST ISSUE OF TRUSTING PEERS TRUST – ANECDOTE TRUST – ANECDOTE
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I: Right, if it's something private. M: Yeh. I: So, what about you? Do you think you've got better or different types of friends now you are older? E: I don't know. They're all more stressful now. Definitely more stressful. My whole defence-mechanism thing, it means I'm constantly stressing, I'm constantly worrying if I'm going to probably push them away and then the next minute, I want to properly push them away. It was a lot easier last year cos we were kind of more chilled out, we were cool, now no-one has any chill, no-one has any cool. I: Why is that then? E: Well, a lot of people were very hostile towards our group, I don't know why. I: Why aren't people chilled out now? Is it pressure of school or something? E: School works definitely got harder. GCSEs coming up, we're probably in the middle of all that stuff. I: Mm. E: And it's so difficult to keep track of everyone when everyone's growing and everyone's changing. Like I still call you by your old name, I feel really bad afterwards cos I referred to them in the wrong pronoun, and I feel bad that I use the wrong term to address someone. But then other days I'm just too tired to refer to people as they want to be referred. To be fair everyone does call me (<i>says a name</i>) which isn't my name, so. I: What do you think, do you find you've got better friends now than you had, or... S: I mean in Primary School I was home-schooled, so I didn't really know anyone. I: Oh, right, that must have made a difference. S: Yeh, and then I went to a different High School before this one.	I-B I-B GENDER DIFFERENCES TRUST TRUST I-B COPING MECHANISM 'I TRY AND PUSH ALL OF MY FRIENDS AWAY, MAKE THEM ALL HATE ME' I-B PEER GROUP RELATIONSHIPS
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I: Right. S: And something happened there which was completely taken out of context, something M knows about, it was completely taken out of context and not what I said in the first place. Then I moved here and was like, I found it really hard to trust people. I: Mm. Yes. After that experience. S: I joined after Year 7, so. I: Do you feel you can trust the people you are with now, then? S: Yeh. I: That's good, isn't it? They're supportive. S: Also, cos they're much like M's group. We've a mixed group, as well, boys and girls. E: To be fair the boys in our group are not, actually, the boys in the group are not actually, proper, they're not 'lad' boys. I: I know what you are saying. E: It's like, they don't count, those lad-boys, they're more like (names a boy). I don't like (names boy). He's OK. I: OK. Let's move on to the next question. (Question 6) How important are your parents or carers, to you at this age? And your siblings, as well. M: Well, <u>my parents are important because like they pay the mortgage and everything and they get me food and they buy me clothes.</u> I: So, financially they are important. Is there anything more than that? M: Also, <u>they're just, erm, being there. Looking after you, like loving you and that.</u> I: Support. M: Yeh. <u>Cos mostly you can talk to them about anything because they don't like care about your flaws, they love you for who you are. But my sister is just annoying.</u> I: Is she older? M: Younger. I: Right. At this school?	PEER GROUP RELATIONSHIPS DIFFS WITH MIXED GENDER GROUPS POSITIVE ASPECT OF MIXED GENDER GROUP PEER GROUP RELATIONSHIPS – HANDLING MIXED GENDER GP STRESS OF PEER GROUP RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE IN ATTITUDE Y9 HOSTILE RELATIONSHIPS
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M: Yeh, it's like yesterday, uhm, I didn't know she was staying after school to rehearse her drug thing, and she didn't tell me, so I thought she'd got lost or something or got attacked.

I: You were worried.

M: Yeh. And she turned her phone off. So, I couldn't call her so I had to call some of my friends and then her friend was like 'Oh, Yeh, she's doing Drama.' And I was like, she could have told me.

I: (*lights in room suddenly go off, girls giggling*). Oh, that's interesting. Does that happen very often? (*one of the girls sings 'Hello darkness, my old friend'*) The trouble is I can't see my questions; we can still talk. Do you know where the light switch is?

M: I have no idea where the light switch is, oh, it's in the corner up there! (*lights come back on*).

I: So, where were we? We were talking about, you were talking about, your younger sister.

M: Yeh, she copies me like, what I do.

I: Right. She looks up to you, that's why.

M: Yeh, it's very sweet but she can be annoying.

I: Have you got other siblings, older brothers and sisters?

M: No.

I: So, it's just the two of you?

M: Yeh.

I: What about you? Have you got...siblings?

S: You know how confusing my family is (*lots of chat between girls – someone says 'confusing family'*)

I: That sounds interesting.

S: Yeh, my parent is great. The other one isn't. We don't talk about the other one.

I: One parent is OK.

S: Yes. And the other one kind of skedaddled out before I was born, never came back.

I: Oh, fair enough.

PRESSURE OF GCSEs

PEER GROUP CHANGES
GENDER ISSUES

BEING HOME-SCHOOLED –
LACKING PEER-GROUP

MOVING SCHOOLS

DIFFICULTIES IN SCHOOL

ANECDOTE

TRUST

S: Yeh. So, the one that I have left is very supportive. I: Mm. S: Uhm, when <u>I was diagnosed with something a year ago, a physical thing, a year ago, like she was there for me. And allowed me to talk to her about it all.</u> I: That's good, isn't it? S: Yeh, and like <u>my million siblings</u> (<i>laughs</i>). I: A million siblings? (<i>laughs</i>) That could be an exaggeration. How many have you got? S: How many have I got? Err, <u>I don't know how many I have, seven or something?</u> I: Do they all live with you? Or are they in other places? S: <u>I only met two of them.</u> I: I see. So how many live at home with you? S: <u>Two. They both don't really understand. Like my little sister is annoying, because of the same reason</u> (<i>mentions other girl</i>) <u>like my elder sister has mental problems so she doesn't really understand that much.</u> I: Mm. And your parent is supportive. At home. For advice? Does she give you advice? S: Yeh, in a way, but <u>she also just kind of helps when like, I'm not feeling great about something.</u> I: Mm. Caring. (<i>pause</i>) That's good. (<i>pause</i>) What about you? E: Err, <u>my parents are confusing. Very, very confusing. They both had very difficult childhoods but that means my Mum can't deal with emotions very well. My Dad is very grateful for what you have 'I didn't have that when I was young.'</u> And it means, me and my dad are very opinionated. So, we often go <u>head-to-head over a lot of things. Which is why I haven't had Technology for a week now</u> (<i>laughs</i>). I argued about <u>relationships, not in a bad way, I just felt that relationships were emotional things, not, it didn't have to be physical at my age.</u> And my Dad said they've got to have some sort of physical	POSITIVE PEER-GROUP R/SHIPS GENDER IN GROUPS DIFFERENTIATION OF MALE PEERS I-C I-C I-C I-C ANECDOTE RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS SIBLING I-C ANECDOTE
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<u>aspect otherwise they are no different to friendships. Anyway, so...</u> I: Interesting conversation. So, would you call them supportive? If you need help, or advice? E: <u>Yeh, but, not very, they stress me out a lot, because they're determined that I can do really, really well. And my Mum got something stupid, like she only got told off by a teacher once, in her entire High School life. And she didn't get any warnings, or behaviour, she just got told off. And my Dad got a detention once which means they expect me never to do anything wrong...</u> I: You've got high standards to follow... E: And <u>I've asked them before, can they stop having such high expectations of me, and they said 'No.' They're going to keep pushing me cos I am naturally lazy so if I don't have them pushing me, I just won't try.</u> I: Do you agree with that? E: <u>Some cases, other cases I don't agree.</u> I: Right. E: And I just <u>sometimes they can fix it, I know they'll be supportive, like all people saying mean stuff. I've told them about that. And they're usually quite supportive of that. But then there's stuff like that mental health discussion and they said I probably wouldn't ever get diagnosed with anything, so they are not going to let me get diagnosed with anything. And that annoyed me. And sometimes they are supportive, other times I am not so sure. A lot of the time there is mockery and comedy going about.</u> I: Right. E: <u>I don't take jokes well. My Dad likes joking a lot.</u> I: (slowly) Yes. E: <u>My Dad says my forehead could be used as a billboard or could be used to plough snow. And he doesn't understand why</u>	I-C I-C I-C I-C I-C ABSENT PARENT I-C 'THE OTHER ONE KIND OF SKEDDADLED OUT BEFORE I WAS BORN, NEVER CAME BACK'
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<u>(indistinct amongst general laughter) my head so much. He just watches so much.</u> M: Your forehead is the same as mine. I: Is that up to you? E: <u>No. And he mocked my feet saying I'll never need flippers if I go diving, I can just use my natural feet. (laughs) And Mum has tried to have a conversation with him, saying '(names father), let's not...' the general gist is 'don't say that, if affects her' and then I say 'Dad, I don't like my forehead, or my feet, I can barely look at them'. And he says, 'It's OK we love you, even if you have got massive feet.' I'm size 6, Dad, I'm not that big.</u> <i>(others join in 'I'm size 7' 'I'm size 9')</i> I: Right. We're going to move onto the next question: (Question 7): 'How much do you feel that the school staff listen to you, listen to what you need, or want, or care about? And if they do, in what ways do they listen? Why don't you start, please? M: <u>I don't really say anything.</u> I: You don't talk to them. Staff. M: No. I: Right. Is there a reason, for that? M: <u>I just don't really have anything to say.</u> I: Right, you don't feel the need to. M: No. I: Do you feel that if there was something that happened to you, either at school or in your life, you feel you could go to a teacher or a member of staff, would you feel you could do it, even if you don't? M: <u>Yeh. I like some teachers. I would just go to them.</u> I: Right. And you'd go to the ones you like. OK. That's helpful. Thank you. ME: Well, <u>there's a couple of teachers that, like, I feel like I probably could go talk to. But there's one of them that's like</u>	I-C I-C I-C I-C BEING MISUNDERSTOOD I-C/D I-C VIEWS ON RELATIONSHIPS
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<u>really good, when I've wanted to talk to them before about something. And they like really thought over it all. And none of these people are in Engage which are meant to do these things.</u> I: Right. What do you think that's about then? S: Nobody, you cannot go in Engage and talk about something deeply, to them. Because the walls are so thin in there, and the windows. I: Really. S: You can be sat in that room, and the people outside that room can clearly hear what you are saying. So, you can't talk about anything. I: Mm. That's not good for confidentiality, is it? S: And, <u>even in the counselling room you can hear what you are saying outside of the room.</u> I: Right. You've experienced that, have you. You've been outside and you've heard people talk? S: <u>Yeh. It's bad.</u> I: But you are saying you wouldn't go to that 'resource' if you like, but you would feel comfortable talking to particular members of staff. S: Yeh. I: OK. What about you? E: <u>I try and make friends with the teachers. I don't like talking to other students, so I try and make friends with the teachers.</u> I: Right. E: <u>I did it in Primary School. It seemed to go well then.</u> I: Would you say then you talked to them, that might be in a friendly way, but would you go if there was a serious issue? E: <u>I have, but it, kind of, annoys me, cos some of the teachers, their response is carting me off to Engage. I try and talk with a teacher cos I feel like they can give me advice, more than people in Engage. Their response will be 'Do you want to go to Engage and talk to someone there about it?'</u>	I-C PRESSURE EXPECTATIONS I-C HIGH EXPECTATIONS YET LOW EXPECTATIONS CONFLICTED I-C CONFUSED OVER FAMILY SUPPORT
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I: Right. And you don't feel that's sufficient for your needs in some way? E: I just feel that the people in Engage are so used to dealing with people, but they can't really give the in-depth answers and they can't really respond to every single person as the singular person. I: Right. E: They can't. They don't have that much of an emotional response cos they've seen it all. I: Mm. <i>(pause)</i> So, on the whole, <i>(loud voices outside in corridor)</i> are you all saying that if you had something important to say you feel the school would listen to your view? Whether or not it was just a problem, or say you had an idea, something to change, would you feel that somebody would listen to that idea, or that view? E: If it were for something to change, they would listen, but I would have to do it myself. Like if I say I think a charity day would be good, they would probably agree, but I would have to do all the organisation myself. I: Right. OK. Thank you for that. The next question: (Question 8) In an ideal world, is there anything more, or different, that the school could do for you at this stage? So, I'm saying if they had enough money, what is it they could do that you think would make your life better in school? M: <u>Build a Sports Hall.</u> I: Right. Yeh. Tell us a bit more about that. M: <u>Well, our gym is really small and we can't do much in it.</u> I: Right. M: <u>So, if they got a load of fund raising, could build a Sports Hall at the end of the field, and we could do more.</u> I: Do you like sport particularly? M: Yeh. I: So, you have to cope with what?	I-C FAMILY DYNAMICS TEASING MIXED MESSAGES FROM PARENTS II-C II-C
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M: <u>The school hall or gym is quite small, and the netball courts are quite dangerous.</u> I: They're old, I suppose. M: <u>It's got a lot of stones on it, so you slip over. Yeh, and it slopes down. And then there's a puddle (<i>laughs, others join in</i>).</u> I: Really. That's not much fun. (<i>general laughter</i>) If you're playing in a load of puddles... M: Yeh. I've fallen over a couple of times and literally ripped your skin off. I: Mm. M: I did that a couple of weeks ago and broke my arm as well. (<i>talks to others in an aside</i>) You know she ran out of French. I showed her my arm and she ran out of French. I: So, what do you think could be improved...anything at all? S: I like M's idea, but also, I think extra study support. Honestly, cos it's like the Maths study support and that, that's only for the select students. And I think there should be things like, open, on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school as there are late buses on those days. I: Right. S: That you can go to, and like go into more depth in learning. I: Cos, I saw a thing on the board up there (<i>pointing to notice board behind the group</i>) All: That's for GCSEs. I: Oh, I see. So, you are talking about pre-GCSE. You think that support... S: Like I think it should be open for everyone not just Year 11s. (<i>others voice agreement</i>) I: That sounds very good. And would that be run by teachers, or older pupils...or...What would work? S: Either would probably work. But we have like certain teachers, like Maths teachers, English teachers, Science teachers, they stay in school until 5 and so they are already here.	II-C II-C SUPPORT SYSTEM IN SCHOOL LIMITATIONS OF SUPPORT IN SCHOOL LIMITATIONS OF SCHOOL SUPPORT SYSTEM LIMITATIONS OF SCHOOL SUPPORT SYSTEM LIMITATIONS OF SCHOOL SUPPORT SYSTEM
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I: Yeh, they might be doing busy things... S: They could be, but there's always time. I: It's a very good suggestion. OK, I'm going to move on now, because the time is going. (Question 9) How much do you think about the future? M: Too much (<i>sighs</i>). I: Go on then, what do you want to say about 'too much'? M: Way too much, because there's like all these things going on at the moment in school, out of school, that's like government this, government that, that will affect us and GCSEs cos you're always worrying how you are going to do in them. But like, with the government thing, like all these things are happening that we, that at our age, can have no power to stop. I: Right. M: Yet, it's our future it's affecting. I: That's very important, isn't it? And now we've got a new government, maybe having less power? M: Yeh. I: But so, you feel that erm, as a student you really can't make a lot of difference to what's going on? M: Yeh, like, in the wider world we're all so powerless at our age. Even though it's us it's affecting. I: Absolutely. That's a good point. What about you, what do you think? E: I am just generally stressed. I have no ideas of what to do when I'm grown up. I: No. E: But my parents really, really, really want me to succeed. I: Right. E: And they said they'll be fine with anything if they know I've tried my hardest. I: Yeh.	II-C II-C SUPPORT SYSTEM IN SCHOOL LIMITATIONS OF SUPPORT SYSTEM IN SCHOOL LIMITATIONS OF SUPPORT SYSTEM IN SCHOOL HOW THE SCHOOL LISTENS
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E: But because they always have such high hopes for me, I mean whatever I do, whatever job I get they won't believe that I've tried my hardest. I don't even know what GCSE's to take, I don't know what to do when I'm older. I: Mm. It's hard. E: I've been given one throwaway subject. They've said I can do one subject that I want to do. And I don't know what to do with the whole Brexit thing going on. Which will affect us so much, will really be hitting hard, by the time we're in university or college. Yet we have absolutely no say in it. I: Until you can vote. E: When we can vote it's too late, cos... I: They are thinking of changing that to 16. E: A year and a half. I: What about you, is there anything you want to say about the future, what do you feel about the future? S: I am quite scared of like the environment. I: Right. S: And what society's coming to. I: Yeh. S: Cos no-one acts like, mature, anymore. There's lots of like knife crime and everything. Like on London Bridge, why did he do it? That's just stupid. And then about global warming. I just kind of sit there and worry like, what if the world gets too hot, what if we all die too young. But I know we won't. I: No. But it is a concern, isn't it? I think a lot of people are worrying, quite rightly. S: And like, you can't change it. And about the water and everything and the turtles. I love turtles. E: But you were in Geography yesterday right. S: Baby penguins can shiver. I cried. I: Just one last question, cos I know it's time nearly. (Question 10) There's lots of different words that are used to describe your age group, so which of these do you like the best:	V-II SPORTS FACILITIES LIMITATION OF SCHOOL AMENITIES SCHOOL IMPROVEMENTS POOR CONDITION OF SPORTS FACILITIES POOR CONDITION OF SPORTS FACILITIES
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adolescent, teenager, young adult, young person, youth. Do any of those sound that they sum up, what this age group is about?

M: Probably young person or youth.

I: Right. Does that sound more reasonable to you?

M: Yeh. Like I play rugby and there's the youth age, it's under twelves and it goes up to under eighteens. So, it is not like the (*unclear*) it's the youth age. And the young, when you're a child you're not really recognised as a person, if you know what I mean? You're just like a kid, or a child.

I: Mm.

M: But then cos you don't really know anything, you don't understand everything, but when you're a young person if you say oh those people ...

I: Good, thank you. Have you got one of those you prefer?

S: Why can't we just be called humans?

I: Just want to be called humans.

S: Yeh, I don't know why we need these different age-categories.

I: That's a good question.

S: We could be good in some senses, but we all have these stereotypes as teenagers.

I: That's right, that's exactly what I'm looking at.

S: So that's what I get out of that...youth.

I: Yeh, I see what you are saying. OK.

E: I like youth as well cos usually it's the foolishness of youth. That's really what we are at the moment. (*general laughter as end of school bell rings in corridor outside classroom*)

I: Right. We'd better stop. Thank you very much....

APPENDIX 12

TRANSCRIPTION YOUNG PEOPLE INTERVIEW 7

Dryden Academy – Year 9– Elizabeth, Molly and Sarah

13.12.19 – Classroom 2 – 60 minutes

Interviewer: So, the first question (Question 1) is: You spend a lot of time in school, out of all your experiences here, what do you enjoy most?

Elizabeth: Going home.

I: Any more than going home, as well as going home...

E: Probably that brief bit in the morning, before Form, like when you just get in and you can just say 'Hi' to everyone.

I: Mm. So, seeing your friends...

E: Kind of. Not much happens in the day. You can just do what you want.

I: And that is your highlight of all your experiences?

E: There are different parts, on different days, but that's like the key point.

I: OK.

Molly: I quite enjoy the artistic lessons, and things, we do. Things like art, and drama, and technology.

I: Right.

Sarah: I like PE and Science.

I: They're your favourites.

S: Yep.

I: And you've all mentioned, well two of you have mentioned subjects, you've mentioned getting here. What about anything that goes on between lessons, the social side of it, is that important?

S: I like lunch break.

I: OK. Thank you for that. On the other side of that, (Question 2) is there anything you find difficult in school? And if so, can anyone help you with that? You were nodding...

M: Well, things are kind of difficult, it's just because we're all teenagers, and that. We all have these very solid opinions of other people, and sometimes they are not the nicest.

I: What was the word you used before you said 'opinions'?

M: Like solid.

I: Solid. I see. You mean like fixed.

M: Yeh.

I: Give us an example of that, no names, but what would you call a fixed opinion?

M: Someone going up to you, like you are on multiple occasions, and perhaps saying that you, I don't know, perhaps just saying that you are kind of not intelligent, not a nice person, but doing it on multiple occasions.

I: Right. So, criticising you.

M: Yeh.

I: So, is it name-calling?

M: Depends. Sometimes.

I: Right. So that would be like verbal bullying, wouldn't it?

M: Yeh.

E: Very few people do it cos it's just too easy to get told off for.

I: Really.

M: They might have said it, they might not have said it, they can't prove it. (voice rises) But if you go up to someone and punch them, you're going to get sent to Engage and they've got proof that you hit them.

I: Right. So, are you saying that people get away with verbal bullying?

M: Not really.

I: You're saying, 'not really' and you're nodding...

E: I just really don't like school, honestly.

I: Don't like school. That's fair enough. Not everyone does.

E: Being social is difficult, lessons are difficult. Homework is difficult.

I: Right.

E: There isn't much that isn't difficult.

I: What's the social side being difficult? That's to do with the bullying, is it?

E: No. They just find it difficult to talk to people, to communicate to people.

I: Has that always been true? Or is it now that you are older?

E: Always, I think.

I: So, it could be that it's about something that's your particular thing that you find difficult. It's not about the school particularly.

E: It wasn't about Primary School, but here it's a lot more difficult to be social with people, cos they're in separate groups. Like, (addresses girl in group) your friend group is very separate to my friend group, separate to the boy's friend group. The different groups compartmentalise the school.

I: That's a very good word.

E: (whispers) Is it a word?

I: OK. So, it's quite divisive, it sounds. Between people. And people are in their little groups. What do you think?

S: Just what people think of me. Like the popular group, the dodgy group, they go around and they just say what they think. And they'll just put you down. It's not very nice.

I: That isn't very nice, is it? Can anyone help you with those things? (pause) Do you talk to people?

S: No. It doesn't affect me, but they just look everyone up and down, if you know what I mean, and they just kind of judge them.

I: Mm. Judging is the word.

E: But if they say something bad you can't just change your outfit. You've just got to stick with it. You just want to get to school you can't change what you're wearing. You don't know what they're reaction is going to be until you get to school.

I: So, appearance matters.

M: On the side of being able to get help from people, it, the fact that we have places you can go to get help. But sometimes it's almost as if they will push you away cos you don't have the proof that they apparently need to be able to do anything against it. And they are not that great. And also, the atmosphere in there is just horrible.

S: Cos that's also the place where a lot of people go, to get told off, to get punished. So, when you feel like you want to go there to talk, you feel like you are being punished. So, you feel like you've done something wrong.

I: That's interesting. So, you are saying the same place where you need to go for help, feeling a bit vulnerable, will also be the place where you would be told off, disciplined?

M: They're not that great. In Year 8 I sent a report and they lost it.

I: Who lost it?

M: Engage. I filed a report, and they lost it.

I: So, a complaint against...people, or something?

M: Yeh. Some girls had gone through my bag in Year 8 and they have been kind of mean since Year 7 and I didn't want to deal with it anymore. So I filed my report, and I waited a couple of months, and I thought they were doing stuff but they just lost my report, and I just had to sit there and asked them if they were doing anything, and they just said 'We didn't know anything was going on'...a report and they lost it. And they still haven't found it to this day.

I: So, this was when you were in Y8, you're in Y9 now?

M: Year 9.

I: Has it got better since you've been in Y9?

M: Yes, sure. I don't think I've had to file any more reports.

I: Well, that's good, isn't it?

M: Now, if I've got a problem I usually go there and try to speak to people in person. Because of that, and I don't really trust that the report will get read. So, I have to go there and tell people myself.

I: And does that help? Talking 1 to 1? Or directly to somebody?

M: Uhm. It helps when you're then and there, cos you kind of calm down and you can talk about it. But when you leave, you're back in the world, and it's kind of, the shell that you've build round yourself kind of melts away. Back where you started.

I: Are you all in Y9? So, do you think that's something that's happened as you've got older? The negative things?

S: I think you're just more self-conscious.

I: Right, that makes sense, Yeh.

M: You know a lot more, as well, cos you understand situations a lot more than what you used to.

I: Yeh. (pause). And does that mean then that you're more aware of things, sort of more self-aware, more sensitive to them?

M: Yeh, I'm slightly more vulnerable as well, towards them.

I: Mm.

S: You've got to notice things a lot quicker. Because I look back on my memories at Primary School and I realise that the girls I thought were my best friends were really idiots.

I: Really. When you thought about it.

S: And I thought they were just jesting, but now that I have actually found friends, why don't they do stuff that my Primary school friends did? Why aren't they like that? And then I realise that they are actual decent people.

I: Mm. That's good, isn't it. I'm glad you're in a decent group. OK, thank you for that. So, the next question is more general. (Question 3) What is it like for you being a teenager now, at this stage in your life, what's the experience like?

E: Not good.

I: That's a shame.

E: Even my parents say that my Dad said the other day that, cos I was feeling really down, and generally stressed, if someone offered me a million pounds to go back to your age, I wouldn't take it.

I: Right.

E: We're not children. And we're given so much responsibility. And we meant to be so mature. But we're not adults. Some adults are expecting us to be light-hearted, like children, and the next they're expecting us to act like adults. That might just be my family though.

I: No, I think that is what people say about adolescence. That you are sort of caught in the middle between two stages. So, it can be difficult for some people. (pause) Do you feel that as well?

M: Yeh, definitely. Like, honestly, being an adolescent, is kind of hell, because ...

I: Wow. That's strong, isn't it?

M: (laughs) In a way it is, because like at this age, as previously said, you understand things a lot more. And because at this stage in your life, stuff would probably have happened that's slightly negative, and you were too young to do some things and too old to do others. Just stress. And everything is judged.

I: Mm.

E: You can't do anything. Everything you say, everything you wear, do.

I: Mm. It's a grim picture. Did you feel like this a year ago, would you say? Has it changed in that time?

E: A year ago, I was really obsessed with stuff and I had really strong interests, so I kind of didn't notice the social side of the world. Were you here last year, ME?

S: I joined two weeks after Christmas.

I: So, you were here for most of it, for two terms. What was it like for you joining? That must have been quite difficult when everyone was in friendship groups, and you like joined in January.

S: Yeh. Well, I knew people here from Primary school, so I settled in quite well.

I: Right. And do you think things are as bleak as these two are describing, for you? No? Tell me a bit what it's like for you.

S: Uhm. Well, sometimes you are not understood because you are going through changes and everything. But you also have that sense of freedom, as well, because you can just go out with your friends, and just do everything you want, as long as you are sensible and that. But some people go too far and get a bit stupid.

I: Is this at school you are talking about?

S: Er, no, just like normal teenagers and that. Yeh, you have to be mature, but like they don't, some people don't, understand that. So yeh you have to have some kind of adult thoughts. If you know what I mean.

I: Yes, I do.

S: In fact, you can do more what you like than you can as a child.

I: Right. And maybe, it's the case that some people reach that point earlier than others? Cos you are all developing at different rates, aren't you? Physically and everything, and so maybe your mental health or intelligence develops differently? (pause) I think that is true cos I have always taught in High Schools and I remember some kids being quite young and in the same class as those that were more mature, you know.

E: When you are our age, you definitely clash with your parents.

I: Ahuh.

E: Like, I have caused so many arguments in my family, mainly with my Dad. We're very opinionated people. So, I think that mental health is really big and the only reason it's become so big nowadays because life threats, and the wars, have gone. So now we are looking more into mental health. It's become more prominent because we have the time and the resources to look at it. And my Dad says a lot of people who say they have mental illnesses are just using it as a label to hide behind. And get away with work because he's met people who do that. So, he's assuming that everyone who does that, everyone who has a label, does that. And he believes that people who genuinely have mental health illnesses, if you don't label them, it would be better for them because they would be able to live a normal life without trying to live up to the label they have been given. And I disagree with that strongly. And that ...

I: And that's why I am interested in your view. What do you think of that?

E: I believe that people can, some people are using it as an excuse, but I don't think that's a common thing.

I: Mm.

E: I think that's a kind of 1 in 50 maybe.

I: Right.

E: Because a lot of people can have various scales – so someone could say they’ve got ADHD, that doesn’t mean they are bouncing off the walls all the time, they could be relatively low on the spectrum, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t have it, and it doesn’t mean that they’ve got to act a certain way because of it. And if people want to be diagnosed they should simply be, so that they have that kind of assurance of that if they think that acting in a way that really isn’t normal and they want to know why they are acting in that way then they can know, why maybe they don’t fit in, or why they act in a certain way. They don’t think that they’re just weird and an outcast, they know that they’re acting for a certain reason.

I: Mm.

E: Does that make sense?

I: Yes. Definitely. But then nobody is weird and an outcast, are they?

E: (laughs).

I: Do you think there is anybody in the school that is described as ‘weird’?

M: I think that people in this school immediately put labels on people who are slightly different as the ‘weirdos’ or the ‘freaks’ of the school.

I: Right. So, I like the way you are saying slightly different. You are saying some people act slightly different to the ‘norm’ or ‘normality,’ although that is hard to define. Mm. (Question 4) Are there any positive sides to being a teenager then, do you think? (pause)

E: You can fit into better clothes.

I: You like fashions?

E: No, I don’t like modern fashions, but I can get into 1950 and 1920s clothes easier when I am the size closer to a small adult. I don’t like modern fashion.

I: Anything else. Do you feel that you kind of understand more things at this age, or appreciate things?

E: I don’t know. I am probably at the same reading age as I was when I was eleven. Maybe I’ve improved a little bit. (pause)

I: Is that a worry?

E: No.

I: Right.

E: I had no friends at Primary School, so I read to kind of chill and my teacher, my Year 6 teacher absolutely hated me! And I talk to people from my Primary School and they say, Yeh, she really had it, she didn’t like you. So, I read instead of talking to other people and so it meant I was at a very good level, I believe. I was reading young adult books when I was, like, ten.

I: Yes.

E: I was always proud of myself, but now I’ve just kind of stopped reading as much.

I: Well, it’s not something that you want to do all the time, is it? You might go in and out, you might come back to it, at some point, as an interest.

E: I like reading. It’s just homework and classwork.

I: All the stuff you’re meant to do, isn’t it? What about you? Do you feel there is anything positive about being a teenager?

M: Uhm. (long pause) I don't know.

I: You can't...

M: There are kind of few interesting things, like you have freedom.

I: What's that? You mentioned freedom, as well, didn't you. Do you mean you don't have to stick to the rules? Or...what do you mean by that?

M: Freedom to go out for longer.

I: At home you are talking about. Like in the evenings?

M: Yeh. And like you are slightly more independent.

I: Right. Yeh.

M: And like I guess it means a bit more positive things to a lot of teenagers because it means they do get a bit of time on their own, not in school, just by themselves, or with mates.

I: That's an important time, isn't it?

M: Few people live near me. I just stay in the house.

I: OK. The next question is about friendships.

M: Oh, God.

I: So (that sounds interesting) (Question 5) just tell me a bit about friendships. Do you want to start cos you just made that interesting comment under your breath. (general laughter) I'm intrigued.

M: They're all over the place.

I: Right. So, what does that exactly mean?

M: We're all like, in my friends circle, all like 13, 14, and we all have our own opinions about things and sometimes we don't agree with each other. (laughs) And then also because in our school you have to be very careful about who you trust.

I: Really.

M: Yes, you have to be extremely careful who you trust.

I: Do you mean amongst the pupils or do you mean generally?

M: Amongst the pupils.

I: Right. (pause) Have you had an experience where you trusted somebody and it went wrong, or?

M: Oh, well, I told some girl something, this happens all the time to many people, but I told this one girl something and then the next thing I knew she told this twisted story of it to the entire school. A couple of months ago I thought well I'll spill all my secrets to everyone. But a lot of people think they have firsthand information then say someone close to the person who the information is relevant to, said it. So someone else found the information and then they said that (names a girl) had told them that and I kind of didn't trust her for a while because I believed that she had been telling everyone everything but it had been someone's idea of a twisted joke to try and break up a group. Also, there's this Year 8 and I told them who I liked and now he keeps frightening, no not really frightening, but 'I'll tell her 'You want to chat. Literally no, mildly. He's so small too. I can't keep track of where he is, where he is going.

I: Do you think it is something about being girls? Do you think girls are more difficult to trust?

M: Girls are more up-and-down.

I: Mm.

M: Whilst boys are more just laid-back. But girls can be quite horrible.

I: Moody, I suppose you would call it. Yeh.

M: Yeh, I just describe it for myself (indistinct).

I: And does that mean you don't trust some close girl friends?

M: Oh, no. I trust all of them. They are all really nice people.

I: Right.

M: But some other girls in separate groups, I don't really, I don't talk to them. But I just don't, I wouldn't tell them anything, like all my secrets.

I: All your inner thoughts.

M: Yeh.

I: So, it sounds like there's a lot of gossiping goes on as well, yeh?

E: I have a very strong self-defence mechanism where when I am overwhelmed or emotional, I try and push all of my friends away, make them all hate me. I tried that. But usually, it just ends up with me just running away, not actually running away, just not eating much with them, not...

I: Withdrawing.

E: Withdrawing, Yeh.

I: Yeh.

E: Like I really don't like my friends, but I can't bear to not be around them.

I: Ah, that's an interesting one, isn't it? That push-pull sort of thing. You want to be with them but then you can't. So, friendships are quite difficult you are saying. Do you have more now, or better now than when you were younger? Do you have better friends? (pause) Do you think your friendships are of better quality, or something?

M: I think we understand each other more, because we just normally go through the same thing, but we have girls and boys in our group so sometimes the boys can just annoy all of us.

I: I see. Right. That must be effective – having boys in the group. Does it?

M: It's quite nice. (pause) They're funny (laughs).

I: Does it not mean that you can't talk quiet, how shall I say, intimately about girl things? If a boy is there? Or doesn't it matter?

M: Uhm. They understand a lot, but sometimes we just break off go on walks or something.

I: Right, if it's something private.

M: Yeh.

I: So, what about you? Do you think you've got better or different types of friends now you are older?

E: I don't know. They're all more stressful now. Definitely more stressful. My whole defence-mechanism thing, it means I'm constantly stressing, I'm constantly worrying if I'm going to probably

push them away and then the next minute, I want to properly push them away. It was a lot easier last year cos we were kind of more chilled out, we were cool, now no-one has any chill, no-one has any cool.

I: Why is that then?

E: Well, a lot of people were very hostile towards our group, I don't know why.

I: Why aren't people chilled out now? Is it pressure of school or something?

E: School works definitely got harder. GCSEs coming up, we're probably in the middle of all that stuff.

I: Mm.

E: And it's so difficult to keep track of everyone when everyone's growing and everyone's changing. Like I still call you by your old name, I feel really bad afterwards cos I referred to them in the wrong pronoun, and I feel bad that I use the wrong term to address someone. But then other days I'm just too tired to refer to people as they want to be referred. To be fair everyone does call me E which isn't my name, so.

I: What do you think, do you find you've got better friends now than you had, or...

S: I mean in Primary School I was home-schooled, so I didn't really know anyone.

I: Oh, right, that must have made a difference.

S: Yeh, and then I went to a different High School before this one.

I: Right.

S: And something happened there which was completely taken out of context, something M knows about, it was completely taken out of context and not what I said in the first place. Then I moved here and was like, I found it really hard to trust people.

I: Mm. Yes. After that experience.

S: I joined after Year 7, so.

I: Do you feel you can trust the people you are with now, then?

S: Yeh.

I: That's good, isn't it? They're supportive.

S: Also, cos they're much like M's group. We've a mixed group, as well, boys and girls.

E: To be fair the boys in our group are not, actually, the boys in the group are not actually, proper, they're not 'lad' boys.

I: I know what you are saying.

E: It's like, they don't count, those lad-boys, they're more like (names a boy). I don't like (names boy). He's OK.

I: OK. Let's move on to the next question. (Question 6) How important are your parents or carers, to you at this age? And your siblings, as well.

M: Well, my parents are important because like they pay the mortgage and everything and they get me food and they buy me clothes.

I: So, financially they are important. Is there anything more than that?

M: Also, they're just, erm, being there. Looking after you, like loving you and that.

I: Support.

M: Yeh. Cos mostly you can talk to them about anything because they don't like care about your flaws, they love you for who you are. But my sister is just annoying.

I: Is she older?

M: Younger.

I: Right. At this school?

M: Yeh, it's like yesterday, uhm, I didn't know she was staying after school to rehearse her drug thing, and she didn't tell me, so I thought she'd got lost or something or got attacked.

I: You were worried.

M: Yeh. And she turned her phone off. So, I couldn't call her so I had to call some of my friends and then her friend was like 'Oh, Yeh, she's doing Drama.' And I was like, she could have told me.

I: (lights in room suddenly go off, girls giggling). Oh, that's interesting. Does that happen very often? (one of the girls sings 'Hello darkness, my old friend') The trouble is I can't see my questions; we can still talk. Do you know where the light switch is?

M: I have no idea where the light switch is, oh, it's in the corner up there! (lights come back on).

I: So, where were we? We were talking about, you were talking about, your younger sister.

M: Yeh, she copies me like, what I do.

I: Right. She looks up to you, that's why.

M: Yeh, it's very sweet but she can be annoying.

I: Have you got other siblings, older brothers and sisters?

M: No.

I: So, it's just the two of you?

M: Yeh.

I: What about you? Have you got...brothers and sisters?

S: You know how confusing my family is ((lots of chat between girls – someone says 'confusing family'))

I: That sounds interesting.

S: Yeh, my parent is great. The other one isn't. We don't talk about the other one.

I: One parent is OK.

S: Yes. And the other one kind of skedaddled out before I was born, never came back.

I: Oh, fair enough.

S: Yeh. So, the one that I have left is very supportive.

I: Mm.

S: Uhm, when I was diagnosed with something a year ago, a physical thing, a year ago, like she was there for me. And allowed me to talk to her about it all.

I: That's good, isn't it?

S: Yeh, and like my million siblings (laughs).

I: A million siblings? (laughs) That could be an exaggeration. How many have you got?

S: How many have I got? Err, I don't know how many I have, seven or something?

I: Do they all live with you? Or are they in other places?

S: I only met two of them.

I: I see. So how many live at home with you?

S: Two. They both don't really understand. Like my little sister is annoying, because of the same reason (mentions other girl) like my elder sister has mental problems so she doesn't really understand that much.

I: Mm. And your parent is supportive. At home. For advice? Does she give you advice?

S: Yeh, in a way, but she also just kind of helps when like, I'm not feeling great about something.

I: Mm. Caring. (pause) That's good. (pause) What about you?

E: Err, my parents are confusing. Very, very confusing. They both had very difficult childhoods but that means my Mum can't deal with emotions very well. My Dad is very grateful for what you have 'I didn't have that when I was young.' And it means, me and my dad are very opinionated. So, we often go head-to-head over a lot of things. Which is why I haven't had Technology for a week now (laughs). I argued about relationships, not in a bad way, I just felt that relationships were emotional things, not, it didn't have to be physical at my age. And my Dad said they've got to have some sort of physical aspect otherwise they are no different to friendships. Anyway, so...

I: Interesting conversation. So, would you call them supportive? If you need help, or advice?

E: Yeh, but, not very, they stress me out a lot, because they're determined that I can do really, really well. And my Mum got something stupid, like she only got told off by a teacher once, in her entire High School life. And she didn't get any warnings, or behaviour, she just got told off. And my Dad got a detention once which means they expect me never to do anything wrong...

I: You've got high standards to follow...

E: And I've asked them before, can they stop having such high expectations of me, and they said 'No.' They're going to keep pushing me cos I am naturally lazy so if I don't have them pushing me, I just won't try.

I: Do you agree with that?

E: Some cases, other cases I don't agree.

I: Right.

E: And I just sometimes they can fix it, I know they'll be supportive, like all people saying mean stuff. I've told them about that. And they're usually quite supportive of that. But then there's stuff like that mental health discussion and they said I probably wouldn't ever get diagnosed with anything, so they are not going to let me get diagnosed with anything. And that annoyed me. And sometimes they are supportive, other times I am not so sure. A lot of the time there is mockery and comedy going about.

I: Right.

E: I don't take jokes well. My Dad likes joking a lot.

I: (slowly) Yes.

E: My Dad says my forehead could be used as a billboard or could be used to plough snow. And he doesn't understand why (indistinct amongst general laughter) my head so much. He just watches so much.

M: Your forehead is the same as mine.

I: Is that up to you?

E: No. And he mocked my feet saying I'll never need flippers if I go diving, I can just use my natural feet. (laughs) And Mum has tried to have a conversation with him, saying '(names father), let's not...' the general gist is 'don't say that, it affects her' and then I say 'Dad, I don't like my forehead, or my feet, I can barely look at them'. And he says, 'It's OK we love you, even if you have got massive feet.' I'm size 6, Dad, I'm not that big.

(others join in 'I'm size 7' 'I'm size 9')

I: Right. We're going to move onto the next question: (Question 7): 'How much do you feel that the school staff listen to you, listen to what you need, or want, or care about? And if they do, in what ways do they listen? Why don't you start, please?

M: I don't really say anything.

I: You don't talk to them. Staff.

M: No.

I: Right. Is there a reason, for that?

M: I just don't really have anything to say.

I: Right, you don't feel the need to.

M: No.

I: Do you feel that if there was something that happened to you, either at school or in your life, you feel you could go to a teacher or a member of staff, would you feel you could do it, even if you don't?

M: Yeh. I like some teachers. I would just go to them.

I: Right. And you'd go to the ones you like. OK. That's helpful. Thank you.

ME: Well, there's a couple of teachers that, like, I feel like I probably could talk to. But there's one of them that's like really good, when I've wanted to talk to them before about something. And they like really thought over it all. And none of these people are in Engage which are meant to do these things.

I: Right. What do you think that's about then?

S: Nobody, you cannot go in Engage and talk about something deeply, to them. Because the walls are so thin in there, and the windows.

I: Really.

S: You can be sat in that room, and the people outside that room can clearly hear what you are saying. So, you can't talk about anything.

I: Mm. That's not good for confidentiality, is it?

S: And, even in the counselling room you can hear what you are saying outside of the room.

I: Right. You've experienced that, have you. You've been outside and you've heard people talk?

S: Yeh. It's bad.

I: But you are saying you wouldn't go to that 'resource' if you like, but you would feel comfortable talking to particular members of staff.

S: Yeh.

I: OK. What about you?

E: I try and make friends with the teachers. I don't like talking to other students, so I try and make friends with the teachers.

I: Right.

E: I did it in Primary School. It seemed to go well then.

I: Would you say then you talked to them, that might be in a friendly way, but would you go if there was a serious issue?

E: I have, but it, kind of, annoys me, cos some of the teachers, their response is carting me off to Engage. I try and talk with a teacher cos I feel like they can give me advice, more than people in Engage. Their response will be 'Do you want to go to Engage and talk to someone there about it?'

I: Right. And you don't feel that's sufficient for your needs in some way?

E: I just feel that the people in Engage are so used to dealing with people, but they can't really give the in-depth answers and they can't really respond to every single person as the singular person.

I: Right.

E: They can't. They don't have that much of an emotional response cos they've seen it all.

I: Mm. (pause) So, on the whole, (loud voices outside in corridor) are you all saying that if you had something important to say you feel the school would listen to your view? Whether or not it was just a problem, or say you had an idea, something to change, would you feel that somebody would listen to that idea, or that view?

E: If it was for something to change, they would listen, but I would have to do it myself. Like if I say I think a charity day would be good, they would probably agree, but I would have to do all the organisation myself.

I: Right. OK. Thank you for that. The next question: (Question 8) In an ideal world, is there anything more, or different, that the school could do for you at this stage? So, I'm saying if they had enough money, what is it they could do that you think would make your life better in school?

M: Build a Sports Hall.

I: Right. Yeh. Tell us a bit more about that.

M: Well, our gym is really small and we can't do much in it.

I: Right.

M: So, if they got a load of fund raising, could build a Sports Hall at the end of the field, and we could do more.

I: Do you like sport particularly?

M: Yeh.

I: So, you have to cope with what?

M: The school hall or gym is quite small, and the netball courts are quite dangerous.

I: They're old, I suppose.

M: It's got a lot of stones on it, so you slip over. Yeh, and it slopes down. And then there's a puddle (laughs, others join in).

I: Really. That's not much fun. (general laughter) If you're playing in a load of puddles...

M: Yeh. I've fallen over a couple of times and literally ripped your skin off.

I: Mm.

M: I did that a couple of weeks ago and broke my arm as well. (talks to others in an aside) You know she ran out of French. I showed her my arm and she ran out of French.

I: So, what do you think could be improved...anything at all?

S: I like M's idea, but also, I think extra study support. Honestly, cos it's like the Maths study support and that, that's only for the select students. And I think there should be things like, open, on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school as there are late buses on those days.

I: Right.

S: That you can go to, and like go into more depth in learning.

I: Cos, I saw a thing on the board up there (pointing to notice board behind the group)

All: That's for GCSEs.

I: Oh, I see. So, you are talking about pre-GCSE. You think that support...

S: Like I think it should be open for everyone not just Year 11s. (others voice agreement)

I: That sounds very good. And would that be run by teachers, or older pupils...or... What would work?

S: Either would probably work. But we have like certain teachers, like Maths teachers, English teachers, Science teachers, they stay in school until 5 and so they are already here.

I: Yeh, they might be doing busy things...

S: They could be, but there's always time.

I: It's a very good suggestion. OK, I'm going to move on now, because the time is going. (Question 9) How much do you think about the future?

M: Too much (sighs).

I: Go on then, what do you want to say about 'too much'?

M: Way too much, because there's like all these things going on at the moment in school, out of school, that's like government this, government that, that will affect us and GCSEs cos you're always worrying how you are going to do in them. But like, with the government thing, like all these things are happening that we, that at our age, can have no power to stop.

I: Right.

M: Yet, it's our future it's affecting.

I: That's very important, isn't it? And now we've got a new government, maybe having less power?

M: Yeh.

I: But so, you feel that, erm, as a student you really can't make a lot of difference to what's going on?

M: Yeh, like, in the wider world we're all so powerless at our age. Even though it's us it's affecting.

I: Absolutely. That's a good point. What about you, what do you think?

E: I am just generally stressed. I have no ideas of what to do when I'm grown up.

I: No.

E: But my parents really, really, really want me to succeed.

I: Right.

E: And they said they'll be fine with anything if they know I've tried my hardest.

I: Yeh.

E: But because they always have such high hopes for me, I mean whatever I do, whatever job I get they won't believe that I've tried my hardest. I don't even know what GCSE's to take, I don't know what to do when I'm older.

I: Mm. It's hard.

E: I've been given one throwaway subject. They've said I can do one subject that I want to do. And I don't know what to do with the whole Brexit thing going on. Which will affect us so much, will really be hitting hard, by the time we're in university or college. Yet we have absolutely no say in it.

I: Until you can vote.

E: When we can vote it's too late, cos...

I: They are thinking of changing that to 16.

E: A year and a half.

I: What about you, is there anything you want to say about the future, what do you feel about the future?

S: I am quite scared of like the environment.

I: Right.

S: And what society's coming to.

I: Yeh.

S: Cos no-one acts like, mature, anymore. There's lots of like knife crime and everything. Like on London Bridge, why did he do it? That's just stupid. And then about global warming. I just kind of sit there and worry like, what if the world gets too hot, what if we all die too young. But I know we won't.

I: No. But it is a concern, isn't it? I think a lot of people are worrying, quite rightly.

S: And like, you can't change it. And about the water and everything and the turtles. I love turtles.

E: But you were in Geography yesterday right.

S: Baby penguins can shiver. I cried.

I: Just one last question, cos I know it's time nearly. (Question 10) There's lots of different words that are used to describe your age group, so which of these do you like the best: adolescent, teenager, young adult, young person, youth. Do any of those sound that they sum up, what this age group is about?

M: Probably young person or youth.

I: Right. Does that sound more reasonable to you?

M: Yeh. Like I play rugby and there's the youth age, it's under twelves and it goes up to under eighteens. So, it is not like the (unclear) it's the youth age. And the young, when you're a child you're not really recognised as a person, if you know what I mean? You're just like a kid, or a child.

I: Mm.

M: But then cos you don't really know anything, you don't understand everything, but when you're a young person if you say oh those people ...

I: Good, thank you. Have you got one of those you prefer?

S: Why can't we just be called humans?

I: Just want to be called humans.

S: Yeh, I don't know why we need these different age-categories.

I: That's a good question.

S: We could be good in some senses, but we all have these stereotypes as teenagers.

I: That's right, that's exactly what I'm looking at.

S: So that's what I get out of that...youth.

I: Yeh, I see what you are saying. OK.

E: I like youth as well cos usually it's the foolishness of youth. That's really what we are at the moment. (general laughter as end of school bell rings in corridor outside classroom)

I: Right. We'd better stop. Thank you very much....

APPENDIX 13 – Consent Forms and Information Sheets

YOUNG PERSON CONSENT FORM

For taking part in a Research Study ‘What Does it Mean to be an Adolescent in an English Secondary School’

Autumn Term 2019

I..... (PRINT NAME) agree to taking part in this research.

This means that:

- I understand why the study is taking place, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Information Sheet and know I can talk to the researcher about my involvement if I need to do so.
- The researcher has answered questions about the study and I am happy with her answers.
- I understand that being part of the study is completely voluntary and that I do not have to take part. My decision whether to take part in the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia.
- I understand that I can leave the study at any time.
- I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that any personal information collected about me will be stored securely and only used with my permission. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Principal of your school who will then contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Richard Andrews at: Richard.Andrews@uea.ac.uk

I consent to: Audio-recording of the focus group YES/NO

The results of the study will be shared at the end of the study – you will be invited to an informal meeting set up in school to hear the results.

.....SIGNATURE OF YOUNG PERSON

Information Sheet for Parents and Young People

‘What does it mean to be an adolescent in an English secondary school?’ - Research Study – Autumn Term 2019

I would be grateful for your help with my research. This sheet tells you about my research. Please read it carefully:

- The researcher is Mrs Susan Davies – I am a Postgraduate PhD Researcher at the University of East Anglia and a retired teacher who used to work for Norfolk County Council in secondary schools across Norfolk. My supervisor at the UEA is Dr. Agnieszka Bates:
Agnieszka.Bates@uea.ac.uk.
- Why is the research being done? I am interested in how it feels to be an adolescent. I want to find out what matters to young people and what works for them. I am also interested in how teachers and other adults in school understand what adolescence means.
- What questions will the research ask? I want to ask young people their views and listen to them talk about their experiences. I will also ask adults how they work with young people and if they have any suggestions about what helps this age-group.
- Who will be in the project? I want to work with a group of about 5-6 volunteers from Years 10 and 11 on a short 5–6-week project and then conduct a group interview. There will also be interviews with some teachers and senior management of the school.
- Does my son/daughter have to take part? You decide if you want your son/daughter to take part or not. He/she can drop out at any time. He/she can tell me if they want to stop or have a break. The young person does not have to tell me anything unless he/she wants to.
- What happens if I agree to my son/daughter taking part? They will be part of a small group who will meet at a convenient time in school, in a quiet room, to think and talk about the experience of adolescence. There will be some reading from novels and contemporary songs to consider and some writing about their own views. This will be followed by a group interview which will be recorded on audio.
- Will doing the research help my child? I hope that firstly, it will be enjoyable. My main aim is to write a report about what your son/daughter has said in a group discussion and I hope she/he might learn something new about themselves. Both you and your child might find the final report interesting and useful. The school staff may also learn something about ways of working with this age-group.
- Who will know if my child is in the research, or what they say? All research has to respect confidentiality. The Principal, staff of the school and parents will be the only other people to know the young people are taking part. The study will be anonymous so names will not be used. I will only tell someone else if something is revealed that could harm anyone.
- Will I know about the research results? I will send the school a short report next year and longer reports, later. I will set up an informal meeting to share the outcomes with those who are interested.

IF YOU WANT TO TAKE PART, PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION.

If you have any questions please talk to the Principal or contact me at: Susan.Davies@uea.ac.uk.

Participant Information Sheet for School Staff Members

UEA Research Project – What does it mean to be an adolescent in an English secondary school?

You are invited to take part in a research study about adolescents in school and what they can tell us about their experiences. This sheet tells you about my research. Please read it carefully:

- The researcher is Mrs Susan Davies – I am a Postgraduate PhD Researcher at the University of East Anglia and a retired teacher who used to work for Children's Services in Norfolk in secondary schools across Norfolk. My supervisor at the UEA is Kate Russell: Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk.

- What is this study about? I am interested in how it feels to be an adolescent. I want to find out what matters to young people and what works for them. I am also interested in how teachers and other adults in school understand what adolescence means. As a retired teacher working for 30 years with this age group I have always been interested in their views and opinions. There is a lack of literature on young people of this age and I believe that they do have something to say. I am interviewing the young people in small focus groups. This Participation Information statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part. Please read this information carefully and ask any questions you have.

- Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling me that:

You understand what you have read

You agree to take part in the research as outlined below

You agree to the use of your personal information as described

You have received a copy of this Information Sheet to keep

- What questions will the research ask? You will be asked a series of questions about your experience of working with adolescents and what you feel is characteristic of this age-group. This will take place in a private space in school at a time convenient to you. The interview will be audio-recorded. This may take up to an hour of your time.

- Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You can do this by contacting me at my UEA - contact details below. You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want me to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study the information will be removed from the records and will not be included in any results, up to the point I have analysed and published the results.

- Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

- Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

You might find the experience of contributing to a research study, of interest. There is also the potential for reflection on your own experiences and practice which might lead to new ways of working with this age group. The aim is to find out if there is anything schools and practitioners can learn from listening to the views of this age-group. If the findings tell us anything new, there could be training set up to share the implications of the study with other professionals.

- What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

The audio-recording of the interview will be transcribed and then analysed by the researcher. Only the researcher and her UEA supervisors will have access to the information. All information given in the interview will be kept confidential and anonymous. No participant names will be used. If you want to access your person information from the study contact either the researcher or her UEA supervisors. The results of the study will be part of a final thesis. Electronic copies will be stored on my personal computer which is password protected.

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to me collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2015).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications unless you agree to this using the tick box on the consent form. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

- What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact my main supervisor, Kate Russell: Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk.

- Will I know about the research results? You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me if you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. This feedback will be in the form of a one-page lay summary. You will receive this feedback at the end of this study.

- What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee. If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Susan Davies, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ. Susan.Davies@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor as above.

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School.

- OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return to Susan Davies (via email if possible) or by post to UEA School of Education and Lifelong Learning (see address above). Please keep the information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

If you have any questions please talk to (name of school contact) or contact me at:
Susan.Davies@uea.ac.uk

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST IN THIS RESEARCH INQUIRY

PARENT/CARER CONSENT FORM

For taking part in a UEA Research Project – What does it mean to be an adolescent in an English secondary school? Autumn Term 2019

I..... (PRINT PARENT’S/CARERS NAME) consent to my child

..... (PRINT CHILD’S NAME) taking part in this research study

This means that:

- I understand why the study is taking place, what the student will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Information Sheet and know I can talk to the researcher about the students involvement if I need to do so.
- The researcher has answered questions about the study and I am happy with her answers.
- I understand that being part of the study is completely voluntary and that my son/daughter does not have to take part. My decision whether to let him/her take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia.
- I understand that my son/daughter can leave the study at any time.
- I understand that my son/daughter can stop the interview at any time if they do not wish to continue. If this happens then recordings will be amended and the information not included in the final study. My son/daughter may refuse to answer any questions with which they are not comfortable.
- I understand my son/daughter may leave the focus group at any time if they do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw their comments once the group has started as it is a group discussion.
- I understand that any personal information collected about my son/daughter that is collected will be stored securely and only used with my permission. I understand that information about my child will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my son/daughter’s name or any identifiable information about him/her.

If you or your son/daughter are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Richard Andrews at Richard.Andrews@uea.ac.uk.

I consent to:

- Audio-recording of my son/daughter YES/NO

Feedback about the overall results will be shared at the end of the study – an informal meeting will be set up and you will be informed of that date and time.

..... SIGNATURE
OF PARENT/CARER

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – School Staff Member (1 copy to participant, 1 copy to researcher)

For taking part in a UEA Research Project – What does it mean to be an adolescent in an English secondary school? Autumn Term 2021

I..... (PRINT NAME) agree to take part in this research.

In giving my consent, I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Information Sheet and know I can talk to the researcher about my involvement if I need to do so.
- The researcher has answered questions about the study, and I am happy with her answers.
- I understand that being part of the study is completely voluntary and that I do not have to take part. My decision whether to take part in the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.
- I understand that any personal information collected about me will be stored securely and only used with my permission. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- An audio-recording YES/NO
- Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study? YES/NO

If you answered YES, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

Postal.....

Email.....

.....SIGNATURE

.....PRINT
NAME

.....DATE

APPENDIX 14

EDU ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER 2020-21

APPLICANT DETAILS	
Name:	Susan Davies
School:	EDU
Current Status:	PGR Student
UEA Email address:	Susan.Davies@uea.ac.uk
EDU REC IDENTIFIER:	2019/06/SD_AB (updated approval)

Approval details	
Approval start date:	11.05.2021
Approval end date:	31.07.2021
Specific requirements of approval:	Please use your existing PCF details and information to create a consent form suitable for use with the new participant group. Your supervisor will need to view and approve this before you can begin collecting data with the new participant group.
Please note that your project is only given ethical approval for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethical approval by the EDU REC before continuing. Any amendments to your project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU REC Chair as soon as possible to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.	

Victoria Warburton EDU Chair, Research Ethics Committee

APPENDIX 15

RESEARCH JOURNAL – At the time of a global pandemic -COVID 19

April 2020 - 2021

2nd April 2020 - Day 9 of UK ‘Lockdown’

I think this is Day 9 of the ‘lockdown’ or ‘shutdown’ however it is described by government and the media. I have decided to transfer my regular research journal to this format, mainly because we are in such contrasting times and I think it warrants a fresh look. I will continue to write in my lined exercise book when the fancy takes me, but for now, I am going to write my journal from a position of ‘isolation,’ being at home and not going out to UEA or anywhere for that matter. At home we are not particularly affected, because being retired both Stuart and I have lots of interests and hobbies to keep us amused. Especially the garden. But in my room, trying to come to terms with doing my research without doing fieldwork, it is a different story.

I have struggled with motivation and focus recently. At first, when the schools closed, I almost felt relief. Now I could just concentrate on those annoying interview transcripts which lie there, needing analysis. I saw the weeks ahead allowing me unlimited time to peer into the text and produce amazing findings! However, this has not happened. Funnily enough I have avoided doing data analysis for any pretext. Not sure why. How easy it would be to sit in my swivel chair, with my paperwork at my elbow, my highlighter in hand, and slowly and painstakingly go through the words of my participants. At first the activity took on an aura of seriousness and proper research. But now it almost fills me with dread. Once I have done some coding on the text, I am then thinking ‘Now what?’ Fortunately, Agnieszka is always at hand to push me on to the next stage and at our last supervision session (online of course) she gave me several tasks to do with ‘writing up’ what I have found already. It sounded so simple when she said it. Now I am thinking ‘how?’ So, I am avoiding facing this. I am doing other tasks she gave me and skirting round what I know needs to be done – she has given me a deadline! But being at home, with the sun shining, the outdoors beckoning, I can think of so many other things to be doing. Some of them important, like exercising, some of them less so, like ordering clothes online for Jack! Or ordering flowers for Helena’s birthday or ringing a friend. Anything but face those pages of text.

And another distraction now presents itself. The talk is all about how COVID 19 is affecting researchers. So, I am happy to fill in a survey for UEA, pleased to look at some papers sent by AB on how it impacts on fieldwork. But is any of this productive? It is important, of course, and I feel the impact of the virus on our work has to be taken into consideration in our work. But when can I let it go and just get on...

3rd April Day 10 of Lockdown

Looking out of my office window, it is hard to credit that there is a pandemic. The trees are coming into leaf, the blossom is blooming, the birds are singing. This morning there was a blue sky and I took some photos. But then I went on the BBC website to get an update and got immersed in the myriads of charts showing the progress/increase of the virus the world over. It made grim reading, but it was fascinating too.

So, we just carry on in our own little worlds. Here in my room, I have lists of 'To Do' which I pour over trying to sort out the things I should do versus those I'd rather like to do. AB gave me an interesting task, to write pen pictures about three of the young people I have interviewed. I have been working on that all this week. At first, I just put down a few gut-feelings but have modified this over the week in the light of her advice, which was to really listen to the transcript and what they are saying. This bore fruit, as I found out more intricate detail which I could add to my portraits. I am still amending it, cos I want it to read well, as well as be true to their voices.

Apart from that exercise, I have done a bit of writing on my thesis. I enjoy this once I get going but am a bit confused about which chapter I should be putting stuff in to do with this analysis process. And when I look back at my notes from supervision, I see that AB talks about a different chapter than the one I am writing! Still, I think as long as I am getting words down on paper, I can always put them in the right place later. I have a deadline of one week more for the portraits and three weeks for the chapter.

I usually feel quite motivated once I sit down, but it is easier now, with Stuart around, doing lots of new projects, to get distracted and see what he is up to. We don't see anyone else, of course. And most of my social life (all of it really) is online. How sad. But at least we are both fit and well and keeping away from possible sources of infection. Still no idea of how long this will go on. The weather is warming up, slightly, and I get excited when I think of that, then I think, but what difference will it make? We will still be here!

7th April Day 14 of Lockdown

Sadly, the Prime Minister is in intensive care suffering from Coronavirus. Worrying.

Meantime, I am here in my room, the window open, the sunshine pouring through, and listening to the lilting music of Beethoven's Symphony No.6 in F (the Pastoral) which has an opening track of: 'Awakening of happy feelings on arrival in the country'. So happy music in the background to help me on my way. I am feeling quite positive with my work this morning in contrast with yesterday when I felt utter frustration. I have decided to transfer my hand-written coding from the girl's interview to the computer! Oh, dear. Maybe not such a clever idea. Yesterday I struggled with formatting the transcript into two columns so that I could add my codes to the right-hand side. It was not easy. I had to ask Stuart who produced the great idea of doing it as a table. So now I have two columns. So far, so good. The only thing was

that writing in my codes/comments on the right-hand column kept going pear-shaped. So, I was shouting at the computer, getting mad, getting frustrated. Finally, I went for a nice walk and that helped. Today I am taking it much slower. Which helps. And carefully negotiating the task of making it both readable and relevant. Both a technical challenge and a cognitive one. But this morning I feel I have made more progress.

Last night I enjoyed another Covid-19 activity – Gareth Malone’s Gt British Home Chorus – we sang heartily and did some warm-ups. We have a new song, a Duran Duran one, called ‘Ordinary World.’ Ironic. But it is a pleasant tune so it may work well.

On other Covid-19 news: I went to Sainsbury’s for the once-a-week ritual. It was OK-ish. We queued outside but only for a few minutes. But inside I found it stressful trying to keep at a distance from others, especially in the aisles that everyone goes in, veg, fruit, bread, cereals, etc. It was such a chore trying to negotiate a safe distance that I found the whole thing tedious and couldn’t wait to get out. There was a very long queue outside when I left. I got a couple of things for Carol and Ian and took them round. It helps me feel I am thinking of others at this time. I recently rang Carole from book group to see how she is – she lives alone but has her dogs for company. She was quite cheerful and seems resigned to being at home and indoors. Mij rang us but I was singing! Stuart said she seemed OK but says Malcolm looks poorly – she looks through the window of the home to see him. Hard for her.

So onwards with my data analysis. Luckily, I have a deadline (2 weeks) before seeing AB so this keeps me focussed. And tomorrow I am due to Skype Natasha which should be interesting – both in a techy way and to see and talk to her. We also have our weekly online meeting with PGRs so I will join in with that too.

10th April, Day 17 of lockdown

It feels as if we are living in two universes. One is our daily lives and one is our interrupted, daily lives. So here at home we have our usual domestic routines and rituals, not changed by the virus. Yet alongside we have an existence very different to ‘before.’ Whereas I might have been going out today to meet with a friend, have a coffee, go for a walk, this morning I rang a friend and we spoke at length over the phone. The main topic of conversation was about the pandemic. And tonight, we might have gone out for a meal to a local pub, instead we are talking to old friends, online. We are using Zoom, an online tool, to contact them and see them on our devices. We are keeping up our social contacts but virtually.

Likewise, with my research. I am working from home, which was normal, ‘before.’ But now I am working from home constantly, I have no choice. And that may be the crux of the thing. Our choices have been severely curtailed. I am happy to do my work at home, in my comfortable room, looking out at my beautiful garden. But I am doing it every day now, not now-and-again. No visits to the UEA, to the library, to the PGR office. We are talking to each

other online – we had our weekly Wednesday lunch meeting this week, moderated by Agnieszka. But it is different from bumping into each other in the office. I Skyped Natasha and had a pleasant hour chatting with her. At least we could see and hear each other.

And my work is going through several ups-and-downs. Motivation is erratic. Some days I can feel keen and inspired, others it seems unimportant and is very hard to grasp what I am trying to do. I have work to do, it is there in my folders and files. I could be doing a number of different tasks. Agnieszka has given me some guidance and I completed two tasks last week to send her. Now the focus is taken off again, so I am floundering.

Regarding my analysis so far, it is patchy, and therefore, my findings are unclear. I sometimes see meaning in a statement in a transcript but how does it relate to my overall aim? I can still hear the voices of my participants. I hope I am still listening in the way I need to. But I am aware that huge change has taken place since those innocent days of going into a school and interviewing young people. How will these young people be changed when we meet up again? How will the adults be feeling about their roles in school and how have they managed the situation? I will be emailing my two contacts in the schools after Easter – just to touch base and to remind them of my existence. But it will feel even less relevant to them, I am aware, than previously. Or could it be a distraction? Best to be optimistic.

I have been coding an interview which throws up several challenges. Seeing something in what someone says is a fragile and precious practice. How do I really know that what I say the person meant, they really did mean? How can I ensure that my ‘take’ on their utterances is accurate, is what they meant to say? So often in social communication we can say ‘oh, I didn’t mean *that*’ when someone challenges us or misinterprets us. Misinterpretation is one of my fears – and misrepresentation, too. Who am I, that I think I can say what another person means? If you were to overhear my interaction with my partner, at home, you would witness regular occasions when we accuse each other of misunderstanding. It seems to be one of the greatest challenges of a close relationship, to communicate effectively and honestly, with each other. So, if I can’t always get it right at home, in a personal relationship, what makes a difference when I am in the role of a researcher, trying to listen to a person unknown to me?

APPENDIX 16 – Table of Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic

DATA FILE	THEME: IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC
Interviews 1 to 7 Nov to Dec 2019	PRE-COVID PERIOD
Interview 8, April 2021, ONLINE, Staff Member FA	DURING LOCKDOWN – Affected socialising, not meeting up, negative impact out-of-school. High rates of anxiety and relief on returning to school.
Interview 9, May 2021, ONLINE, Staff Member TA	DURING LOCKDOWN – ‘ <i>Lack of control</i> ’ ‘ <i>They all hated lockdown</i> ’ ‘ <i>They couldn’t do as much work at home.</i> ’ Missed face-to-face lessons. Increased referrals for eating disorders and self-harm.
Interview 10, May 2021, ONLINE, CU	DURING LOCKDOWN
Interview 11, June 2021, ONLINE, CU	DURING LOCKDOWN
Interview 12, September 21, Staff Member HH	Disruption to learning - Missing time in school -Reduction in resources
Interview 13, October 21, HHS, Y12/13	NOT MENTIONED
Interview 14, October 21, HHS, 6 th Form	Pressure on return to school – ‘ <i>here’s a load of work</i> ’ - Rosie
Interview 16, November 21 HHS, Y9/11	The school ‘ <i>were doing what they could</i> ’ Willow Missing out on learning ‘ <i>Being stuck at home</i> ’ Tania ‘ <i>We missed most of those beginning years</i> ’ Willow
Interview 17, November 21, Staff Member HH	Negative effect on development ‘ <i>14- and 15-year-olds have lost two years</i> ’ Difficult for some individual students
Interview 18, December 21, Staff Member HH	Confusion especially regarding exams – expectations from school
Interview 19, December 21, Staff Member HH	NOT MENTIONED
Interview 20, December 21, DA	NOT MENTIONED
Interview 21, Dec 21, HHS	NOT MENTIONED

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