

**DPY 5360**

**Final Doctoral Project**

**An Exploration of Mental Health Issues in Independent Education:  
Undergraduates' Memories of their Secondary Schools**

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## ABSTRACT

Aims: This research investigated the lived mental health experiences of six university undergraduates as they looked back on their time at their independent secondary schools. The results will inform culturally specific counselling practices and school pastoral care programmes which support the psychological health and wellbeing of students, and it will contribute to further research into the mental health of young people within privileged secondary school environments.

Methods: This epistemologically pluralistic study juxtaposed two different methods of investigation:

1. Semi-structured interviews were used within an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis methodology to explore the observations, attitudes, and feelings of the participants, then all transcripts were analysed phenomenologically to produce a richly detailed interpretation of the participants' mental health experiences. An analysis of the data generated a number of themes and superordinate themes.
2. A survey of recent research in the field of sociology placed the participants' experiences within a wider social context.

Results: Three superordinate themes were revealed: 'Needing the help of others', 'Feeling pressured', and 'Ambivalence'. The participants' said their mental health depended on the safety of their close bonds with friends, parents, and teachers, yet their statements also suggested that the competitive natures of their school communities, together with overly demanding academic standards, sometimes caused damaging stress levels which overwhelmed students' ability to cope. Extreme time pressure compromised their ability to sleep, spend time with friends, or enjoy learning. They were ambivalent about having privileged advantages, and they felt guilty when they did not achieve 'success' by providing their parents with the 'value for money' of top grades. Even though the participants supported the need for more mental health education and counselling services within schools, they implied that asking for help was culturally discouraged, so they did not utilise school counselling. (Word count 289)



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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This piece of research explored the mental health experiences of a social subset of young people: those who attended independent secondary schools. In particular, it analysed the memories, observations, opinions, and feelings of six academically successful young people who, at the time of their interviews, were second-year undergraduates at prestigious, top-tier British universities. As they looked back on, and tried to make sense of, their school experiences, the young people themselves defined the concept of 'mental health' and shared what it meant to them personally.

The original inspiration for this research grew out of my twenty years of experience in working as a psychotherapist with privileged, but unhappy, young people, 12 to 18-year-old students who attend private British or International schools. In my experience, these young people show a worrying array of emotional and behavioural symptoms which betray their increasingly pressured and complicated lives. Although materially advantaged, they are often anxious, insecure, depressed, and overwhelmed by everyday life, developing significant symptoms of stress from as early as 10 years of age. The present study contributes ideas as to why this might be.

When searching research data bases for information on 'young people', 'students', 'mental health', and 'independent schools', the results showed the mental health of all secondary students and did not differentiate those who attended independent schools. However, studies from a small group of researchers in America have specifically investigated the mental health of young people in 'privileged' communities and schools. They found that adolescents from privileged communities suffered high levels of psychological ill health despite their many advantages (Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendress, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Luthar, 2013). This present study addresses the need for more research in this area.

## 1.2 Why investigate educationally 'privileged' young people?

As a psychotherapist working with socioeconomically privileged young people, most of whom attend independent secondary schools in Britain, it is my belief that independent school students have numerous advantages and disadvantages which are fundamentally different from those of other young people, but that, as members of a significantly privileged cultural subgroup, their experiences and concerns are virtually invisible. Although there is an extensive history within sociological theory of studies which evaluate the lives of elites (Foucault, 1994; Bourdieu, 1984; 1986; 1996), interest in the 'privileged classes' has languished for several decades, and it has only recently been revived by a small cohort of dedicated researchers. Among them, Savage and Williams (2008a) have remarked on the 'glaring invisibility of elites' within present research, particularly with respect to schools (Ball, 2015). In a study by Brooks and Waters (2015), the researcher said:

*'It is striking to note then that to date elite schooling has largely evaded academic scrutiny. Elite (and particularly high-fee-paying independent) schools are far less likely than their state-funded counterparts to be involved in, and the subject of, critical social science research. This situation is a difficult one to redress, not least because much research on schools requires schools' participation and co-operation, and this is far harder to achieve when dealing with the relatively small number of schools at the top.'* (Brooks & Waters, 2015, p. 96)

Fortunately the tide, in this respect, seems to be turning and there has been a wave of new research which promises valuable insights into the world of elite education, information which will help us to tease apart the social forces which act on all young people, privileged or not, by juxtaposing important variables at each end of the class spectrum. Having said this, most of the existing studies which investigate the psychological consequences of school socialisation processes have looked at environments within the state sector, and many have understandably been focused on those at the bottom of the socio-economic spectrum. However, a significant proportion (7% of schools in Britain) are elite private schools which are independent of this sector. Unfortunately, not only are studies into the split nature of the British education system effectively non-existent, but there is also a significant lack of

information about how young people are faring personally within elite educational environments.

Most adolescents spend the majority of their time in school and, as such, these environments are crucially important in shaping the interactions which help young people to develop a sense of themselves apart from their families. The value systems that young people internalise, and the nature of the relationships they build with teachers, peers, and parents therefore play a central role in forming them as people.

Young people in private schools are expected, above all, to be 'successful', and students are offered a vast array of resources to aid them on their paths to an exceptional future. How they make use of these gifts, and how they make sense of their experiences within these privileged environments, has a fundamental effect on their ability to function in the adult world. It is also likely, given the history of elite education in Britain, that many privately educated young people will become future leaders of industry, religion, politics, and the arts, so it follows that their collective mental health will have huge ramifications for all of us (Duffell, 2014).

It is impossible truly to understand the experiences of young people who are formed through educational privilege without understanding the cultural container in which they develop, just as a view of their elite environment alone gives an incomplete picture of how these environments are created, sustained and experienced by all the individuals within them. My study is a small but significant contribution to this important body of work. I hope it will go some way toward filling a gap in our knowledge of the individual voices of these young students: voices which have, to my knowledge, never been heard so clearly.

The world of education is becoming ever more competitive [See Chapter 7] so there has never been a more important time for understanding the effects of academically rigorous private education on the psyches of young people. Schools are struggling to understand and deal with increasingly severe symptoms of psychological distress in their students, despite their seemingly cossetted lifestyle. The general public are also curious as to why adolescents with so many advantages seem unable to cope in the modern world. Although the media are noticing the highly pressured lives these

young people lead, to my mind there is neither sufficient understanding of the reasons for this state of affairs nor much thoughtful discussion about how to better the situation.

Suniya Luthar (2013), a USA-based psychologist, is one of the most vocal advocates for increasing public knowledge about the developmental risks to young people which are inherent in contexts of affluence and privilege. She believes it is crucial to acknowledge the special needs of advantaged youths so that caregivers at home and at school are able to provide them with the emotional support they need. I would add to this that psychological professionals who work with these young people should also take a particular interest in the special needs of this demographic population, so they are able to help these privileged but pressured youths to thrive within the bounds of the culture they inhabit.

Choosing to hear the voices of the participants in this study as they describe their experiences within independent schools will provide new insights which may improve therapeutic provision for all young people within these privileged spaces. An exploration of the goals and values of schools and parents, the intrapsychic effects of school socialisation practices, as well as recognition of the confusing mixed messages that result from a multitude of competing social forces, is also crucial when hearing the concerns of these young people. Only by truly listening, and attempting to grasp the whole picture, can we provide the support they need and help them to gain a healthy perspective about their place in the world.

In addition, this study will make recommendations about the structure and function of therapeutic counselling in schools. Awareness of how young people feel about counselling within these environments should help pastoral care professionals to tailor services by attending carefully to their own observations and experiences. In particular, information about the underlying social messages within their subculture will help to sensitise school counsellors and psychotherapists to the culturally specific social imperatives against socially advantaged students exposing personal vulnerability or seeking counselling within their privileged spaces.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

I begin this chapter by examining the current statistics on the mental health of young people in Britain, then explore studies which investigate the mental health of privileged young people in Britain and America. In doing so, I will attempt to define the nebulous concept of privilege, then look at the nature of privileged schools in Britain and ask whether young people in private schools can be considered a cultural subgroup with important aspects in common. I note some sociological theories of power and privilege which may be applicable to processes of independent education, then turn my attention to the influence that parents have during adolescence.

I will explore school as a developmental context and describe the effects of academic stress, then examine the provision of counselling in schools and the role of a school counsellor. There is very limited information available about the mental health of young people within independent education anywhere in the world, but I will most often concentrate for this review on the current state of knowledge in Britain and North America.

Literature reviews generally attempt to provide an overview of a particular topic so that the available evidence can be critically appraised. But while 'systematic' reviews attempt to evaluate the total available evidence (Naveed *et al.*, 2016), 'narrative' literature reviews, such as this one, are informal discussions of important topics from a more theoretical point of view. As such, they are exploratory and serve a different purpose than systematic reviews. The purpose of a narrative review is simply to explore ideas in order to inform and inspire the evolution of a final research project. Bryman (2008) states that,

*"The literature review for [interpretative researchers] is a means of gaining an initial impression of the topic that they intend to understand through their research. The process of reviewing the literature is thus a more uncertain process of discovery, in that you might not always know in advance where it will take you[...] They [interpretative researchers] are also invariably less explicit about the criteria for exclusion or including of studies' (Bryman, 2008:92)*

I began this literature search by reviewing the topics which were most familiar to me from my therapeutic interactions with young people, then I developed other possibly important strands of inquiry as they appeared relevant. The resources I utilised included primarily qualitative research reports and first-person accounts, as well as select topics from seminal psychological and sociological theory, a few quantitative studies, and policy documents which acknowledged the viewpoints of a range of stakeholders. I have included a schematic diagram [Figure 2 on p.43] which shows my initial informal question, the gradual evolution of my thoughts throughout the literature review, and the eventual development of an formal research question which then guided the present study.

At each stage of the literature review, a variety of databases were used to conduct searches for material – PsychINFO, PEP Web, the Social Psychology Network (SPN), the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), and the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC). A number of grey literature sources and grey information services were also sought via ResearchGate and Google Scholar. Articles which were identified on these sites were often obtained individually from the Middlesex University library. In addition to the above, I directly consulted experts in the field of mental health to help me identify further research of interest. Toward the end of this project, I also updated searches to include more recently published work. Only English language research was sought.

The literature review followed an iterative narrative process, so no formal exclusion criteria were developed or applied, although an attempt was made to choose material which had direct relevance to the study participants. Topics under consideration – mental health, independent schools, parents and family circumstances, peer and teacher relationships – generated many of the initial search terms. Keywords and their synonyms were chosen, then Boolean operators were used along with wildcards and truncation to gradually narrow and refine the searches.

For example, the topic of ‘independent education’ generated several synonyms for ‘independent’, such as ‘private’, ‘paid’, ‘elite’ and ‘privileged’, and several for ‘education’, such as ‘learning’, ‘school curriculums’. Each of the resulting phrases

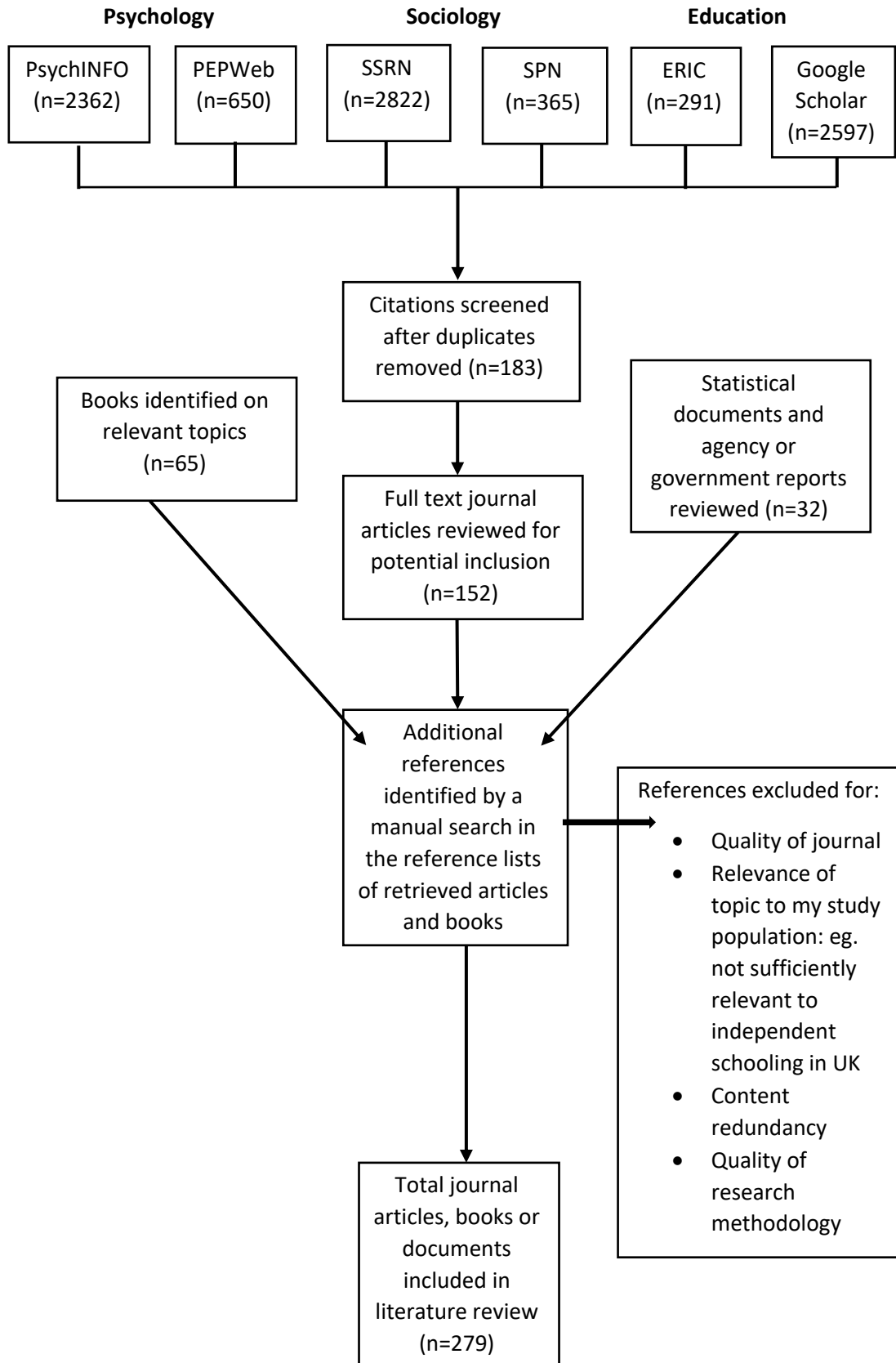
were combined with the phrase 'mental health' using the Boolean operator 'AND', and studies about university level education were excluded using the operator 'NOT'. A combination of 'berry picking', pearl growing, and citation tracking methods were also used to identify relevant literature and ensure that searching was sufficiently broad in scope to avoid systematic bias (Zwakman *et al*, 2018).

- 'Pearl growing': Core articles are identified which lead to keywords and index terms that allow a researcher to build a literature review from the main topic outward. All papers which are close to the core topic are canvassed to generate further search terms. In this way, the literature builds until reaching a predetermined depth or until no new relevant papers are found (Schlosser *et al*, 2006; Booth *et al*, 2012). For example, in the case above the keywords 'international', and 'global' were identified as pertinent to independent education and this produced additional articles.
- 'Berry picking': This method is a non-linear, iterative process which identifies relevant information not as a complete set but gradually in bits and pieces by means of footnote chasing, journal browsing, and database searching (Bates, 1989).
- 'Citation tracking': Backward citation tracking searches for articles from the reference section of pertinent research, while forward citation tracking identifies all studies which cite a relevant article. This method effectively uses the knowledge and judgement of peers to inform the direction of a search (Papaioannou *et al*, 2010; Booth, 2016).

Figure 1 below shows my literature search process for the present study. It does not include either resources about research design or journalistic articles. The resulting amalgam of topics is illustrated in greater detail in Figure 2.



Figure 1: Literature selection process



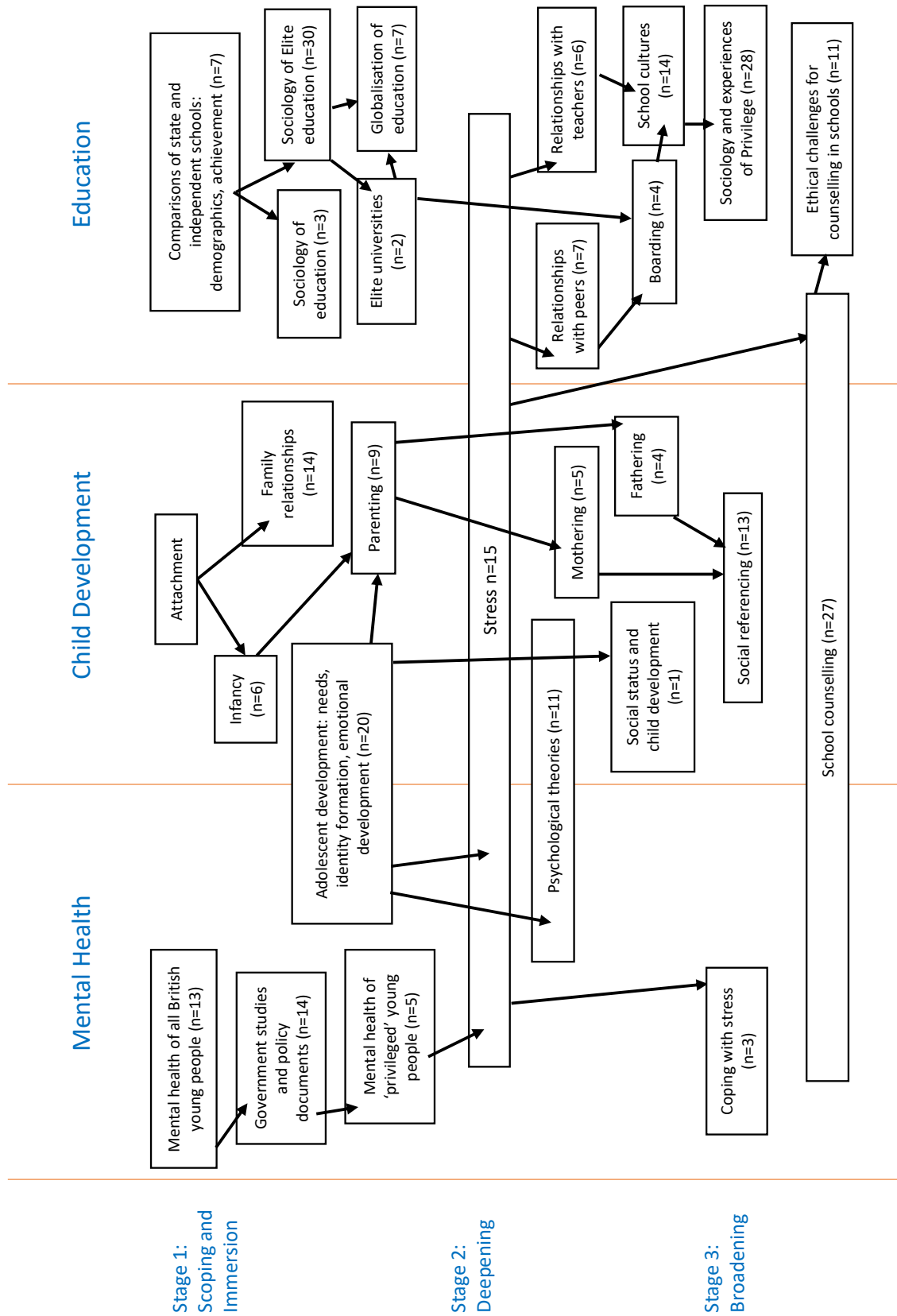
The following Figure [2] shows the different stages of the literature review:

Stage 1 sought mental health statistics and research studies of all British school aged youths compared with the mental health of independent school students using Boolean search terms to explore topics such as 'students and mental health', 'mental health and independent schools', and 'academic achievement and education'. The cultural circumstances and systemic processes of private or independent schools were also explored using a berry picking method of journal browsing and pearl growing from key articles by identifying other topics such as 'globalization and education', 'privileged education' and 'elite education'.

Stage 2 continued the exploration of family relationships and expanded into relationships in schools by using citation tracking and pearl growing methods of retrieval. More specific school environments and school cultures were explored with search terms such as 'teacher and student relationships', 'student stress', and school boarding programmes'.

Stage 3 sought information about coping with stress during adolescence primarily through berry picking from articles identified with search terms such as 'stress and adolescence', and 'school stress'. The sociology of privileged education was further explored by a backward citation tracking method of retrieval. Counselling theory, statistics and the effects of school counselling used berry picking and citation tracking.

Figure 2: The process of creating the literature review



## **2.2 General prevalence of mental health problems in UK adolescents**

It is arguable that the global nature of our world (Lechner, 2009), together with a media and technology-saturated culture, changing sexual mores, and the emphasis on individualism and competition have all had a detrimental effect on the emotional wellbeing of today's youth (Smith, 1995; Robbins, 2006). The developmental stage of adolescence is a particularly sensitive time for young people, and any emotional problems which begin at this time are likely to persist throughout an individual's later life. In fact, research indicates that over half of all mental ill health in adulthood begins before the age of 14 years (HM Government, 2011), and 75% of adult mental illness begins before 18 years of age (Murphy & Fonagy, 2012).

The human cost of mental illness, to each individual as well as to his or her community, is undoubtedly immense, but the legacy that this ill health bequeaths to the entire UK is also considerable. Overall, it is estimated to cost the English economy approximately £105 billion annually (NHS England, 2011). Poor mental health has also been found to have a deleterious effect on physical health as well as on total life span. Life satisfaction, educational achievements, work prospects, and future earnings are all reduced, and the likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system is increased (Murphy & Fonagy, 2012; Goodman et al, 2011; Layard, 2013).

As early as 2004, UK statistics found that one young person in every ten was estimated to have a diagnosable mental health disorder, rising to approximately one in five by 25 years of age (Green et al, 2004; Kessler et al, 2005; McGorry et al, 2007), yet it has also been estimated that 70% of those affected were not offered appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age (Children's Society, 2008). Recent statistics (NHS, 2017) have also noted a slight, but steady, increase over time in the rates of mental disorders experienced by 5 to 19-year olds, and percentages increase from the early childhood years (5.5% of 2 to 4-year olds) to adolescence (16.9% in 7 to 19-year olds).

In a recent report by the UK Office of National Statistics (2017), symptoms of anxiety and depression amongst young people aged 16 to 24 years are high and increased substantially from 18% in 2009-10 to 21% in 2013-14. In particular, the most recent

increase was due to more young women reporting symptoms, with 25% reporting anxiety and depression compared to 15% of young men. The most recent NHS survey (NHS, 2017) confirmed the vulnerability of girls, saying that boys were more likely to suffer from mental ill health until 11 years of age, and both sexes were equally likely to have problems from 11 to 16 years, but girls had more than twice as many instances of diagnosable mental health disorders as boys between the ages of 17 and 19. Within this age range, one in four girls had a diagnosable disorder and half of those said they had self-harmed or attempted suicide (NHS 2017).

### **2.3 Research on the mental health of privileged young people in Britain**

When this research project was conceived, no research had been conducted in the UK which specifically investigated students within the special environment of independent education. Since then, one notable exception, a Department of Education longitudinal study (Lessof, C. et al., 2016) of 30,000 Year 10 students, found a slightly higher, but statistically significant, risk of psychological ill health in young people from 'privileged' environments. Although the direct causes of this ill health were not discernible from the design of the study, the authors noticed that increasing levels of parental academic qualification had the largest statistical impact on increased psychological distress in children.

### **2.4 Research on the mental health of privileged young people in America**

The term 'mental health' has been used differently by researchers but it is most often defined as a measure of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing which affects how we think, feel, and act. It denotes an ability to cope with normal, everyday stresses and it reflects both an ability to work productively and to contribute to community life.

To my knowledge, Suniya Luthar was the first researcher to define and investigate the mental health of 'privileged', 'affluent', or 'wealthy' young people in America. Although the social circumstances determining educational privilege in America are,

admittedly, somewhat different from those in a country such as Britain, the initial body of Luthar's research began to illuminate some troubling trends that should be a cause for concern everywhere. According to her research, which investigated the mental health and behaviour of young people within wealthy neighbourhoods, there were hints that teens at the top of the socio-economic ladder were, despite their economic and social advantages, less happy and psychologically healthy than their peers within less socio-economically advantaged communities (Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Luthar, 2013). In addition, the more recent studies confirmed that wealthy boys and girls were at higher risk of a range of mental health problems, showing on average more than twice as much depression, anxiety, and deliberate self-harm as the US national average (Luthar, 2013).

As early as 1999, Luthar's studies have investigated the 'internalising' of psychological distress by girls and boys from financially above-average families. An extensive study of affluent 12 to 18-year olds in 2005 found that 30-40% experienced 'troubling' psychological symptoms (Luthar and Sexton, 2005), and approximately 22% of the young people surveyed suffered from serious depression (Luthar and D'Avanzo, 1999; Luthar and Sexton, 2005). By the age of 18, one third showed clinically significant anxiety symptoms, three times the US national average.

The amount of illegal substances used also seemed to differentiate socio-economic populations. McMahon and Luthar (2006) studied children from well-educated, white, high-income families and found they participated in more substance abuse than their lower socioeconomic peers, and as many as 10% had very serious emotional and behavioural difficulties. Luthar and Ansary (2005) also found that 45% of the affluent young people they studied engaged in problematic behaviour indicative of poor psychological adjustment, and 23% reported active drug use.

In a more recent study, Luthar (2013) again looked at substance misuse in young teens and found that, by 13 years of age, approximately 7% of the affluent boys she studied were using marijuana and getting drunk at least once a month. She noted that they typically expected alcohol and drugs to be available at social events and had easy access to the money needed to purchase them. To date, there is little

information on why young people feel the need to use alcohol and drugs in this way but, in a comparatively early study (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999), privileged adolescent boys admitted to binge-drinking, marijuana use and the abuse of 'hard' drugs in order to self-medicate against depression.

There have been some notable attempts to describe the value system which exists within wealthy communities in America. In an ethnographic study of suburban high school students, Clark (2004) found evidence that life can be considerably more pressured for privileged children than for lower-class adolescents, particularly when their parents hold high-status, highly pressured jobs. Luthar and Sexton (2005) have documented the psychological damage young people can suffer by living within a 'cultural context of affluence': communities populated by teachers, schools, coaches, and peers who disproportionately value the star status of personal success and are highly critical of failure.

Whereas Luthar and Ansary (2005) found initial evidence of serious rule-breaking and criminal behaviour such as widespread cheating, stealing, and random acts of delinquency in these students, Madeleine Levine (2006), an American psychotherapist familiar with the lives of affluent youths, believes these adolescents' highly privileged circumstances create unusual dilemmas for them which explain their apparently dysfunctional behaviour. Using alcohol and breaking rules helped them to achieve high status within their peer group, and they engaged in a variety of high-risk activities to relieve the stress of their heavy academic burdens and over-scheduled lives. Most disturbingly, she believed their highly pressured environments eventually created passive, unmotivated, disconnected, overly compliant, and depressed young people because of the intense external pressure to 'succeed'.

## **2.5 Defining privilege**

The majority of studies concerned with privilege have been conducted through the lens of sociology, in which the term is defined as a level of social status which gives

economic, social and cultural advantages to members of distinct social groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al, 2013; Savage et al, 2015; Ball, 2015).

Because the definition of words like 'elite' and 'privileged' are not entirely synonymous, these concepts are exceedingly difficult to define, so researchers and theorists have attempted to describe their own versions of the terms. In addition, the boundaries of definition depend entirely on which field of study is being investigated or compared: wealth, education, class, status, power etc. Hence, a literature review of the relevant research on privileged youths tends to identify them as belonging to a socially advantaged group. Terms such as 'elite', 'affluent', and 'advantaged' sit alongside the more popular term 'privileged' and, in most cases, are used interchangeably.

*'Both in a technical and semantic sense the word elite is a problem for social researchers – what exactly do we mean when we use it? ... There is clearly no single or agreed usage or definition of the term – the chapters slip between wealth (economic), lifestyle (culture), exclusivity (social) and power (political) as the basis for identifying elites. ... elites are different and differently constituted and understood in different places.'* (Ball, 2015 p. 234)

Modern privilege theory states that every member of a society is embedded in a complex, multi-layered matrix of contexts, each of which either enhances their privilege or decreases it (Khan, 2012; Twine, 2013). Rocco and West ((1998) use the term 'polyrhythmic realities' to refer to interlocking forms of advantage and disadvantage which enable a person to be dominant in one setting but marginalised in another. Crenshaw (1989) coined the phrase 'intersectionality' to describe these interactions and her theory delineates three main spheres of privilege: structural, reciprocal, and psychosocial.

Crenshaw's 'structural' realm concerns how the norms, policies and language of privilege are institutionalised within societal mechanisms which maintain and reproduce privilege, a view which is most often explored by sociologists. For example, Savage (2015) and his colleagues describe how achieving 'privilege' depends on having access to different forms of social, economic, and cultural 'capital'



which set a particular social class apart from others and give them distinct advantages [See Sections 2.7 and 2.8].

Crenshaw's 'reciprocal' realm portrays how an individual's underlying assumptions about their social role and status are expressed in their behaviour. She acknowledges that internal experiences of 'self' shape intimate interactions with an individual 'other' as well as responses to societal groups.

In Crenshaw's 'psychosocial' sphere, the nature of being privileged is not only an objective truth, but a subjective experience as well. Psychosocial privilege refers to the formation of an individual's core identity and unconscious way of being as they internalise the powerful socialisation processes around them. In general, psychologists tend to focus more of their attention on these subjective experiences as well as how an individual's personal assumptions, goals and values are acted upon within their personal relationships and family systems.

It may be possible to identify each of these three aspects of privilege within the present study. When initially identifying a study population and recruiting participants, I chose to investigate private secondary education as a possible structural realm of privilege by reasoning that these environments might provide similar types of socialisation for most students. The type of methodology I used specifically targeted Crenshaw's psychosocial realm, and, during the analysis, I also commented on aspects of the reciprocal realm.

It is important to note, though, that simplistic categories of privilege such as these have been criticised for ignoring the relative differences within each category of privilege (Coston, 2012). While a more extensive investigation of the complex intersectionality of privileges within the participants' lives is beyond the scope of this research, it must be acknowledged that schools are, by nature, complex, multi-dimensional entities. Students who attend independent schools inevitably have different personal histories and family backgrounds. They belong to different races and genders, and have different cultural backgrounds, social status and economic resources. In addition, not all private schools are privileged environments, and not

all people who have been socialised within these environments think of themselves as privileged.

Although I have tentatively identified independent schools as privileged spaces, I have also taken pains to avoid disclosing my own opinions to my participants for fear of unduly influencing their stories or biasing the data. Instead, in line with a phenomenological investigation, I have asked that the participants provide their own definitions of privilege. [See Chapter 6, Superordinate Theme #3: Ambivalence].

## **2.6 Definition and prevalence of independent schools in Britain**

According to the Independent Schools Council (ISC), there are about 2,500 independent schools in the UK, 1000 of which belong to the ISC. In total, about 7% of all British school children and approximately 18% of young people over 16 years of age are educated in private institutions. As of 2017, 78% of ISC schools are co-educational, 14% are girls' schools, and 9% are boys' schools. Day schools make up 62%, while 38% include all or some boarding students (Independent Schools Council, 2017).

### **2.6.1 UK boarding schools**

According to the Independent Schools Council, 38% of their constituent schools have boarding programmes (about 400 schools) and 14% of all students in ISC schools board. Predictably, ISC's attitude to their residential care is entirely positive and their 2016/17 report states *"the standard of pastoral care is outstanding, and boarding provides a safe and consistent environment with a well-structured and healthy social life"*. There has, however, been little research which specifically investigates the psychological consequences of boarding programmes or the socialisation processes found therein. Some recent studies (Wheare, 2006; Martin et al, 2014; Papworth, 2014) have investigated the academic and non-academic consequences of attending residential education and have concluded that the more modern versions of

boarding are much more focused on the psychological development of young people, as well as on providing extensive academic support.

A longitudinal study by Papworth (2014) investigated life in twelve Australian boarding schools through self-report surveys. The subsequent quantitative data analysis found no significant differences between day and boarding students in all respects, including aspects of academic achievement and measures of psychological wellbeing, such as meaning and purpose, life satisfaction, and emotional stability. The history of Australian boarding is not strictly equivalent to that of the independent sector in Britain because the demographic makeup of the student populations there reflects the lack of secondary schooling opportunities in many remote regions of the country. However, Papworth still maintains that the organisation of life within these schools can be considered generally equivalent to British independent schools in many respects.

Boarding schools undoubtedly represent a unique socialisation setting when compared to day schools. Typically, advertisements for boarding schools portray boarding programmes as providing positive benefits for students, such as advanced academic skills. But some researchers have pointed to the psychological difficulties associated with this type of institutional living. In particular, Duffell (2000) and Schaverien (2015) note the serious harm which can result from being institutionalised during childhood or adolescence, and both authors have identified a typical group of personality traits and psychological defences which can be used when young people attempt to cope with boarding before they are developmentally ready to individuate. This is especially true when students also suffer systemic abuse in these environments, or experience severely ruptured family attachments. As a result, the researchers have identified aspects of psychological rigidity and dysfunctional relational patterns which they call a 'Survival Personality' or 'Boarding School Syndrome'.

Yet it seems that boarding schools are becoming more popular than ever. As internationalism and a global economy become the norm, and as the proportion of aspiring middle classes continues to grow in much of the developing world (Anglionby, 2018), a British education is increasingly seen as the gold standard for

achieving access to elite levels of business and culture. Caletrio, (2012) believes that an understanding of the norms and practices around transnational mobility is essential for understanding social privilege and argues that mobility is a key feature of being elite. In line with this, economically elite parents in countries such as Russia, China, and India are choosing to send their children to international schools for secondary and tertiary education (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Kenway et al, 2013; Kenway & Fahey, 2014).

Schools in the UK have a long history of educating global elites (Duffell, 2000; Brooks & Waters, 2015) and, at present, they provide a number of popular, globally recognised curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (Brooks & Waters, 2015; Hayden, 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Independent schools in the UK are increasingly competing for pupils on the world stage as the global education market becomes ever more internationally oriented (Brooks & Waters, 2015; Hayden, 2011), and a growing number of specialist international schools have established themselves in recent years.

The general lack of rigorous research and theory in this area points to the need for much more information, but this situation may be about to change as schools reach out for quality research to inform their academic and pastoral care networks. Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) and Khan (2011) have recently produced extensive ethnographies of elite American boarding schools which give valuable depth to our understanding of the many powerful cultivation processes by which elite establishments create a new generation of leaders, *'a group of people socialised into particular orientations toward the self, others, and broader society'*. (van Zanten, 2015 p. 20).

### **2.6.2 To what extent is private schooling a 'privileged' environment?**

The academic, economic and social advantages for students who are educated in independent schools in Britain is undeniable. Recent studies have measured the differences in academic achievement between state and independent school students. Attendance at a selective school increases educational outcomes for both

female and male students (Dearden et al, 2002), and these advantages persist even when the variables of background and cognitive skills are taken into account (Sullivan & Heath, 2002). In a recent report by researchers at Durham University (Ndaji et al, 2016), the cumulative differences in educational attainment equated to an accelerated academic achievement of approximately two years by 16 years of age.

Private schools are not required to follow the national curriculum, yet higher levels of academic attainment are evidenced in, for example, twice as many A level entrants in 2016 achieving an A\* or A grade than entrants from state schools (48% as opposed to 25.8%). At GCSE, the number was five times greater than in state schools: 61.9% as opposed to 6.5% (ISC, 2017). Whereas the average ratio of students to teachers in state schools is approximately 17 to 1, the ratio in independent schools is about 8 to 1, and about 17% of independent schoolteachers are Oxbridge graduates. 92% of students in independent schools move on to higher education, and 82% of pupils gain a 1<sup>st</sup> class degree or 2:1 compared with 73% nationally.

In an early study by the Sutton Trust in 2008, just 100 elite private sixth forms and sixth form colleges accounted for a third of all admissions to Oxbridge during the previous 5 years (Ndaji et al, 2016). By 2018, the Universities and College Admissions Service had calculated that students who attended private schools were seven times more likely to win a place at Oxford or Cambridge than those in non-selective state schools (Guardian, 2018). At present, the large majority of independent school students (56%) achieve acceptance at Russell Group universities, while 6% go to Oxbridge (ISC, 2017).

Once students graduate from elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, they can expect to achieve professional and managerial-level employment in the public and private sectors (Karabel, 2015; Stevens, 2009; Allouch, 2013; Parel & Adams, 2013; Weis & Cipollone, 2013), as well as more economic remuneration than that received by individuals from lower ranked universities (Green, et al, 2010; Van Zanten, 2015; Savage et al, 2015; ISC, 2017).

In addition to providing excellent standardised academic results, independent schools are also increasingly focused on providing training in character, resilience, and the 'soft skills' which provide further educational advantage, such as 'confidence, control, and commitment'. (Ndaji et al, 2016; ISC, 2017). These attributes are all defined as constituents of 'mental toughness', a personality trait which determines how individuals deal effectively with stress and challenge (Clough and Strycharczyk, 2015).

## **2.7 Sociological theories of power and privilege**

At the moment, the field of sociology is asking some fundamental questions about the societal effects of privilege in the lives of 'elites', and researchers have explored some nascent ideas about the possible consequences for young people of being part of an advantaged social class, especially within elite education. A number of sociological theories have been used here to inform my discussion of the position of independent schools within society, as well as the socialisation processes existent within them. Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1986; 1996), a French sociologist and philosopher, examined the dynamics of power in society. He coined the term 'social capital' to represent the intergenerational reproduction of elite status and the acquisition of behaviours and attitudes which signal privileged repositories of knowledge.

Faubion (1994) and Ball (2013) have both commented on the theories of another French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1927-1984), who was primarily concerned with the hidden sources of power which, he believed, discipline our appetites, limit our thoughts, and structure our entire society. Unlike 'repressive power' structures, which are codified and therefore easy to see, the more nebulous interactions of 'normalising power' are essentially hidden everywhere and have the effect of making us want to do what we are required to do in order to fit in with the powerful social forces around us.

These socialisation processes inevitably mould the goals, values, and behaviour of all individuals, including schools and students, by determining what specific human

qualities are valued and rewarded (Ball, 2013). Foucault felt strongly that we should all strive to be aware of these forces so that we may eventually resist them, and only in doing so can each of us achieve some personal freedom. I will explore these theories further during my discussion in Chapter 8.

## **2.8 The sociology of elite education**

Most 'elite education' research tends to concern itself with the social processes which set some schools apart from others in a socially stratified society. Admittedly, this is a relatively new field of research, with most researchers working in isolation from one another yet, fortunately, elite national and international education systems are increasingly becoming the focus of collaborative research (Karabel, 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014; Maxwell, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Brezis, 2011; Khan, 2011; Koh & Kenway, 2012; McCarthy & Kenway, 2014, van Zanten, 2015), much of which explores the concept of privilege as it relates to the reproduction of social advantage, or the 'bubble of privilege' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010).

Recently, a number of social scientists have attempted to document the many elements which interact to facilitate the development of elite status and opportunity. Undoubtedly, highly resourced families have better access to elite, academically rigorous schools (Gantambide-Fernandez, 2009; van Zanten, 2009; Draelants & van Zanten, 2011), and private education offers aspiring families much more now than in the past because it provides a 'safety net', or supportive scaffolding, for a child's academic success as well as significant competitive advantages when accessing further elite education (Van Zanten, 2015) and professional careers (Savage *et al*, 2015).

Annette Lareau's concept of 'concerted cultivation' (2003) explains how advantaged families engage in specific processes of socialisation to shape their children's success in a range of privileged arenas. These cultivation processes are all focused on winning admission to a top ranked university, a rite of passage which demands not only a demonstration of exceptional grades during secondary school, but an equally

impressive list of personal accomplishments. Whereas sociological research into elite education to date has focused to a large extent on the methods by which students are moulded and directed toward these 'value added' experiences, researchers are becoming aware there is also a need to focus attention on the subjective experiences of these students in order to understand more fully the collective social forces that shape their lives.

*'Reflecting on the affective relations structuring our research allows us to (i) consider the ways in which our identities and those of our participants were negotiated within the research moment, (ii) offer insights into the broader relations and dynamics shaping the local private education market which we were studying and (iii) describe some of the viscerally experienced practices of inclusion and exclusion encountered within the privileged spaces of elite schools.'* (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015, p. 3)

A knowledge of how the processes of 'concerted cultivation' impact young people within privileged academic environments seems crucial if we are to understand and support their development and emotional needs, yet a surprisingly small amount of research has been carried out on the personal effects of these cultivation processes. The present study will provide an initial exploration of the needs of these special young people and will perhaps inspire other researchers to take forward the quest for more information in future.

## **2.9 Researching the influence of parents**

Although attachment needs during adolescence undoubtedly change as young people individuate from their parents, Armsden and Greenberg (1987) have shown that a secure parent-child attachment at this stage of life predicts better non-attachment outcomes such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, college adjustment, and greater perceived social support.

Positive family involvement has been found to promote academic and non-academic achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). A study by Wang and Sheikh-Khalil (2014) stressed the crucial importance of active and attentive parenting for facilitating the healthy development of secondary school-aged children. Parental involvement was found



generally to improve both academic attainment and emotional functioning, evidenced by both behavioural and emotional engagement. In particular, maternal acceptance and emotional support has been associated with a wide range of optimal emotional regulation strategies (Kliewer, Fearnow, & Miller, 1996; Hardy, Power & Jaedicke, 1993). Maternal sympathy and observed responsiveness have also been seen to lower negative emotions in children (Fabes *et al*, 1994).

Yet, Luthar (2013) and Levine (2006) both cite the tendency of affluent parents to be highly critical of their children as well as being supportive and loving. The researchers found that a significant proportion of parents in wealthy communities pressured their children to achieve very high academic standards and demanded that they also excel in extracurricular-activities and social popularity.

In a further study of 1,300 adolescent children of highly educated, suburban, 'white-collar' [upper-middle-class] professionals (Yates *et al*, 2008), nearly a third were found to self-harm regularly, and the researchers believed this behaviour was a response to the young people feeling academically pressured while also being required to hide their emotions (Luthar & Becker, 2002). They noted that parental alienation and criticism were associated with these high rates of self-harm, particularly for boys.

Steinberg & Morris (2001) found that parental involvement and behaviour monitoring were crucial aspects of preventing anti-social behaviour, and they stressed the need to balance appropriate levels of supervision with adolescent needs for autonomy. In contrast, Levine found that affluent parents seemed to be under-involved in monitoring and managing the riskier social experiences of their children, while also displaying highly competitive, intrusive, and anxious behaviour (Levine, 2006). In addition, research on parent-child autonomy and relatedness suggests that young people who remain overly dependent on their parents show higher rates of internalising symptoms, such as depression, while as those who have difficulty maintaining their close relationships with parents show more problematic externalising behaviour (Allen, Hoouser, Eickholt, & Bell, 1994).

Research has not yet identified the most effective types of parental involvement for healthy adolescent development within particularly stressful environments (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Little is known about the inter-relational mechanisms which underlie parental effects on academic achievement or mental health (Li & Lerner, 2011; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). There are many variables involved in parental care, including involvement at school, relationships at home, and academic socialisation practices (Hill & Tyson, 2009), all of which involve complex and multi-layered interactions.

### **2.9.1 Social referencing in families**

The term 'social referencing' refers to the process of developing a personal viewpoint in response to observing someone else's behaviour or emotions. Originally, standardised tests, such as the 'Strange Situation Test', focused on identifying individual differences in infant attachment behaviour by measuring how often a child responded to the behaviour or emotions of their mother in order to judge whether a given ambiguous environmental situation should be reacted to either positively or negatively (Dickstein et al, 1984; Klinnert et al, 1983; Lamb et al, 1984; Thompson & Lamb, 1983).

However, the normal socialisation behaviour of parents inevitably changes as children develop, so more recent studies have reflected the need to explore a multitude of situations and developmental contexts. Psychological studies which focus on the role of emotions in this process (Parkinson & Manstead, 2015; Manstead & Fischer, 2001; Parkinson, & Simons, 2009) are juxtaposed in the literature with social psychology research which investigates the role of social referencing in particular types of social situations (Latané and Darley, 1968; Parkinson *et al*, 2012). In particular, increased emphasis on relational and social contexts in the study of emotion have pointed to social referencing, or 'social appraisal' (Walle, Reschke, & Knothe, 2017), as a particularly powerful interpersonal mechanism which informs and regulates an individual's relationship with their environment.

Whereas theoretical discussions of social referencing typically focus on the active evaluation of emotional information based on the reactions, such as facial expressions, of others, research has also investigated the emotional contagion, or resonance, which can be an unprocessed product of social referencing (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Coyne, 1976).

Although adolescents typically show increased levels of conflict with parents and decreased warmth toward them (Steinberg, 1998; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Steinberg & Morris, 2001), parents and siblings remain potent influences throughout much of an individual's life cycle, including during adolescence (Morris *et al*, 2017; Walle, Reschke, & Knothe, 2017), when family members can shape the opinions and reactions of young people. And since adaptive social functioning relies on the ability to appreciate and utilise information from the emotional and behavioural reactions of all significant social partners, the attitudes of teachers and peers inevitably affect the appraisals which young people make of their surroundings (Jacobs, Manstead & Fischer, 2001; Yamamoto & Suzuki, 2006) Hendrickx *et al*, 2017).

## **2.10 Schools as a developmental context during adolescence**

Studies by Lazarus *et al* (1984) and Bronfenbrenner (1989) describe schools as social macro-environments of influential interactions in which each student's personal development takes place. Schools act as agents of social regulation: all-encompassing environments which influence and challenge students based on the provision of specific educational tasks, and on how schools evaluate student performance (Popkewitz, 1997). Within this transactional space, 'coping' is defined as the ability to find adequate responses to the demands of the environment.

In an overview of school contextual issues during the middle years of adolescence, Roesner *et al* (2000) referred to Erikson's belief (1968) that adolescents need to be grounded and nurtured within the social conditions of their environment. Unlike Freud (1936), who saw adolescence as a time of tumult when young people inevitably experience psychological problems, Erikson believed that problems during youth signal an environment which fails to provide appropriate care and support. In

Erikson's life-span theory (1973), the main task of adolescence is to build a positive psychosocial identity by deciding what to do and who to be, yet he believed the ultimate responsibility for healthy adolescent development lay squarely in the hands of the collective: parents, teachers, school organisations, and members of the wider community. The task for young people is therefore *'to cocreate and perpetuate society in conjunction with their elders, and, sometimes, to reshape the future direction of society in spite of them'* (Erikson, 1969, as in Roeser et al, 2000).

Studies by Roeser et al (2000) and Eccles & Roeser (2011) both supported and extended Erikson's ideas. Their studies suggested that the ultimate decision to engage in learning depends on whether a young person feels able to meet the challenges they face, whether they see value in that engagement, and whether they feel safe and cared for. Eccles and Roeser's research (2011) focused specifically on how teachers, academic tasks, and classroom environments played a role in the intellectual and social-emotion development of adolescents. They found that school environments influenced every aspect of development for young people, and that the personal and professional qualities and skills of teachers were the most influential of all.

Academic work was found to affect what students learned about themselves and their world, and it profoundly influenced their interests, passions, morals, and ethics. In other words, close relationships with teachers helped to make the work personally meaningful. A study by Ruus et al (2007) investigated the social climate of a group of schools to determine which types of educational environment support or undermine students' academic success and coping strategies. Detailed data were collected about the views of students, parents, teachers, and school administrators to determine each student's developmental context.

School value systems and teacher attitudes were found to significantly affect the level of optimism which students felt, as well as their physical and psychological well-being and academic success. The researchers (Ruus et al, 2007) suggested that schools could be categorised based on their value systems. Those which were most supportive of student coping strategies were found to balance the competitive aspects of academic achievement with the pro-social, humanitarian values necessary

for relational well-being, such as the need for trust and affection, respect for difference, co-operation, the strengthening of communal structures, social justice, and personal accountability. According to Kennedy and Kennedy (2004), teachers can provide valuable opportunities to form attachment bonds which protect a young person's mental health, especially when these relationships are sensitive, responsive, and emotionally supportive.

Student-teacher relationships, as well as teachers' attitudes toward students, have also been found to have a profound effect on students' ability to cope with school stress (Ruus et al, 2007). However, the researchers also believed teachers were in danger of absorbing the 'authoritative' power dynamics of Western individualism which, they believed, tend to promote conservative 'market values' over relationships (Tuffin, 2005). Under these circumstances, they believed that teachers might find it difficult to create healthy attachments with students and a sufficiently warm and friendly school culture.

Ideas about the importance of early attachment relationships have recently been expanded to include the significance of care giving by peers during adolescence (Ainsworth, 1989; Pianta et al, 2003; Allen, 2008), although the research regarding these attachment relationships is still very limited (Scott et al, 2011; Verschueren et al, 2012). Studies by Jacobsen and Hofmann (1997) and Swenson Goguen et al (2011) have found evidence that secure peer attachments facilitate positive academic results, and recent research has begun to examine the importance of peers for providing social and emotional support (Kerns, 2008; Gorrese & Ruggiere, 2012; Laible, 2007; Laible et al, 2000; Wilkinson, 2010).

### **2.10.1 The effects of academic stress**

A certain amount of stress is necessary for the physical and mental well-being of adolescents (Rajan, 2003). However, the emotional consequences of differing levels of stress during this stage of development are a neglected topic amongst researchers (Lin & Yusoff, 2013). The few studies which do exist usually document the effects of stress using either physical, environmental, or psychological models (McNamara,

2000). These studies find that psychological stress which is within a normal, or moderate, range is essentially adaptive, while intense or chronic stress is correlated with diminished life satisfaction (Mayberry & Graham, 2001; McKnight et al, 2002; Suldo et al, 2008). The person-environment model of Misra and McKean (2000) describes stressful events in school as either challenging, when stress brings a sense of competence, or threatening, when stress causes feelings of hopelessness and loss which result in less successful coping strategies and lower academic achievement.

High levels of academic stress are well known to affect students' psychological health and ability to cope, in fact, it has been the most common factor cited as affecting students' quality of life, life satisfaction, and academic performance (Misra & McKean, 2000; Dwyer & Cummings, 2001; Dusselier et al, 2005; Lin & Yusoff, 2013). In addition, a study by Stoppler and Marks (2010) showed that effects of excess stress not only have a harmful effect on the physical and emotional health of adolescents, but these effects persist into their adult lives.

External stress caused by adverse environmental conditions has been linked to a variety of psychological conditions, such as anxiety and depression, aggressive or destructive behaviour (Jaser et al, 2005), and substance abuse (Galaif et al, 2003). Recently, in an attempt to further define stress during adolescence, psychological models have focused on 'perceived stress': an individual's personal estimation of their stress level, as well as their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses to both environment factors and experiences of bodily distress. However, very few studies have attempted to integrate these definitions of stress, especially when trying to determine why some young people cope well with stress and others do not.

Overall, the social-emotional functioning of students within academically challenging secondary education has received little attention in educational research (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010). Having said this, an innovative study by Suldo et al (2008) has explored the different strategies which high-achieving adolescents use to cope with the internal stress caused by the developmental challenges of puberty, as well as a variety of external pressures in their environment. The researchers examined what kinds of stresses cause problems and how different types of individuals negotiated them.

They found that adolescents who attempted to cope by using negative strategies, such as venting their angry feelings, smoking, or using alcohol or drugs, actually exacerbated their stress (Galaif et al, 2003; Suldo et al, 2008; Lin & Yusoff, 2013), while those who used positive strategies, such as talking to parents, strengthening their relationships with friends, having optimistic thinking styles, and cognitively strategising to overcome setbacks, experienced better overall mental health (Einberg et al, 2015; Suldo et al, 2008). Using proactive time management skills and task strategies also supported coping skills (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010).

Identifying the needs and coping strategies of students within academically rigorous education seems particularly important because of the increasing popularity of highly demanding programmes of study, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB). According to Conner (2008), the IB is a very challenging '*curriculum designed to cultivate advanced content knowledge, global awareness, intercultural sensitivity, social competence, inquiry, and problem solving*' in students (Conner, 2008, as in Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010, p. 128).

Only two of the participants from this study completed an IB diploma in their senior schools, yet it is interesting to speculate whether its general rigour, educational philosophy and focus on academic achievement can be considered broadly similar to other types of programmes offered by their independent schools. The IB is a time- and labour-intensive programme of study (Andain et al, 2006), involving frequent examinations, the completion of independent research projects and additional extra-curricular activities. As a result, IB students report having little time for sleep, social interactions or personal reflection. (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008).

### **2.11 School-based counselling provision in Britain**

As a result of the prevalence of mental health problems in young people, government policy has recently focused on the role of schools in providing early mental health education and counselling interventions. Since young people spend approximately 7,000 or more hours in school (Burgess, 2013), it is hoped that these institutions will capitalise on a valuable opportunity to identify and respond to

nascent psychological symptoms by proactively promoting good mental health and wellbeing. This is particularly important since research suggests that in a typical class of 30 students there will be three pupils who have a diagnosable mental health disorder (Green et al, 2004), ten pupils who have separated parents (Faulkner, 2011), six who may be self-harming (Brooks et al, 2015), and seven who are likely to have been bullied (Langford et al, 2014).

The 2008 Children's Plan also emphasised the role of schools as a vital community resource with an important responsibility to promote wellbeing (Foresight Mental Capital and Well Being Project, 2008), and the UK government has identified schools as appropriate locations for reducing the stigma associated with mental health as well as increasing access to services (NHS England, 2015; NHS England, 2016; Frith, 2016; Department of Health & Department for Education, 2017). To achieve this, a government Green Paper has mandated (DH & DfE, 2017) that, by 2025, all UK schools should have a designated Mental Health Lead who will coordinate mental health services, train teachers to identify mental health difficulties, and refer students when necessary to other outside public and private agencies such as the National Health Service Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Most importantly, national policies have encouraged primary and secondary schools to promote consistent, 'whole school' approaches to mental health and wellbeing which, hopefully, will affect all aspects of school life in the future (NICE 2008, NICE, 2009; Weare, 2015; Lavis & Robson, 2015).

School-based counselling in the UK is one of the most important and prevalent forms of counselling available to young people. It is defined by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy as '*a professional activity delivered by qualified practitioners in schools. Counsellors offer young people a valuable opportunity to talk about their difficulties, within a relationship of agreed confidentiality*' (BACP, 2015, p. 1). Within a counselling interaction, a student may explore any issue which feels personally relevant, including family difficulties, friendship issues, worries about grades, and other experiences at school and in the wider world. (Cooper, 2013. p. 3). Most young people who ask for emotional help prefer to access counselling in schools (Quinn & Chan, 2009; Cooper, 2006), but since there are, at present, no



established criteria for determining which students should be offered school-based counselling, counsellors tend to work with many different levels of distress, ranging from 'normal', through 'borderline', to 'abnormal' levels (Cooper, 2013).

Student-focused, person-centred approaches to counselling (Rogers, 1961, 1980) emerged in UK schools during the 1960s and 1970s (McLaughlin, 1999; Baginsky, 2004) to support pupils with behavioural, personal, family, or health issues (Howieson & Semple, 1996), but changes to government priorities in the 1980s and 1990s (UK Education Reform Act of 1988), and general confusion about the purpose and usefulness of counselling, resulted in poor service implementation, less emphasis on psychological support, and more emphasis on academic results and the management of student behaviour (Lang, 1999; Robinson, 1996; Baginsky, 2004).

Fortunately, more recent changes in government policy (DfES Every Child Matters, 2003; DfES Children Act DfES, 2004; Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007; DH & NHS England, 2015; DfE, 2016; DH & DfE, 2017) have meant that school-based counselling is increasingly valued (Polat & Jenkins, 2005; Cooper, 2013), although at present, recent government policy does not make an explicit financial provision for increasing school-based counselling (DH & DfE, 2017). It is estimated that between 61%-85% of secondary schools in England and Scotland now provide in-school counselling services (Cooper, 2013). Since 2007, Northern Ireland has established school-based counselling in all its secondary schools and, since 2008, Wales has offered counselling to all children in public education from 10 years of age.

Although schools and service users generally report happiness with their school counselling experiences, there is as yet little definitive evidence of its effectiveness. Nonetheless, there are a few small-scale studies which have found positive results (Fox & Butler, 2007; Kavanagh et al, 2009; McArthur, et al, 2012; Murdoch et al, 2012). When Cooper (2013) completed a comprehensive review of existing school counselling programmes, he found that students overwhelmingly reported satisfaction with the counselling they received, with approximately 80% of respondents saying they had been helped 'quite a lot' or 'a lot'. In addition, a more recent study by Pearce et al (2017) has suggested that levels of distress were significantly reduced as a result of counselling since students felt it helped them to

work toward their goals. However, researchers have also found that a significant number of young people do not ever seek help for their mental health, whether inside or outside of schools (Gulliver et al, 2010; Smith, 2012; Cooper, 2013).

Although students say they value the organisational 'independence' and 'confidentiality' of a dedicated school counsellor, some young people are reluctant to access services because they feel too embarrassed about needing help or worry that their personal problems are not 'real' or 'normal' (Biddle et al, 2007). It seems that the stigma around mental health, the fear of being seen by others, and students' lack of knowledge about what counselling is and how to access it, mean that only about 8% of students actively request the help they need. (Cooper, 2004; Chan & Quinn, 2012; Cooper, 2013).

#### **2.11.1 The role of a school counsellor**

The UK government and researchers alike have encouraged 'whole school' wellbeing programmes which incorporate psychological knowledge and skills into all levels of school organisations. Yet, according to Cooper (2013), most school counsellors in England are independent practitioners or agency counsellors contracted for only a specific number of one-to-one sessions with students per week, most of which are funded through the school's budget. That being the case, it is likely that these counsellors may have very little influence on school policies or procedures. It is evident that much more research is needed to identify the most effective roles for school counsellors, the types of provisions which are necessary for the wellbeing of an entire school community, and the specific types of counselling which provide the most help for individual students (Cooper, 2013).

In a study by Hanley et al (2012), about 80% of school counsellors were identified as carrying out their singular role within schools, but just over 20% of them were reported to hold other positions as well, such as teacher, nurse, or chaplain. According to the authors, the responsibilities of these roles sometimes clashed but, even when the role of counsellor was well defined and integrated, counselling tasks were viewed differently from each part of a school's organisation.

Kimber and Campbell (2013), have researched the inevitable ethical conflicts that arise when counsellors have different goals and values from those of administrators, parents, and teachers. For example, administrators typically focus on the economic stability of their organisation and the multiple needs of the whole school community, whereas counsellors focus primarily on the needs of individuals within these systems. Issues of confidentiality, informed consent, safeguarding, and the use of counselling for identifying 'problems', all create clashes and moral dilemmas for those concerned. Studies show that head teachers, teachers and counsellors have difficulty resolving these conflicts (Cranston et al, 2006; Lyons, 1990; Campbell, 2003; Duignan & Collins, 2003; Eyal et al, 2010; Langlois & Lapointe, 2007; Norburg & Johansson, 2007), yet Bond (2000) encourages counsellors to see these conflicts as ubiquitous and systematic and to reflect on, and take ownership of, the necessary ethical decision-making process.

## **2.12 Psychotherapeutic theories which have informed this research**

As a psychotherapist for young people, my therapeutic perspective has been significantly coloured by a number of important psychological theories which have underpinned my analysis of the participants' transcripts during the present study [See also Chapter 3, 'My Journey']. The seminal theory of attachment developed by John Bowlby (1973) and Mary Ainsworth (1974; 1989) is valuable when considering an individual's primal need for strong and reliable early caregiving, and thought is given here to how these initial relational patterns might also affect young people during adolescence. (Howe, 2011; Bifulco & Thomas, 2013).

I have relied heavily on Donald Winnicott's theories of child development (1958, 1965; 1971), particularly his ideas on the mechanisms of an early attachment relationship between a mother and her child. I believe that a wider focus on this type of relationship can also be useful for understanding developmental aspects of identity formation during adolescence. Important concepts such as 'good enough mothering', the 'facilitating environment', and the development of a 'True Self' and 'False Self' will be discussed in relation to the participant's comments in order to

explore and interpret their thoughts. In addition, Winnicott's recognition of the necessity for rest, play, and friendship, as well as the perils of too much compliance, will be noted when examples of these issues are identified within the participants' narratives.

Another influential theorist, Erik Erikson (1968), believed that only psychoanalysis and social science together can eventually illuminate significant aspects of humanity's common life cycle. He explored the ways in which communal social organisation co-determines the structure of a young person's family through the tastes, standards, and traditions of the social class in which they live. In particular, he noticed how minute displays of emotion, rather than words used or meanings intended, transmit to a child the outlines of what really counts in his world.

Like Winnicott (1959, 1980), Erikson also believed that the basic needs of infancy and childhood are revisited and reworked during adolescence in relation to the adult roles and responsibilities a young person must eventually assume. Erikson presents human growth as a series of normative inner and outer crises which

*'the healthy personality weathers, emerging and re-emerging with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase in good judgement, and an increase in the capacity to do well, according to the standards of those who are significant to him' (Erikson, 1959/1980:52).*

Whereas the normative psychosocial crises previous to adolescence include 'trust versus mistrust', 'autonomy versus shame or doubt', and 'competence versus inferiority', during the adolescent stage of 'identity formation versus identity confusion', an individual must eventually develop their own personality characteristics and values. In a healthy individual, the oppositional tensions during this crisis are eventually resolved, and growth is achieved, by developing the capacity to make choices and self-determine, albeit within the individual opportunities and limitations of the surrounding culture. As such, Erikson's themes echo those of modern theorists who have studied the personal qualities of successful adolescents, and their need for trust and care in relationships, autonomy, challenge, self-expression, choice, decision making, and competence (Eccles et al, 1993).

As the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1915) developed his theories about personality during his early career as a neurologist and based his assumptions on his therapeutic interactions with clients. He believed in the existence of an unconscious aspect of the psyche which contains a repository of an individual's personal thoughts, feelings, urges, and appetites which are too painful or unacceptable to be allowed to enter conscious awareness. The recognition of these unconscious processes forms one of the pillars of my psychotherapeutic understanding of clients' experiences of pain, anxiety, and conflict, but Freud's concepts are also valuable when attempting to unpick some of the more paradoxical and troubling aspects of school environments: unconscious organisational defence mechanisms which can be examined through this lens.

I have also considered the theories of psychoanalyst Adams Phillips (1998; 2007) and the educator Tamara Bibby (2018) during my data analysis since they both comment on Winnicott's work. Bibby's Winnicottian perspective is particularly valuable when she reflects specifically on the unconscious interactions of teachers and students. Salzberger-Wittenberg et al (1983) also looked at emotional experiences in the classroom from a psychoanalytic perspective. Together, their detailed descriptions illuminate the positive relational factors which are vital for the growth of young people within educational environments as well as the multiple psychological pressures inherent in all types of learning.

Lastly, one of the most definitive issues in the existence of independent schooling is the fact that parents must pay for the education of their children, and I mention it here because of the attention it received from the participants in this study. Although a full discussion of money exchange is beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to note that analyses of issues around money and the consequences of paying for psychotherapeutic services are a rare, but burgeoning, topic among psychoanalysts (Amar, 1956; Dimen, 1994; Klebanow & Lowenkopf, 1991; Heron & Welt, 1992; Hirsh, 1992). For the purposes of the present study, it may be possible to equate payment for therapy to the somewhat similar payment for specific types of 'learning' in schools.

### **2.13 Addressing gaps in the research literature**

This study addresses many gaps in the psychological and sociological research literature, since there is still so much to be explored before we can begin to understand the lives of young people within 'privileged' independent schools. There exists a small body of research which has explored important issues, such as the effects of school environments on adolescence development, how young people deal with academic stress, and how their social lives develop. Yet, these studies do not address the possibility that students within the special environments of academically rigorous, achievement-oriented schools might experience particular internal or external challenges which make them feel or react differently than other groups of students. In addition, qualitative studies in this area which let us hear the actual voices of young people themselves are very rare, and the personal reflections of students within the special environments of independent schools are rarer still. This study addresses these gaps.

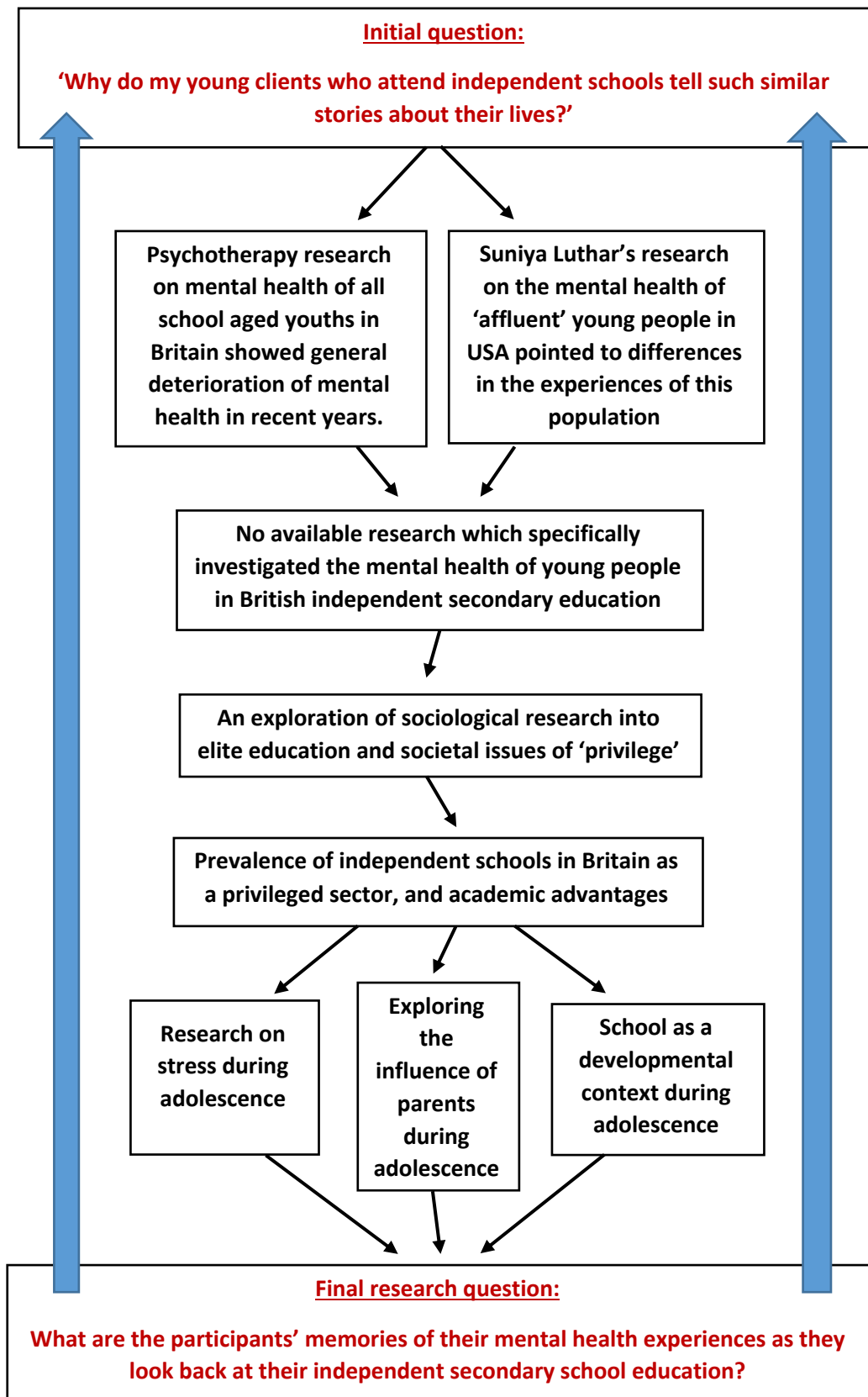
The participants' comments in this study may give us much-needed insights into the relational mechanisms by which parents and teachers help or harm a young person's academic potential and emotional health. They may also provide tentative insights into how these students develop their identities as 'successful' people and how they position themselves within the wider world, topics which are novel in the existing research literature. Since most of the research on the mental health of students in 'privileged' environments, such as independent schools, has been carried out in America, this study begins to address the lack of knowledge about British youths, as well as potentially adding to our understanding of intercultural issues which can transcend specific cultures. While existing research on counselling in British schools focuses on the general provision of services in all schools, this study explores how students feel about accessing counselling within the specialist environments of privileged, highly competitive schools. Thus, this research may offer new insights which will help schools to provide more effective services by including culturally sensitive therapy.

The present study also adds significantly to the existing research in the sociology of elite education in that it seems to align with many sociological concepts [See Chapter

7], such as the 'responsibilisation of motherhood' (Vincent and Maxwell, 2015), increasing competitive pressure within and between schools (Stevens, 2007), and the desire for entry to high status, 'super-elite' universities (Wakeling and Savage, 2015). By attending carefully to each participant's narrative, this study also provides many personal descriptions of previously recognised social mechanisms which make elite educational environments different from other types of schools. These include the mechanisms of 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003), as well as the interpersonal transmission and internalisation of high social status and elite cultural 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1986).

For clarity, the following schematic diagram [Figure 2] will show my initial steps through the research literature, as well as my experiential explorations. Both of these aspects contributed to the final, overarching research question which directed this study.

Figure 3: Literature review and genesis of overarching research question





## **CHAPTER THREE: MY JOURNEY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The need for a researcher to reflect deeply on her own background and reactions during all stages of a research journey is one of the cornerstones of good qualitative research. To illustrate this, I will describe my background and recount some of the personal and professional events that have sensitised me to certain elements of private education in Britain, as well as circumstances which have motivated me to conduct this research. My interest in this topic began long ago. I have learned much of what I know from my clients, but my many conversations with parents, teachers and administrators have also informed and transformed me. The type of study I eventually carried out has been a result of being pushed and pulled by these conversations in a variety of frustrating and fascinating directions.

In this chapter, I will recount my return to university and some of my previous research projects before discussing some pertinent ethical considerations associated with the research. Balancing the dual roles of psychotherapist and researcher has been highly challenging for me, but the necessary personal struggles involved have served to clarify important issues and focus my thoughts. Most importantly, learning to appreciate the concerns of all stakeholders, and to negotiate effectively with them, has greatly increased my understanding and empathy.

Throughout this project, I have become more aware of my independence as a private practitioner, my immigrant status, social class, professional status and relative wealth, all of which may have affected the stakeholders. The following is a description of some of my thoughts during the many years it has taken to complete this research.

### **3.2 My personal journey**

As in all qualitative research, it is essential that the reader has some knowledge of my history in order to judge the validity of my study. I am a 64-year-old white woman, married with 4 adult children, living in a wealthy suburb community south of London,

England. As a psychotherapist in private practice, I have specialised for the past 20 years in working with adolescents, the majority of whom attend expensive private secondary schools in my area.

During my initial psychotherapy training, I attended Regent's College in London at a time when the academic study of psychotherapy as a profession was in its infancy. As a result of the course, my theoretical orientation was originally defined as Humanistic and Integrative but, as I have continued my learning throughout my career, I have explored many different theoretical orientations as I adopted additional skillsets. In particular, my systemically oriented therapy with families and schools has demanded that I acknowledge the value of the wider world around my young clients. My interest in psychoanalytic theory and practice have also deepened my appreciation of the multi-layered intrapsychic levels at which I engage with clients.

I consider myself to be privileged in many ways. My parents moved countries when I was young, at considerable cost to themselves, in order to provide me with the best education possible, and I was lucky to have attended excellent schools and universities, all of which have provided me with a wonderful, mind expanding education. In addition, I was able to take advantage of a wide variety of extracurricular activities, both inside and outside of school, which expanded my horizons and added spice to life. Because of my family circumstances, I am moderately wealthy, and I have also been successful in my career as a therapist, so my day-to-day financial needs are rarely a problem. However, the large majority of the privileged families I work with are considerably wealthier than I am, and this disparity of wealth has generated personal and professional issues around money and privilege which I have had to continually acknowledge and explore.

In 1986, I moved my family from North America to England because of my husband's job. When my four children started their school careers at a well-known independent prep school south of London, and when they moved during their secondary years to three different private schools, the type of environment and education these schools provided was entirely new to me as an outsider to British culture. Because the goals and values of their private schools were often so far out of synchrony with my own

North American experience, I was perhaps more sensitive than most parents to my children's reactions to the steadily increasing, and sometimes debilitating, academic pressure they experienced.

I myself had been schooled in both rural Canada and a suburban part of the USA during a time when students were fairly relaxed about planning for their futures. I attended an academically prestigious secondary school, yet I do not recall it being a pressured environment. In fact, it was a highly enjoyable experimental space where teachers were generally kind and respectful, and I was allowed to develop my personal interests and relationships away from the gaze of my parents.

Homework was seldom assigned and, although grades were given, and I recall that my fellow students were quite comfortable with the grades they achieved. Many of them joined the workforce directly after high school and, although my parents thought I was capable of attending university, they never pressured me. Personal autonomy was very important to me at the time, and I made all the major decisions about my future independently, trusting that I would find my own way in the world.

When I chose my university, I followed my own interests without consulting my parents. I applied to the top five universities in Canada and was accepted at all five, eventually choosing McGill as my *alma mater*. A university education was considered a novelty in my community, and although there was a general belief that university was a possibility for any student, I believe I was the first person in my extended family to actively aspire to it. My rather average grades were always rewarded with praise by my family, but my parents were not pushy parents. They seemed much more interested in what I had learned rather than the grades I received.

Although McGill university was considered at the time to be the 'best' university in Canada, the environment was as relaxed as my school had been, and no one checked up on me. I understood that the purpose of my education was to develop me as a person regardless of my grades. University fees were heavily subsidized by the Canadian government and my parents paid the remaining portion of my fees without comment. As a result, I was allowed to choose my degree purely because of my interest in psychology, with little thought that it would eventually facilitate my

employment. It was supposed to take me somewhere into my future, but where, I did not know.

During these undergraduate years, I also decided to volunteer one day a week in a school for deaf and physically disabled children, and the experience I gained there eventually inspired me to complete a further degree in Special Education. Only then did I begin to think about my career prospects. I eventually achieved a position as a teacher on a very low salary but, luckily, life in rural Quebec was relatively inexpensive and my needs were few. My teaching career ended with the birth of my first child, but I returned to university many years later when I again followed my curiosity and studied for a degree in psychotherapy.

With hindsight, my meandering, relaxed journey through the world of education seems so different from the pressured lives of the young people I now meet. I was allowed to live in the moment, whereas, in my experience, students today seem to live each day planning for their future. It was the stark contrast between their world and mine which inspired me to research the experiences of young people in modern independent secondary schools.

### **3.3 Dyslexia**

I was 40 years old before I learned I was dyslexic, but finally making this discovery has significantly changed the way I view myself and all my educational experiences. Because the diagnosis of 'dyslexia' as a learning disorder did not exist when I was young, and because my father and brother were obviously much more affected than I was, my disability was never identified. I remember the insecurity I felt when approaching a reading assignment and my intense fear of writing, so I struggled to learn certain things and I knew there were some tasks I could not do as easily as others could. Yet my parents and teachers encouraged me to persevere and to be confident, so I eventually did well.

Fortunately, my school was a wonderfully nurturing and exploratory environment where my teachers accepted my individual learning style as just one aspect of my

personality, not a 'flaw'. The academic side of school was not at all pressured or competitive so, by the time I reached university, I had developed my own unique strategies for 'going around' my difficulties. Although writing is still somewhat nerve-racking and time-consuming, I have naturally overcome most of the emotional and practical impediments I faced when I was young.

Yet I believe that coping with dyslexia also induced a level of perfectionism in me which is sometime unhelpful (Newman, 2020) and, therefore, I identify strongly with young students who struggle to live up to the high expectations of parents and teachers, especially when they demand excellence. When I reflect on my educational journey, I am not sure how I would have coped with the pressurised world that many young people experience today. It is this comparison, of their world and mine, that has inspired me to conduct this research.

### **3.4 My children**

My own children entered an educational system that was very different from mine: a world that seemed to expect slightly more of them than they were able or motivated to give. Although all my children have become vibrant and successful adults, there were several memorable experiences which taught me early on that their schooling was a serious business. As an example, my eldest son was not considered academic enough to remain at his school. He was six years old at the time.

Although that dire prediction ultimately proved false, it provided stark evidence that his school prioritised grades from the very beginning of his school career. Many similar experiences followed as my children grew in body and mind and, although their primary and secondary schools supported a great many valuable academic and social aspects of their growing identities, it was never smooth sailing and they often suffered from stress.

When I began my psychotherapy practice with young people, most of whom attended independent schools in my area, their stories paralleled those of my

children. They most often presented with a familiar range of identity, friendship, and family issues, but, unlike my own children, they also showed increasingly debilitating levels of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and eating disorders. Parents complained often of their lack of motivation and drive, but the young people also complained of their parents' unreasonably high expectations. They seemed to suffer from paralysing pressure as they tried to keep up with over-full schedules at home and at school. Although I began to see some interesting patterns in my early work with these students, it was not until years later that I realised I was seeing something larger than just individual lives within my local environment.

### **3.5 Creating the Surrey Counselling and Psychotherapy Initiative (SCPI)**

It is within my core nature to collaborate with others. In 2004, I invited a group of local psychologists, psychotherapists, and counsellors to join me in creating a new professional organisation, the Surrey Counselling and Psychotherapy Initiative. I was finding my career as a psychotherapist a lonely one and hoped to build a supportive referral network of psychology professionals who could support each other's personal and professional growth while also giving the public a point of reference for easier access to quality therapy. It felt particularly important for me to challenge some of the traditional boundaries between different therapeutic modalities, so I invited practitioners who represented a wide range of theoretical orientations and clinical skills to join me. The group quickly grew to 60 members, spawning several vibrant subsections, one of which was the Child and Adolescent group. It became a professional haven for its members, among whom are several highly experienced school counsellors within local state and private schools. We continue to collaborate and support each other's professional development during monthly meetings, workshops, and peer supervisions. I am particularly fortunate that my slowly developing views on 'privileged' young people have been challenged and shaped over the years by these colleagues.

### **3.6 Supervising colleagues**

Once my therapeutic skills grew and I had more extensive experience collaborating with schools, I became a supervisor to several school counsellors and other private practitioners who often reported experiences that paralleled mine. They suspected, as did I, that there were special circumstances in fee-paying schools which were causing discernible patterns of distress in students yet, surprisingly, there was a general lack of discussion about the possible causes.

### **3.7 Creating a life skills course**

By 2008, my extensive experience as a therapist had led me to believe that young people in independent schools needed more psychoeducation and a chance to share their views openly with each other. Since the early stages of my career, I had cultivated a close relationship with one particular independent school and, as a result, was finally given permission to present a 'relationship skills course' to boarding students which would focus on mental health issues. Unfortunately, the course failed for a variety of reasons, mostly because I lacked experience in facilitating groups but, in addition, two factors stood out, although I did not realise their importance at the time. The young people did not trust each other sufficiently to self-disclose and, most importantly, it was clear they resented taking time to talk with me when they were receiving no official grade or prestigious additions to their personal CVs for this course.

### **3.8 Talking to parents**

During this time, I also offered a series of 'adolescent mental health' workshops to parents and teachers at several local schools. I intended to use these opportunities to engage with adults whose children were not directly involved in therapy and I hoped they would help me to interrogate my ideas. Surprisingly, their reactions to my topic were often defensive, even combative, and I was puzzled when terms such as 'privileged', or references to the emotional health of students within

‘advantaged’, or even ‘independent’ school environments, elicited such strong emotional reactions. Unfortunately, the issues I wished to clarify were instead becoming ever more confusing for me and I seemed to touch raw nerves everywhere, as these school administrators’ comments illustrate:

*‘Other schools are hothouses, but not ours. We don’t have kids like that here.’*

*‘We send you our students [for therapy] and keep you in a job. You should be more grateful.’*

*‘These children are not “privileged”! They work very hard for the success they have, and they deserve every bit of it!’*

### **3.9 Going back to university**

Re-entering university for this doctoral programme gave me an opportunity to carry out research which could potentially answer some of my most pressing questions. My first study explored the personality traits and values of a group of participants who, I believe, represented those of my parent population, but the journey between this initial project and my final research went through many interim stages of development, some of which I outline next.

### **3.10 Attempting Action Research**

The road to my final project was not at all an easy one and I have been forced to abandon several potential projects along the way. Although my setbacks were not at all comfortable, I have learned a tremendous amount about the considerable social constraints which impede the legitimate study of youths within the protective shield of privileged families and elite schools. I have been fortunate that, with each twist and turn of my research adventure, my passion for this topic seems to have found new energy. Having said this, I wish to recount some of the projects I previously attempted, with the hope that my growing sense of disillusionment at the time will give further insight into the practical problems I encountered and show my own reactions to this project.



With each painful dead end, I struggled to understand myself, and my own preconceptions as I clashed with the cultural forces at stake in my clients' worlds. I knew I wanted to support young people, yet at this early stage in my research I had not consciously considered what impact my focus would have on the psychological equilibrium of students or the agendas of parents and schools. I knew only that, within my private practice, young people felt overwhelmed by their pressured lives. They suffered from serious depression and debilitating anxiety, yet they had no words for the shame and confusion they were feeling.

I had faith that, if they could be taught to communicate more effectively, and if their suffering could be heard by others, they would heal. With this in mind, I developed a plan for a collaborative, arts-based group activity within an Action Research methodology which would combine both my therapeutic and research aims. This would entail a group of young people creating a group communication platform to help them describe their experiences.

### **3.11 Project #1: Action Research: An arts-based collaborative inquiry**

I had failed to engage the boarding students in my life skills course because their complicated social landscape meant they could not always trust each other, so I reasoned that a group of young people who were recruited from separate schools might be able to talk together and share themselves more freely. I often use art as a means of working with my clients since it is such a powerful form of individual and group communication (Leavy, 2015). In my experience, adolescents enjoy reflecting creatively and are adept at expressing their ideas in artistic forms.

An action research cycle of 'inquiry-action-inquiry' seemed to offer me a maximum opportunity to learn myself while also providing therapeutic value for my participants. I looked forward to experimenting with new strategies which would allow me to alter the core nature of my psychotherapy practice (Elliott, 1991) while also adding to the research literature on privileged youths.

As with all qualitative research, Action Research (AR) would demand of me a willingness to be critically reflexive and ethically engaged at every level of the project, and this appealed to me a great deal (Winter, 1989; Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 2003; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). AR does not seek 'truth', but instead seeks understanding (Stiles, 1993), and the ultimate validity and reliability of the findings would depend on my ability to be transparent and 'believable' while gathering, analysing and disseminating data (Stiles, 1993). While this seemed challenging, I was drawn toward this deep level of engagement.

I was also highly attracted to the idea that AR had the potential to de-stabilise prevailing cultural narratives and overturn social myths by challenging the status quo and adding significant new knowledge to the world (Stiles, 1993). The pursuit of both therapy and research are socially powerful forces for transforming society (Kirkbride, 2018; Cooper, 2015; Reeves, 2015), and I believed this particular method of investigation would allow young people to bring their needs and concerns out into the open so they could be addressed.

### **3.12 Ethical considerations of Action Research with students**

When I originally conceived this research, I held a strong underlying belief that young people in independent schools were generally 'privileged but pressured' and I wished, above all else, to find a way to relieve this pressure. However, I had not sufficiently thought through the possible ramifications for all stakeholders, particularly for my school age participants. I simply wanted a method that would illuminate their hidden world. I assumed that anyone who freely volunteered for a study about mental health would feel interested enough to participate, but I also naively assumed their agreement to explore their thoughts and feelings would automatically set up the circumstances for their growth and learning.

However, in pursuing my goal of getting young people to articulate their personal feelings, I believe I unintentionally lost sight of the significant moral and ethical dilemmas which might have resulted if the project had gone ahead. My dual role as a psychotherapist and researcher might have cause confusion both for me and the

students. Parental expectations might have been difficult to manage. Family or school relationships might have been affected negatively in ways I could not anticipate or control.

Most importantly, if I succeeded in opening the 'Pandora's box' of students' feelings, I had to admit I did not feel entirely capable of providing the level of therapeutic support these young people might need during or after the project. The creation of art is undoubtedly a very powerful means of accessing unconscious aspects of the psyche (Jung, 1995, 2005; McIntosh, 2010), but how deeply did I, or my participants, wish to explore? Would the young people themselves be capable of limiting their disclosures in order to protect themselves?

Socially or psychologically vulnerable individuals, such as young adolescents, should never be expected to take full responsibility for their own emotional wellbeing. Introspective abilities are often underdeveloped in adolescents and, therefore, they may not have the ability to process any feelings which emerge. In addition, if these young students found my inquiries too upsetting, they would still be subsumed within school and family systems from which they had no realistic way of extricating themselves. I therefore deemed I could not sufficiently provide for their safety under these circumstances.

### **3.13 Project # 2: Creative collaboration with students in schools**

After considering these ethical issues, I decided to embark instead on another project which would give greater control to my participants and provide more support for their wellbeing. In my experience, the adults who are concerned about the mental health of students are generally supportive of the types of psychoeducation and wellbeing programs offered in schools. Yet, in my experience, these programmes are usually organised and carried out with very little active involvement or feedback from students. I therefore wondered whether AR could provide the type of collaboration which would empower young people to actively shape the type of mental health support they felt they needed.

I had faith in my ability to convince a school to evaluate, and sometimes alter, their mental health services for the benefit of their students, if only I could initiate the right conversations with the right people. Furthermore, I assumed young people would wish to communicate their needs to their parents if, with my help, they could convey their thoughts in a creative and thoughtful way. I hoped I could keep my participants safe by giving them more power over what would happen to them, and I reasoned that a close collaboration with their school counsellors might offer me the structured therapeutic collaboration I needed in order to ensure they would be cared for. In addition, not only could school administrators offer me instant access to their students, but they might also provide valuable help with the logistics of obtaining participant and parent consent while also organising a time and venue for my meetings.

So, I began the process of contacting three prestigious independent secondary schools in the greater London area. I hoped to conduct my research with young people during the school day, possibly during their personal, social, health, and economics education classes (PSHEE). I explained my project to several enthusiastic school counsellors, then we conferred online and eventually fleshed out many of the particulars, such as age group of the participants, the need for parental permission, and class timing.

Through them, I was introduced to three administrators who listened attentively to my plans and agreed in principle with the general aims of my research. I ultimately needed only one of them to agree to host my project and, since each one seemed ready to give permission, I decided to take the first one who gave me a firm commitment. Unfortunately, as I waited patiently for news of their final decisions, something strange happened. Despite my enquiring emails, I received no further communication from anyone.

### **3.14 Failing to access schools: The ambivalence of stakeholders**

When I reviewed all that had happened, I finally realised that, not only did a project of this sort require too large a time commitment from busy schools, but stakeholders

were possibly ambivalent about my investigations because, as one parent said, ‘it might make matters worse’. I was an unknown entity and, more importantly, these administrators had no reason to trust that I would follow their underlying agendas when conducting my research. Finally, I had to admit I was conflicted about entering the inner sanctum of any school since, in my experience, their pastoral systems had not always been efficient at providing mental health support to students such as my clients.

### **3.15 Negotiating with gatekeepers**

A number of researchers have experienced ‘elite’ participants or stakeholders initially collaborating with them and then stopping. (Sherman, 2017). Maxwell and Aggleton (2015) suffered this fate when they approached a number of schools for access to their students.

*‘About the same time, emails were sent to three other nearby schools. Each of these approaches were unsuccessful – with one school feeling there were too many changes afoot (a new headteacher [sic] coming into post) to allow involvement in the research study as well, and another agreeing to participate. However, very abruptly, just one week before data collection was due to commence, this latter school ceased all contact with the research team.’ (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015, p. 11)*

During their study, whether or not schools were willing to be ‘viewed’ by the researchers depended on how sensitive the administrators were to actions which could undermine the school’s market position or decrease its competitive edge relative to other schools.

*‘It was the view of the headteacher that “the research project would not be able to guarantee the anonymity of the school, especially with respect to competitor institutions, so [he] felt unable to give permission for the research to take place”. This was a disappointing response but revealed something of the sensitivity associated with researching elite education. It also left us feeling like we had been “tested” and found wanting.’ (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015, p. 11)*

As these researchers sought the participation of different schools, they learned to consider four key variables which, together, would possibly allow them access:

- Whether key stakeholders with the authority to grant access ('gatekeepers') displayed an intellectual or professional curiosity about the focus of the project
- The extent to which the findings were perceived to be in line with the school's own planned development
- Whether the gatekeepers' and researchers' personal biographies were similar (social class location, educational history).
- Whether the gatekeepers and researchers had a prior acquaintance which would allow trust

I had failed to achieve access to schools because I had not been fully aware of the requirements of stakeholders, or of the necessity to consider carefully these important aspects of the negotiations.

### **3.17 Being an outsider**

During this project, I have often wondered how my North American accent has affected the reactions and behaviour of the people with whom I have interacted. I suspect I may have seemed familiar to some parents and administrators in international schools, but those in traditional British schools may have been more wary of me because of my obvious difference.

It is interesting to note, though, that my colleagues have remarked on my 'outsider' status being a positive asset while investigating educational aspects of social class and privilege in Britain, and perhaps this emotive subject has indeed required a foreigner to shine a light on areas which might otherwise be hidden or taken for granted. However, my obvious differences may also have created unnecessary barriers to access, making this project much more difficult than it might otherwise have been.

For my own part, I felt my outsider status very keenly. For much of my life, England has been my home, but my immigrant status makes it impossible for me to feel I truly belong in this country. While my personal relationships with school administrators and my marriage to a teacher have given me valuable insider knowledge of school processes, it is interesting to me how much of my personal and professional life has continued to place me in this insider-outsider position. Yet, as difficult a position as it has been at times, I believe it has provided me with just the right background of experience for this piece of research.

### **3.18 A change of direction**

*‘Even though I was getting good grades, I felt a complete failure, the lowest of the low, but I couldn’t have reflected on it when I was in school. It’s only with hindsight that I got a perspective on what I went through.’ (A university student)*

It was clear to me that I had to consider a new research method and, thankfully, my final epiphany happened when I spoke with two university undergraduates about their attitudes toward mental health. Even though they were both enrolled in very highly ranked British universities, they recalled the pressure and confusion they had experienced while in their private secondary schools. Both knew something was ‘not right with the world at the time’ but neither could determine what the problems were or how to deal with them. Most importantly, they said their ability to reflect only came with the space to look back at their former selves. The present study grew out of that seminal meeting. In the next chapter, I will discuss my final choice of methodology and study population.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I state the aims and rationale of this study and justify my use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as an appropriate form of qualitative research by discussing several other methodologies which I initially considered but ultimately rejected. I discuss the theoretical stance of IPA, as well as its underlying philosophy, and focus on the central components of IPA which are necessary aspects of the methodology, then I show my commitment to a pluralistic, mixed methods design which juxtaposes my IPA methodology with sociological theory and research. A schematic diagram of my research cycle will place each of the elements of my research in relation to each other.

### **4.2 Qualitative research**

Whereas quantitative research methodologies rest on the acceptance of an objective reality which can be measured, qualitative approaches to research attempt to understand the meaning which individuals derive from their interactions with the social world. This type of research accepts the existence of multiple views of social reality in which a participant is considered to be an expert with their own unique views. In this case, it is the researcher's role to listen to and interpret their individual perceptions. The assumption is that lived experiences are subjective and varied, and the goal of qualitative research is therefore to empower and to give a voice to participants by exploring the process of their meaning-making.

There is a wide variety of interpretive stances in qualitative research, each of which reflect different sensitivities and points of view. At one end of the spectrum are 'naïve and empathic' phenomenological approaches which focus on uncovering, as much as possible, the personal meaning-making of an individual from a position of 'seeing afresh' (Finlay, 2010). At the other end of the spectrum are constructionist philosophies which rely on an acknowledgement of the social forces which shape an individual's actions and thoughts. In this type of approach, a researcher attempts to



explain a participant's experiences rather than understanding them only through the individual's own point of view. Three theoretical variants within these approaches have been described by Denzin and Lincoln (2007): constructivist-interpretive, critical, and feminist (p. 31). A constructivist approach assumes that the personal narratives that make up subjective reality are grounded in the natural settings of a social world in which there are no objective realities, only subjective experiences which need to be explored and interpreted.

In contrast, critical stances examine the issues of ideology, control, or power dynamics which shape an individual's understanding of their world. In particular, postmodern perspectives focus on how positions of power are reproduced. While there is no assumption here of objective truth, the aim is to fashion a representational portrait, and an important goal of this type of critical investigation can be the exposure of social injustice and the desire to liberate individuals or groups who are marginalised or invisible. Finally, feminist perspectives concentrate on the lived experiences of women and other oppressed groups while also pointing to the positivist, male biases in knowledge building which ignore how gender intersects with race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference (Bavnani, 2007, as in Hesse-Biber, 2010, p.456). This focus attempts to uncover the 'subjugated knowledge' which traditional research approaches have typically neglected (Hesse-Biber, 2010a).

### **4.3 Methodologies which were considered but rejected**

On the route to my final methodology, there were several projects which I initially considered, but rejected. Their different philosophical attributes reflect my attempt to define my research questions and subsequent methods.

#### **4.3.1 Action research**

The first two studies that I attempted within a critical, transformative epistemological framework were both Action Research projects (See Chapter 3) which attempted to help students explore the nature of their school lives. Action

research (AR) is a collaborative form of investigation which counters the idea of participants as the objects of study and, instead, gives them an equal opportunity to imagine, construct, and carry out a research project with a researcher.

AR creates forms of knowledge which are practical and experiential, and its goal is to produce actions which are directly useful for a specific group of people. It assumes participants have specialist knowledge of their particular environment and are capable of making sense of their own worlds. *'All those engaged in the inquiry process enter the process as persons, bringing with them their intelligence, their intentionality, their ability to reflect on experience and to enter relations with others'* (Reason & Riley, 2008, p. 208). My two attempted action research projects were originally conceived in this way but, as previously mentioned, I was unable to recruit participants.

#### **4.3.2 Ethnography**

An ethnographic exploration depends on a grounded theory analytic process (see below) to illuminate important aspects of one particular environment, such as a school, through an immersive, multi-layered investigation. It includes data gathering through interviews and direct observations of activities, such as rituals and social behaviour. Because I have been interested in the educational circumstances which shape student behaviour, I would have valued the opportunity to gather data by having access to multiple aspects of an independent school environment for an extended period of time, but the failure of my Action Research projects had made me very reluctant to approach schools again or attempt to recruit them as direct participants. Total immersion in any school environment (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan, 2011) is difficult to achieve if a researcher is not already a regular member of a school community. In addition, the extensive time requirement for an ethnographic study made this type of inquiry impractical.

### 4.3.3 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a popular type of qualitative research which aims to develop a new theory about a particular phenomenon by building insights ‘from the ground up’ through an inductive process of data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It usually starts with a researcher asking a general question then gathering information which is directly or tangentially relevant. Similar ideas or concepts eventually emerge from the data, then additional information is gathered to further illuminate the emerging themes until new ideas are no longer being generated. The researcher attempts to uncover an action or process which all the participants would have experienced, and the goal is to seek an overall explanation or understanding. Corbin and Strauss (2007) developed a structured approach to grounded theory which initially looked interesting to me, but the interpretive perspective of Charmaz (2006) might have suited my interest better in accommodating reflections on my own interpretive stance.

Although several of my research questions would have suited a grounded theory approach, there were many aspects of grounded theory which did not appeal to me:

- I wished to pursue one overarching research question which implied several subsidiary questions, yet grounded theory begins with a more naïve, open-ended approach.
- Collecting appropriate amounts of rich, dense data requires the gathering of a large amount of information, so the time and resources would have been substantial. A project of this kind was likely to need much more of a commitment than I was able to make.
- I did not feel the use of this methodology gave me sufficient opportunity to reflect on my own part in a study because it does not strictly require this.
- I had been curious about the lives of privileged young people for many years so had gained considerable knowledge before my study began. Grounded theory’s requirement that a researcher avoid previous assumptions, particularly a review of the literature, in advance of collecting data was not practical in my case.

- Grounded theory emphasises being an observer rather than a collaborator and I was somewhat uncomfortable with this approach.

#### **4.3.4 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis**

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) is a form of inquiry which focuses on the power relationships in society and how language is used to construct and maintain that power. It focuses on the connections between language and subjectivity and examines what can be said by whom within particular social circumstances. A researcher who uses this type of methodology tries to understand how individuals view the world by analysing their personal and institutional relationships, paying close attention to how surrounding social structures legitimise and reinforce institutional structures by '*organising, regulating and administering social life*' (Willig, 2008).

Because I have an interest in social psychology, and because FDA is concerned with the political implications of language, I considered it an interesting method for learning:

- How the language of students might reflect the special nature of independent schools relative to non-fee-paying schools.
- How the internalisation of hierarchical relationships with teachers and parents might reflect these differences.
- How students might comply or resist certain socialising aspects of their education.

However, although I wished to challenge some of the institutional mechanisms and underlying goals of schools, it was difficult to see how their self-protective, entrenched, and invisible processes could be challenged using this rather theoretical type of discourse alone. A Foucauldian analysis of student behaviour in response to the systemic structures of independent schools might have effectively examined the situations above, but because I wished overall to focus more on the mental health

needs of privileged students, a Foucauldian analysis alone seemed an inappropriate choice.

#### **4.4 Choosing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

After much consideration I decided, instead, to conduct an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which had the potential to explore many more aspects of students' personal experiences within family and friend relationships. Furthermore, when combined with qualitative research in sociology which has analysed some of the wider world around schools, this qualitative approach might provide valuable baseline information about student experiences from multiple perspectives.

#### **4.5 IPA: Ontology and epistemology**

Ontological ideas about the nature of existence necessarily lead to an epistemological philosophy about the nature of knowledge building, so a researcher's ontological and epistemological awareness should ultimately underpin their purpose and guide the eventual construction of their study. In attempting to find a research position which incorporated an exploration of the experiences of young people with an investigation of the social processes within the world they inhabit, I chose to use Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as my primary methodology while also incorporating ideas from sociology within a mixed methods, pluralistic design which applied more than one analysis to my initial data set.

IPA itself somewhat straddles this epistemological divide in that it is not purely a phenomenological investigation of personal experience but also incorporates social constructionist ideas which recognise that those experiences are inevitably shaped and contained within a world which already exists. It therefore leans toward a realist ontology which acknowledges the independent existence of world phenomena, but within a constructivist epistemology which holds that our personal histories, experiences, and social interactions form our unique understanding of that reality.

Willig (2008) has criticised IPA for its emphasis on descriptions of experiences of phenomena rather than on trying to explain them. With this in mind, although I have placed more of my emphasis on the IPA results, I have also analysed the same data set through the eyes of the critical paradigm of sociological research in order to place the participants' comments within what is theorised about external societal processes and to further emphasise the socially constructed nature of their experiences.

This postmodern perspective sets my claims within a discussion about the world today and, although I have not carried out a full analysis of power dynamics in this respect, I have touched on some relevant theories, such as Foucault's ideas about the internalisation of subversive power, in order to initiate a different type of 'wondering' about the former students in my study, and to triangulate and validate the IPA results.

As in a qualitative research, my own history has influenced my analysis of the participants' narratives, particularly my years as a psychotherapist and my extensive interactions with schools. I have taken the uneasy position of juxtaposing a phenomenological openness with a strong sense that the world around privileged young people must change in order to better provide for their mental health. This impetus for change also extends further into my ideas of society in that I have commented on 'privilege' as a status issue, and independent schools as 'privileged' environments which actively contribute to increasing educational and social competition (See Chapter 7). In aid of my project, I have also included in my IPA analysis some information on the general psychotherapeutic theories which underpin my personal and professional understanding.

#### **4.6 Background to the chosen design and methodology**

My choice of a pluralist methodology was based on my generally pragmatic viewpoint as a working psychotherapist. My experiences of trying to help young people who have suffered a certain amount of damage because of their school

environments has created my particular biases and informed the questions I propose in this study.

I have attempted to bring together my background in psychotherapy, particularly the phenomenological perspective I use therapeutically, with my extensive experiential learning about schools, parents, and teachers, within the specific methodological orientations of IPA and the qualitative sociological studies of 'elite education' in order to shed light on the cultural patterns I have experienced, and to gain a wider more balanced worldview. I consider the young people who have access to independent education to be a uniquely privileged population, and I believe many of the cultural and environmental pressures which compromise their mental health are hidden and misunderstood, so I have approached this research with the primary objective of advocating for social justice and social change.

My research questions have therefore grown out of this worldview. Pragmatists, such as myself, must place ultimate emphasis upon the research question itself when making choices between different types of research methodology, since the theoretical perspectives inherent in the different methodologies provide a link to methods of investigation. Finally, Tashakkori and Teddie (1998) suggest that a researcher should

*'study what interests you and is of value to you, study in the different ways in which you deem appropriate and use the results in ways that can bring about positive consequences within your value system' (p. 30).*

#### **4.7 A pluralist mixed methods design**

Pluralist qualitative research uses a combination of research methods within the same study. It is postmodern in that it is critical of the idea that one version of the truth is better than another, and it is not integrative, but portrays life as multi-dimensional and fragmentary. The contradictions and tensions of the different approaches therefore facilitate a vibrant dialogical awareness. Mixed methods research was initially developed in the 1980s (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011), and although the idea of using more than one methodology in a single study had surfaced

much earlier (Campbell & Fiske, 1959) researchers from many different disciplines eventually proposed similar ideas to counter the polemic qualities of more traditional research paradigms (Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Bryman, 1988; Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Morse, 1991).

In pluralist research, more than one epistemological position can be brought together to facilitate a more holistic understanding of a phenomenon and, even though these differing perspectives may at first appear to present entirely different ontologies, epistemologies, and logic (Cresswell, 2009c), they can be used to balance an investigation, to challenge a single viewpoint, and to provide much greater depth.

*‘Rather than assuming “one truth” or attempting to merge different epistemological stances into one, pluralism can move between different levels of interpretation holding in mind that “qualitative research is about attempting to discover new aspects of a totality that can never be accessed directly or captured in its entirety”’ (Willig, 2012: 162, as in Steffan, 2015: 42).*

Studies which juxtapose multiple methods are becoming more popular than ever and many different combinations are being developed at present (Tahsakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Mixed methods designs usually use both quantitative and qualitative research within the same study (Frost et al, 2010; Frost et al, 2011), but the majority of these preference a quantitative method over a secondary qualitative method (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

The term ‘pluralistic’ is associated with a combination of different qualitative research methods. Just as in other types of mixed methods studies, pluralistic research paradigms can differ in the types of qualitative methodology used and the emphasis placed on each form, sometimes using one main interpretive stance along with one or more subsidiary ones (Dewe and Coyle, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2010). Frost and Nolas (2013) have advocated the use of pluralistic qualitative research for evaluating social processes in order to facilitate change in specific small-scale environments.

Especially when considering new and innovative interventions, pluralistic research can offer localised answers to how something works, whether proposed changes



matter, whether interventions are appropriate for a given population and whether stakeholders are satisfied with the resulting services. Since independent schools are microenvironments which largely determine their own individual mental health agendas, more holistic, multi-dimensional, mixed-methods studies, which triangulate results and apply clear models of analysis can be useful tools for facilitating their understanding and aiding the process of transformation.

However, there are several practical aspects of using pluralist methodology which need to be considered. There is more flexibility for a researcher and a wider range of ontological and epistemological positions, but this can also be ontologically confusing. It can be difficult for a researcher to carry out multiple methods since a high degree of competence is required in more than one area, particularly since they usually involve different investigative skills and resources which, critics argue (Bryman, 1988; Guba & Lincoln, 1988; Smith, 1983), can lead to conflicting ideas and general confusion for both the researcher and those who review the research. It is therefore difficult to write up these studies in an accepted style which can be easily compared to other research.

I have carried out two analyses in a combined approach where the variables which are identified in one study are re-examined by a second analysis in order to triangulate, or validate, the results of the first. A primary Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) looks at the personal experiences and meaning-making of a group of former students, then sociological theories, based on previous qualitative studies, are compared to each IPA superordinate theme to further explore important aspects of the participants' experiences based on their collective social, historical, and cultural container. Although the methodological rigour of the initial IPA study is not equalled by a similarly standardised second analysis, the use of sociological studies and theory to give context to the IPA research will, I believe, add a new and valuable point of view.

#### 4.8 IPA: Theory and philosophy

IPA as a methodology was initiated in the UK by Jonathan Smith in the mid 1990s (Smith, 1994; 1996) and it quickly became popular within health psychology, clinical psychology, and counselling psychology. Because of its appeal to researchers who believe in the value of subjective knowledge and those who are interested in illuminating human experience from a first-person standpoint, it is now used in a wide variety of fields and is becoming one of the most popular forms of qualitative research. Noon (2018) has stated that IPA is '*a particularly useful methodology for researching individuals or groups whose voices may otherwise go unheard*' (p. 80).

IPA is a form of qualitative research. Its underlying phenomenological philosophy is derived from a group of philosophers who were concerned with personal experiences of living within the mutually constructed relatedness of self and others when individuals are also embedded within the surrounding physical and cultural environment. Edmund Husserl (1927) believed we should step outside our habitual, or natural, attitude to everyday experiences in order to reflect on them by directing our gaze inward. He therefore focused on the internal psychological mechanisms whereby a person might deeply explore his own perceptions and consciousness. He was especially concerned with examining the essential qualities of an experience and he advocated an attitude of 'returning to the things themselves' by 'bracketing' off previous assumptions.

Martin Heidegger (1962/1927) expanded on Husserl's ideas by proposing that, as much as self-reflection is an important starting point for a phenomenological investigation, a human being is also a *Dasein*, a 'being in the world'. A person and his environment are inextricable intertwined, and both are constituted within an already existing social, cultural, linguistic, and historical reality. Heidegger believed it is this intersubjectivity which defines our engagement with the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) carried Heidegger's theories a step further when he described the embodied nature of our relationship with the world and how our individual perspective necessarily grows out of a unique position of 'looking at the world' rather than being subsumed in it.

IPA incorporates these phenomenological ways of seeking the 'essences' of experience within social constructivist attempts to place an individual's experiences within real world phenomena that have real world consequences, yet it acknowledges that 'truth' can only be known subjectively through personally and socially constructed perceptual filters. An interviewee who 'tells her story' communicates her particular point of view, then the analytical processes of a researcher are used to reflect on and interpret it based on the researcher's additional point of view. IPA therefore rests on the double hermeneutic of a researcher trying to make sense of a participant who is trying to make sense of an experience. The primary focus in IPA is a phenomenological one: the individual's own experience and the sense they themselves make of it, rather than merely a description of the structure of their experience (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

An IPA study includes three fundamental elements: it seeks phenomenological knowledge of a participant, it employs a double hermeneutic which involves the reflective processes of a researcher, and it is ideographic in that it looks at the 'lifeworlds' of each research participant separately. IPA studies usually recruit either one or a small number of participants, within a specific context. Participants are recruited by purposive, rather than random, sampling based on the topic of study; in this case, young people who have experienced fee-paying independent secondary schools. Semi-structured interviews are conducted and recorded, then verbatim transcripts are analysed to investigate semantic meaning.

Although a researcher pays attention to the emotional and behavioural manner in which interviewees respond, no attempt is made to analyse specific details of speech, such as pauses or false starts, as in discourse analysis. The research is inductive since IPA does not test established theories but explores phenomenologically in order to build an individual, detailed, in-depth understanding of experience from the bottom up. However, it is also a deductive process, since it incorporates the pre-existing, pragmatic concerns of the researcher (Langdrige, 2007; Smith et al, 2009).

This form of methodology also takes into consideration the belief that an individual is a 'cognitive, linguistic, affective, and physical being' so it assumes a connection

between what people say, think, and feel. (Smith & Osborn, 2009). However, an investigator must also assume that participants are responding to their situation in a taken-for-granted way which might shroud the meaning or importance of their statements and render the participants incapable of communicating what they intend to say. Willig (2008) believes that one of the weaknesses of IPA is its requirement that participants be articulate enough to convey their experiences meaningfully. Participants may also have personal reasons for obscuring what they think and feel, so a researcher must interpret their comments by searching for meaning within their larger narratives (Finlay, 2012).

Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2018) state that, for researchers in the fields of health, clinical, counselling, occupational, and educational psychology, IPA is often used because its focus on lived experience intuitively appeals. But they have also remarked on the 'conspicuous absence' of good quality peer-reviewed educational psychology articles. Larkin et al (2006) have also commented on how tempting it can be for a researcher to remain at the most simplistic, descriptive level of analysis when investigating groups whose voices have not been heard. Noon (2018) agrees that IPA is valuable methodology for educational research but says that studies in this area have thus far been of generally poor quality, with their analysis being merely thematic rather than interpretive. Sultana (2014) also believes that rigorous IPA studies in education can be highly effective in exploring the personal experiences of students, but these studies are, as yet, few and far between.

## **4.9 The three constituents of IPA methodology**

### **4.9.1 Phenomenology**

IPA's first and foremost aim is to seek phenomenological knowledge of a participant which can later be analysed and interpreted by the researcher. Finlay (2009) describes two different types of phenomenology - descriptive and interpretive/hermeneutic. Whereas both types focus initially on a purely phenomenological exploration of an experience, IPA falls into this second category.

### *(i) Embracing the phenomenological attitude*

Finlay (2012) explains the importance of embracing the phenomenological attitude when using it as a methodology. Knowledge is gained by maintaining a naïve attitude and open way of being which allows a researcher to enter deeply into a participant's point of view so that taken-for-granted everyday experiences can be revealed in a new light. According to Finlay, the curiosity this entails starts with the researcher's passion for a particular lived experience, situation, or event which they wish to understand more fully. As Binswanger states, '*One learns to know only what one loves, and the deeper and fuller the knowledge is to be, the more powerful and vivid must be... the passion.*' (Binswanger, 1963, as in Finlay, 2012: 175) Of course, a researcher who already has a strong association with a topic cannot be personally detached from it, so the phenomenological attitude attempts to embrace this inter-subjectivity.

However, remaining in 'a state of wonder' is also crucial if an investigation is to move away from what is already known. Remaining consciously aware of any intrusions of pre-understanding throughout the research process demands the discipline of a critically reflexive stance which facilitates this self-knowledge (Finlay, 2008). This requires, as Husserl suggests, that previous knowledge be *bracketed*, or put aside, in order to truly 'see the world' (Husserl, 1936/1970; 1962/1977). Only in this way can a researcher immerse themselves in the experience of 'being fully present' with a participant and their narrative.

### *(ii) Entering the lifeworld*

Like all phenomenological inquiries, IPA focuses on the lifeworld of participants, who are encouraged to share their understanding of a particular phenomenon and its 'felt' nature. Although phenomenology is rooted in the explorations of a number of philosophers, in particular, Husserl (1927), Heidegger (1962/1927), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Sartre (1958), the approach is essentially a human one. We all adopt a

phenomenological stance when we listen to the stories of others, when we empathise with them, and when we reflect on our own perceptions. Phenomenological investigations codify this natural quest to seek empathic connection into a more rigorous, embodied methodology which can uncover and illuminate implicit meaning.

Finlay (2012) believes a researcher needs to 'stand-with' a participant by encouraging them to describe an experience in rich detail. This entails holding back on any previous assumptions which would close down further expression. Finlay recognises that, if the focus remains on the essence of a participant's experience rather than simply what they think and feel, this deep and empathic form of listening and hearing can be fundamentally healing.

*'From a participant's perspective, the experience of engaging in deep description while being truly with another can be profound. In addition to knowing that one's perspective is witnessed, being listened to opens up potentially transformative space and time, allowing the person to make sense of their experience, perhaps going beyond previous understanding.'* (Finlay, 2012: 181)

### *(iii) Dwelling with horizons of implicit meaning*

This aspect of the phenomenological method involves a soaking in of phenomena during analysis and a re-experiencing of nuances and texture which give a rich sense of complexity. When subsumed in this process, the extraction of meaning should become an embodied and lived experience.

### *(iv) Explicating the phenomenon holistically and dialectically*

Eventually, it is necessary to begin the process of making sense of all the different layers of meaning which the researcher has unwrapped and experienced during immersion, and whichever way the researcher chooses to articulate salient aspects of the data, this should always be done within a holistic vision of how the person and world are intertwined. It is also important to consider that, just as the analysis

transforms the description, so the description modifies the analysis, and much more remains unsaid than can be communicated, so any findings must be considered provisional and emergent.

#### *(v) Integrating frames of reference*

This aspect of the phenomenological method considers the possibility of linking all previous stages of analysis with other interpretive frames of reference which add depth or expand understanding, but Finlay (2012) cautions against using this information to explain why an experience occurred, if the intention is to remain within phenomenology. However, she also values the creativity inherent in combining different points of reference and supports the use of an inclusive attitude which may indeed capture lived experience, no matter if it is strictly phenomenological or not. My attempt to combine a sociological perspective with my sense of the participants' stories can be considered part of this tradition.

#### **4.9.2 Hermeneutics**

Inter-subjectivity is a concept which describes the 'relatedness' which allows us to communicate with, and make sense of, our interactions with others (Heidegger, 1962/1927). IPA's particular strength lies in this inter-subjectivity, which some researchers have called a 'double hermeneutic', the practice of investigating participants' experiences and ways of knowing while also reflecting on the researcher's own experiences and ways of knowing.

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation (Smith et al, 2009). The hermeneutic focus within phenomenology assumes that a researcher's attitudes, values and behaviour inevitably affect the entire research process. Although Husserl believed that bracketing assumptions or pre-knowledge allows a focus on an experience, or 'the thing itself', Finlay (2012) believes this is not enough. Instead, one must take into account how a researcher's individual history and culture, as well as the (inter)subjectivity they co-create with participants, both open up and close down

evolving understanding. Finlay (2008: 179) states, *'the researcher slides between striving for reductive focus and reflexive self-awareness; between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight'*. However, she also cautions against getting caught up in self-reflection which can objectify self and other, and distance us from the felt nature of our experiences.

Smith and his colleagues (Smith et al, 2009) call this thinking process, which is central to IPA, a 'hermeneutic circle' of interpretation. Not only must a researcher alternate their view between 'self' and 'other', and between 'knowing' and 'unknowing', but they must investigate various levels of narrative in relation to each other. In order to grasp the whole of a story, one must look at its parts, and to understand its parts, one must look at the whole. The iterative movement back and forth necessitates a non-linear, active engagement with the data, since the meaning of one level is wholly (inter)dependent on the other.

### **4.9.3 Idiography**

Data analysis is idiographic in that it is primarily concerned with the particular view of a single participant. The in-depth nature of an investigation is immersive and time-consuming since it attempts to uncover different levels of meaning within a transcript by means of an iterative process of investigation. IPA is interested in revealing a sense of detail and depth of meaning, which is achieved by a thorough and systematic analysis of the data. The method is idiographic in that it is concerned with understanding *'how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context'* (Smith et al, 2009: 29).

If there is more than one participant in a study, the first transcript is usually analysed individually to thematic level before moving on to the next, and each is subsequently interpreted individually. Similarities and differences between multiple participants are eventually noted and explored, but the intent is to produce overarching categories of meaning while also making it possible to trace each statement back to a particular individual. Therefore, idiography does not avoid generalisations but

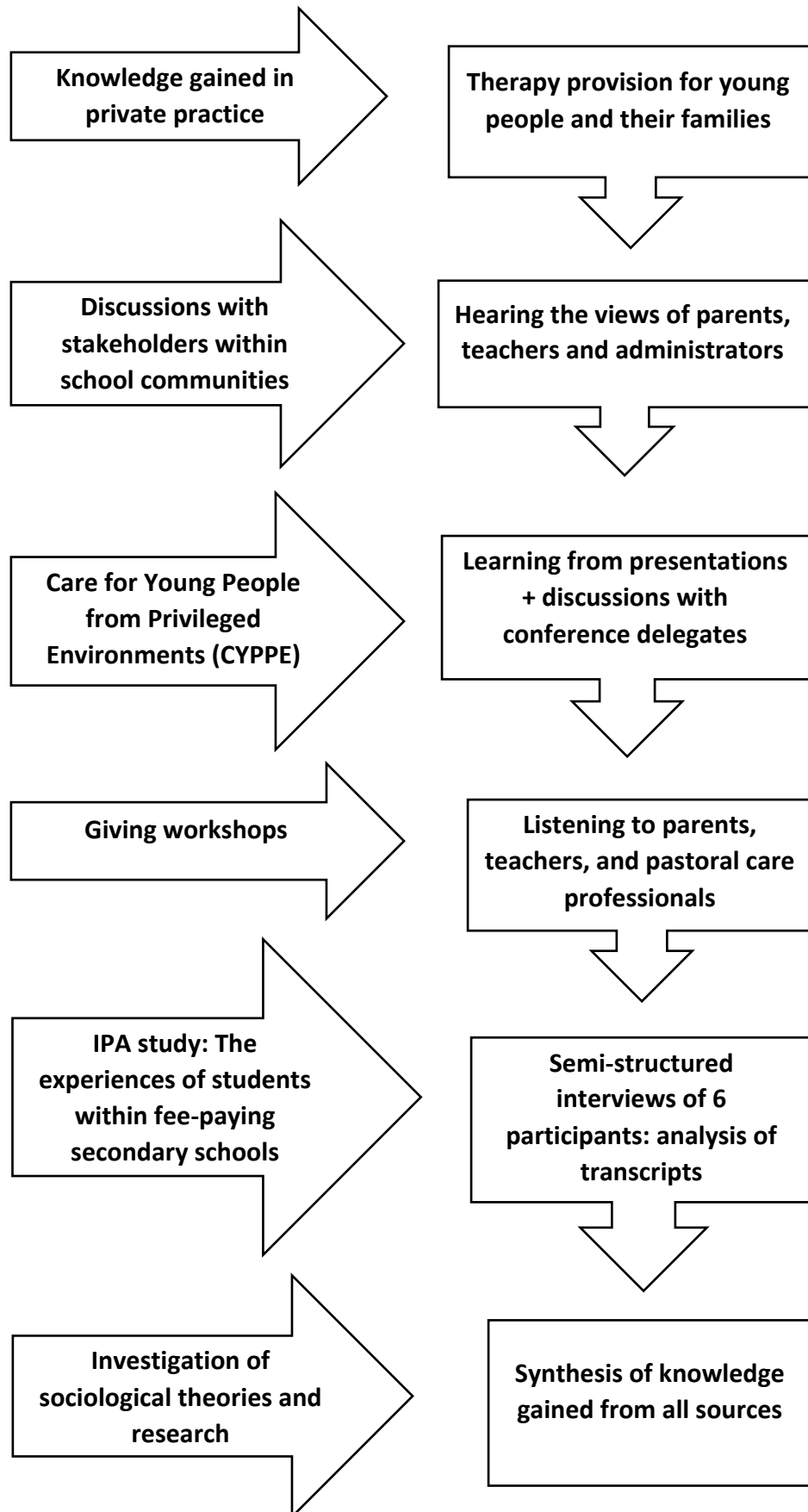


establishes them much more cautiously by referring to each singular case individually within the collective overview.

#### **4.10 The research cycle**

The following schematic drawing [Figure 4] shows the elements of inquiry which have been synthesised to create this final doctoral thesis.

Figure 4: The Research Cycle



## **CHAPTER FIVE: METHODS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

I begin this chapter by restating my aims for this study. I present my research question, then show my rationale and inclusion criteria for choosing participants, as well as the recruitment techniques I used. I discuss my ethical considerations, including the relevance of holding a phenomenological attitude when interviewing participants, and outline my procedures for informed consent and for assuring the anonymity and safety of the participants. I list my criteria for selecting semi-structured interview questions and outline how I proceeded with the interviews, then I show my transcription process and detail the steps I used to analyse the participants' narratives. Finally, issues of quality assurance in qualitative research are explored.

### **5.2 Research aims**

This research investigated the mental health of a specific population of young people by asking a group of second-year undergraduate university students to look back at their lived experiences when they were attending their academically rigorous independent secondary schools. I show in some detail the personal observations, opinions, and feelings of these young people, and relate this to possible avenues for supporting the mental health of other students within similar environments.

### **5.3 Research question**

*What are the participants' memories of their mental health experiences as they look back at their independent secondary school education?*

When this project was conceived, little was documented about the lived experiences of young people within fee-paying independent education, so the overarching

research question represents what I set out to learn. [See p.43 for a flow diagram of how this question emerged from my initial literature review.]

#### **5.4 Inclusion criteria for participants**

There were two inclusion criteria for a participant's suitability for this study:

- Having experience of secondary education at a fee-paying, independent school.
- Entrance to an elite British university.

#### **5.5 Using university students as research participants**

I chose to recruit participants from a small number of top-echelon British universities in order to represent the population of students to which I normally provide therapy. Although this inevitably narrowed my opportunities to explore the mental health experiences of students who moved on to other types of universities, I believed my criteria would provide a sufficiently defined and homogeneous population for the purposes of an IPA study.

University students are often used by researchers simply as proxies for the general population, but my choice of undergraduate participants for this study was strategic and very specific. I have explained in Chapter 3 that I was not given access to young people in schools, but I also considered that school students might not be allowed to, or have the ability to, comment on their surroundings or focus on their own psyches or behaviour.

More importantly, I had ethical concerns about possibly awakening thoughts and feelings which might point out to these young people any difficulties they were experiencing when I was not in a position to alter their surrounding circumstances in any way as a result. I therefore decided to ask more mature university students to look back on their time in secondary school. I needed participants who were close enough to their pasts to recall their experiences yet far enough away to have allowed

themselves time to reflect on their lives: in this case, two years post-secondary education.

### **5.7 Recruitment of participants**

My first attempts to recruit appropriate participants failed when posters were used to advertise my project within a university student union. As a result, I conceded that busy undergraduates might have, for a variety of reasons, left their secondary school experience far behind them. They may have also had little interest in mental health issues, or perhaps their personal histories during adolescence made recalling such issues too emotionally difficult.

I therefore made the decision to ask for help from friends and from colleagues whom I had met through my private practice, my professional organisations, and at conferences. I asked them to identify interested students who had never been known to them as clients. They were given a description of the study to circulate, then they advertised by word of mouth to their friends and acquaintances. Eventually I received the email addresses of seven students who were interested in receiving more information.

### **5.8 Participants**

As in all qualitative research, pragmatic decisions must be made in setting boundaries for inclusion (Smith & Osborn, 2009). Although I had originally intended to choose only undergraduates who had previously attended British secondary schools, those who volunteered came from a wide range of independent schools, including a private European international school.

From these seven initial contacts, six young adults - one boy and five girls - volunteered to be interviewed. One was a young person who I had met briefly but did not know personally, and the other five were totally unknown to me. They presented an eclectic mix of backgrounds, yet all had been privately educated in fee-paying secondary schools.

Three participants had attended private international schools, all as day students, where they followed either American, IB, or combination European/American curricula. Two of these schools were in England and one in Europe. Two were primarily boarding schools and one was a day school. No single sex schools were included in this study.

The other three participants attended British co-educational independent schools. Two of these schools were primarily boarding schools and one was a day school with no boarding programme. Of these three students, one had chosen to board while the other two chose to be day students.

Two participants spoke English as their second language but were impressively fluent. In fact, all the interviewees were particularly noteworthy for their conversational confidence and their careful articulation of ideas.

The following table [Table 1] describes some of the participants' demographic attributes.

Table 1: Demographic differences between participants

	<b>Suki</b>	<b>Gabriela</b>	<b>Lydia</b>	<b>Frances</b>	<b>Ulrike</b>	<b>Tamsin</b>
<b>Nationality</b>	British	American	European	European	British	British
<b>Mother tongue</b>	English	European	European	European	English	English
<b>Type of school</b>	British	International	International	International	British	British
<b>Size of school</b>	Small	Medium	Medium	Large	Small	Large
<b>Curriculum undertaken</b>	British (GCSE and A-Level)	International Baccalaureate (IB)	International Baccalaureate (IB)	American Advanced Placement (AP)	British (GCSE and A-Level)	British (GCSE and A-Level)
<b>Organisation of school</b>	Day only	Day and Boarding	Day and Boarding	Day only	Day and Boarding	Day and Boarding
<b>School attendance</b>	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day	Day
<b>Parental career status</b>	Mother and father are professional	Mother and father are professional	Father is a professional (Mother?)	Father is a professional (Mother?)	Mother and father are professional	Mother and father are professional
<b>University</b>	Russell Group	Russell Group	Russell Group	Russell Group	Oxbridge	Oxbridge
<b>Subject at university</b>	Business	Science	Arts	Engineering	Arts	Politics

## 5.9 Interview schedule

Although I did not give the participants a list of my interview questions before their interviews began, I had let them know the general topics involved during our previous email or phone conversations, and I checked before and during the interviews whether they were comfortable with my intended themes. Each interview was carried out in a totally private space which gave the participants the opportunity to relax. One participant chose to be interviewed at her home while the others were seen in their preferred space at university. All interviews were conducted within three months of each other during the autumn of 2016. Participants were told that meetings were intended to be approximately one hour long, although the length of time would ultimately be determined by them, and they were guaranteed to have sufficient time to say whatever they wished. The resulting interviews ranged from between 48 minutes to 1 hour 21 minutes.

Since the participants and I were unfamiliar with each other, I took time before each interview to introduce myself as a researcher, explain the recording procedure, and make them as comfortable as possible. My years of experience with young people helped me to make a good connection and the interviews were relaxed and productive.

#### **5.10 Semi-structured interviews**

Although a core list of open-ended interview questions was prepared ahead of time, the particular strength of a semi-structured interview is the opportunity for the researcher to enter into the world view of the respondent while allowing both parties to react flexibly to whatever is said. This allows a dialogue where questions can be altered as the researcher probes interesting lines of meaning, and participants follow their own interests or concerns. The lack of a rigid structure encourages the expansion of important themes or interesting subjects which spontaneously arise (Smith et al, 2008). This form of questioning acknowledges that only the participant holds special knowledge of their own experiences so, ideally, they are allowed as much time to tell their story as is possible (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Lamont and Swindler (2014) believed this type of interviewing gives access to 'where people live imaginatively' (Sherman, 2017), so they can be highly effective at uncovering emotions and investigating a sense of identity within special social or cultural circumstances (Pugh, 2013). Therefore, when using semi-structured interview questions, a researcher should be guided by their interview schedule rather than reproducing it rigidly. The order of questions is less important, but care should be taken to remain aware of any pre-planned topics of interest, and key questions should be asked with as little variation between interviews as possible in order to achieve reliable results.



### **5.11 Interview questions**

The overall research question was explored by asking the participants to describe their lives in school and their recollections of their mental health experiences. Consistent with the goals of IPA, the term 'mental health' was defined by each individual participant according to their own understanding of the term. The questions were chosen in order to elicit the personal recollections of the participants in as much detail as possible, so any topics which the interviewees initiated were welcomed phenomenologically. Each general topic was expanded in a variety of ways, depending on the participants' responses, although always with the overall research question in mind. The main areas of inquiry were also explored using some typical expansion questions about parents, teachers and peers [See Appendix 12 for examples].

#### *Interview questions:*

- (a) Please tell me what your views are on the current mental health of all young people in Britain.
- (b) I am particularly interested in the mental health of young people who have attended independent schools. Can you tell me anything about this?
- (c) Would you like to tell me about your experiences in school?
- (d) Would you like to tell me about your mental health when you were in school?
- (e) Is there anything else you wish to tell me before we end our interview?

### **5.12 Ethical considerations**

Researchers who conduct qualitative research use interpretative techniques to make sense of the data they collect, information which is highly personal to their interviewees' lives. Researchers are therefore in a very powerful position in relation to their participants, so, in order to mitigate possible damage, researchers should

maintain a high degree of ethical responsibility toward those they study. My sensitivity to these issues demanded that I clearly demonstrate my motives, my respect for the autonomy and dignity of all stakeholders, the scientific value of my project and its social responsibility, while also striving to achieve the maximum benefit and minimising, as much as possible, any harm which might occur (Steffen, 2015).

Conducting ethical research involves reflecting deeply on the moral and ethical dilemmas which result from investigating vulnerable human beings. According to Josselson (2007), there cannot be a general set of rules or guidelines that can guarantee a researcher's moral stance. Therefore, the lack of rigid boundaries reflects the dilemmas inherent in all qualitative research, as well as the unpredictable nature of minute-to-minute ethical challenges. There are many ethical dilemmas inherent in this type of research which demand careful consideration.

Steffan (2015) believes that all qualitative research can be considered intrinsically ethical because it applies critical reflection to the entire research process, and it values the subjectivity of the participants within their particular context. However, she also acknowledges that this sort of research is 'saturated with ethical issues' that conceal forms of power exertion which are particularly difficult to recognise or analyse. Not only do these ethical issues often clash, but it is important also to consider what personal attributes or feelings stand in the way of a researcher recognising them.

### **5.13 Procedural ethics: an explicit contract**

Procedural ethics are those which concern the standards for organising and setting up a study, as well as obtaining permission from an ethics committee. An explicit contract attempts to delineate the roles of participant and researcher with clear information about the purpose of the study, consent forms, and procedure for voice-recording interviews, while also listing procedural protections, such as voluntary participation, anonymity and the right to withdraw [See Appendices 1 and 2].

*(i) Informed consent and voluntary participation*

A participant information sheet [Appendix 1] about this study was provided to all potential volunteers who initially contacted me by email. It explained the purpose of the research and listed the possible benefits and problems which might result from their involvement. I answered questions about all aspects of the study either by email or phone prior to their agreement to participate. Before being interviewed, the participants again reread a copy of the same document and consent form, then signed both in my presence [Appendix 2]. The involvement of voluntary participants who were adults over 18 years of age, and who were therefore able to give direct personal consent, simplified the ethical requirements of the study considerably, but precautions were still taken, as above, to protect the wellbeing of each participant before, during, and after their interviews.

Participants were reassured that their participation was strictly voluntary and they could stop their interview at any time without disclosing a reason. Any data collected from them would then be subtracted from the analysis. Anyone who continued to consent would be asked to review the thesis once a draft was completed and I would attempt to incorporate their changes or comments before submission.

*(ii) Participant distress*

As previously stated, procedural ethics concerns the systems which should be put in place in order to provide as much safety as possible. In order to minimize participant distress, when potential volunteers initially inquired about this study, they were informed about the therapeutic services which were available to them through BACP and UKCP [Appendix 4], and this was discussed again just before beginning their interviews. All the participants said they were aware of the counselling services at their universities, and while two participants said they 'would' contact these services if needed, three others said they 'might'.

None of the participants showed a noticeably elevated level of distress during the interviews. In fact, several said what a wonderful experience it had been for them. This is not to assume they would feel no negative effects afterwards, so in ending our time together, they were informed again of some therapeutic options should they wish to seek help. I offered them a chance to debrief with me at any time after the interviews and would make myself available by phone or Skype, although I myself would not be able to provide them formal therapy *per se*.

It is interesting to note that some researchers believe this focus on possible harm, which is based on medical consent forms (Corbin & Morse, 2003), encourages a relationship of suspicion between the researcher and participant since it essentially equates distress with harm. Although the setting up of this type of frame may be required by ethics committees, this structure, they say, may reflect the insecurities of the institution rather than provide protection for the participant, and it may inadvertently infantilise them (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). In contrast, Josselson (2007) believes that participants should be trusted to control what they share and, therefore, any distressing disclosures are in the service of self-reflection, growth and personal integration rather than a source of harm.

However, as previously mentioned, I had made the decision to abandon school students as potential participants and to choose, instead, young adults who might be better able to decide whether or not to participate in my study. Although this meant I had to rely on their more distant memories rather than their immediate experiences, I deemed they could take more responsibility for their own introspection, disclosure and self-protection.

### *(iii) Anonymity*

All names and identifying features of individual participants were either removed or changed, and a review was carried out by several colleagues to ensure the document's complete anonymity. I used pseudonyms and have modified some of the descriptive characteristics, but I was particularly concerned that the one man who volunteered would be easily identifiable to those people who knew he had taken

part. I therefore made the decision to use only female names and prepositions when quoting the narratives or speaking about the participants. Although this would inevitably detract from any discussion of the consequences of gender in the study, I felt it was an important concession to make for the safety of the participants.

#### **5.14 Ethics in practice: an implicit contract**

A participant has the opportunity to evaluate an explicit contract before giving consent to participate in a research study, but they cannot evaluate or fully consent to their co-created future relationship with a researcher because it is essentially unpredictable. The nature of the intimate, personal relationship between researcher and participant will inevitably reflect the differing assumptions which researcher and participant each bring to their interaction, and it will be based on important interpersonal cues about the researcher's ability to be empathic, emotionally responsive and psychologically containing. The implicit contract which is co-created from this interaction demands that a researcher make ethically sound in-the-moment decisions to care for a participant by continually evaluating '*the difficult often subtle and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research*' (Guilleman & Gillam, 2004: 262, as in McLeod, 2011: 66). Researchers must be qualified to listen to participants, and I believe my extensive professional experience in this respect helped me to attend to and manage their levels of distress during the interviews, but I was also prepared to cease the interviews if a participant showed signs of serious distress.

As an example, one participant had chosen, because of a family bereavement, to begin counselling as soon as she arrived at university, so she said she could rely on this relationship with her counsellor to help her debrief after her interview. If this disclosure had happened any time before or during her recorded interview, I would have been duty bound to protect her by making an 'in the moment' ethical decision ('ethics in practice') about whether or not to continue the interview process. This would have included discussing with her my concerns about possible topics which might destabilise her or cause her harm.

As it was, this particular dilemma did not occur because she had remarked on her situation only after the formal interview and debriefing stages were drawing to a close. When concluding the interview, I made a final inquiry about what she had experienced with me and how she felt now. She said she had thoroughly enjoyed talking about her all her family members and thinking about their unique contributions to her personal development. Since there seemed little more I could do, I let her know she could contact me in future to discuss her interview or any aspect of the study. I reminded her again of where to find alternative therapeutic support in case her counselling at university did not seem sufficient. [This participant's remarks about reading a draft of this thesis can be found in Appendix 5.]

#### **5.15 Use of supervision for ethical decision making**

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) guidelines for ethical research in the counselling professions (Bond, 2004; 2018) were a valuable resource during this study. I also worked closely with my clinical supervisors and academic advisor, who guided the study and ensured that ethical aspects were appropriately considered. I also continued to attend pertinent professional knowledge seminars at my university, where Dr Andrew Reeves' seminar on the importance of a dedicated ethical stance within research was particularly important for helping me to develop my thoughts. Dr Linda Finlay's seminar on the use of phenomenological interviewing, and Dr Haley Singlehurst-Mooney's seminar on ethics within sensitive research helped me to consider different methods of recruiting participants as well as other pertinent issues to consider when designing my final study.

Ethical evaluations are an essential aspect of making good decisions within situations where there is a chance of betraying trust or doing harm, either psychological or social. One of the most frequently recurring ethical dilemmas I faced concerned my responsibility to remain as unbiased as possible during all stages of this project. Therefore, frequent discussions with my supervisors provided crucial opportunities

for me to look at my true feelings when particular schools, administrators, teachers or parents responded to my ideas or inquiries with hostility.

I had an important ethical responsibility to respond with kindness and open-mindedness rather than with self-defensive aggression or censure. My personal and professional integrity depended, above all, on being able to balance the gathering of sensitive information with avoiding harm to stakeholders. The many ethical discussions I initiated with my supervisors allowed me to vent my painful feelings, but also to find my ethical equilibrium.

To illustrate a further example of my ethical stance, an enthusiastic potential participant contacted me in order to volunteer but I realised I knew her as the daughter of an acquaintance. I took this dilemma to my supervisor and we discussed several issues:

- She was the only volunteer who I had met (very briefly) before I decided to carry out my research.
- The volunteer may have known quite a lot about me, but I knew nothing about her.
- She was very motivated to speak with me, although I did not know why.
- Was there any danger to her if I included her in my study?
- Was there any danger to me, or to the reliability or validity of my research?

After discussing these issues, and after contacting the young woman by email to ask whether she had any misgivings about having met me previously, my supervisor and I deemed there was no significant risk to her, me or my project. I assumed that any participant who volunteered for my research would come with a multitude of fantasies and expectations which I could not know. Josselson (2007) believes researchers should trust that participants will tell only those stories which they wish to tell. The ultimate challenge for any researcher is to be highly sensitive to as many underlying issues as possible, such as the power dynamics in the relationship. For example, a participant may assume a researcher has expertise in something and this may influence the depth or subject of their disclosures.

The situation above also led to another potential dilemma which I chose to take to supervision. How much should I disclose to participants, either before or after interviews, about my background as a psychotherapist, or my experiences with young people like themselves, since this information might compromise their willingness to say what they themselves had experienced? I suspected the participants would all wish to know something about me before they agreed to participate and, as modern, technologically savvy young people, I assumed they would investigate online. There they would inevitably find multiple sites (my personal website, SCPI and CYPPE sites, and therapy reviews) which would detail some of my opinions and previous investigations. With the help of my supervisors, I explored how best to leave sufficient space for their own ideas and experiences.

When initiating the interviews, I concentrated first on helping the participants to relax and to ask any further questions about the study itself, but I said I would defer any questions about me until after the interviews had concluded. Several of the participants then asked about my work and wished me to comment on the things they had said. I reasoned that, at that point, it was ethically responsible to disclose the central focus of my study so the participants would not feel surprised by the final results. Since I had already considered this during supervision, and because I desired above all to be authentic, I was also prepared to give them anonymous feedback on how some of their statements had echoed those of other participants. In addition, I acknowledged some of the similarities between their experiences and those of my clients, and I reminded them that this information would be further detailed when I sent them copies of my draft thesis. I would then ask for comments which could be included in the final document.

#### **5.16 The ethics of embodying dual roles**

Josselson (2007) believes that all forms of narrative research require a researcher to inhabit two fundamentally incompatible roles. She states,

*'Interpersonal ethics demand responsibility to the dignity, privacy, and well-being of those who are studied, and these often conflict with the scholarly*



*obligation to accuracy, authenticity, and interpretation. Fulfilling the duties and obligations of both of these roles simultaneously is what makes for the slippery slopes.'* (Josselson, 2007: 538)

In this case, a researcher must demonstrate a keen sensitivity to the paradoxes underlying this dilemma and admit that it cannot be reconciled, only attempted. One method of accomplishing this is to focus attention on the proactive elements of 'procedural ethics', as well as the experiential, reactive elements of 'ethics in practice'.

### **5.17 Transcription process**

All interviews were voice recorded and notes were taken before and after the meetings to allow me to reflect on the process. Interview #1 was transcribed verbatim by me within one week of completion. All further interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service but not edited by them. Editing of the interviews myself, while listening repeatedly to the recordings, allowed me to recall the interactions and re-enter the feelings and thoughts I experienced during the meetings, so I considered this to be a sufficient amount of immersion to allow an in-depth interpretation of the data.

### **5.18 Data analysis**

Although an IPA methodology can be used quite flexibly, and its successful execution depends on the special perspective of each researcher as an individual, it also requires the use of a clear, consistent, and transparent investigative procedures when analysing data. For the stages of my analysis, I followed the recommendations of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2008):

**Step 1:** Reading and re-reading

**Step 2:** Initial noting

**Step 3:** Developing emergent themes

**Step 4:** Searching for connections across emergent themes

**Step 5:** Moving to the next case

**Step 6:** Looking for patterns across cases

**Step 1:** Reading and re-reading

Once all the interviews were transcribed, I began the analysis process by immersing myself in the first text. I recorded my first impressions of its general meaning and some of the most obvious or striking patterns so that I could temporarily bracket them off while I considered the more subtle and surprising aspects of the text. I underlined phrases which I considered particularly meaningful, then I looked for changing rhythms of speech and noted how my emotions and those of the participants changed throughout. Most of all, I was looking for a felt sense of what had happened during the interactions.

**Step 2:** Initial noting

Given my previous personal and professional history and my obvious investment in this topic, I considered it of paramount importance to meet the text with an open mind to allow new thoughts to emerge, and I attempted to be aware of what comments meant to me in order to identify when the participant might not share my assumptions. In a sense, my previous background was both a help and a hindrance, since it took considerable effort on my part to remain phenomenologically attuned to what was being said.

The interview was then transcribed verbatim into the central column of a three-column word document and a line by line analysis was carried out to identify the descriptive elements of the participants' stories as well as more conceptual elements of the texts which required interpretation. For this, I reflected on my own personal experiences and professional knowledge (Smith et al, 2009). In the right-hand column, I recorded my thoughts, feelings, observations, connections with other

sections of the text, images which came to mind, and anything else I thought relevant. I underlined significant phrases which seemed particularly meaningful and recorded why I felt this way. I also added what I had learned about the participant from the comments they made before and after the recorded interviews.

**Step 3:** Developing emergent themes

When I had added sufficient detail to the right column notes, I put a word or phrase (emergent theme) in the left-hand column which summed up the description, significant idea, or meaning. I then gathered together all the themes from the left-hand column and listed them in chronological order.

In the following excerpt, I present two pages of Lydia's transcript along with my comments and the eventual emergent themes.

Table 2: Example of analysis and emergent themes

<u>Emergent themes:</u>	<u>Verbatim transcript:</u>	<u>Reflections on the text:</u>
<p>Parents influenced by statistics</p> <p>Priority given to grades and status of universities</p> <p>Parents want grades and status as value for money</p> <p>Private schools craft their image carefully</p> <p>Private schools don't prioritise mental health</p> <p>Legitimate to complain? Ambivalence</p> <p>Conflicting goals of teachers</p> <p>High standards increase stress</p> <p>Competition between schools pushes up stress</p> <p>Compliance</p> <p>Social norms negated valuable aspects of life</p>	<p>L: Maybe, I don't know. When you look up my school online, what they put on their webpage like the homepage is what the IB results were from last year or something and all <u>the statistics</u> about, you know, X amount of <u>students go to these colleges</u> and blah-blah. So I think that there is an element of schools, especially <u>private schools that you have to pay for, want to push this certain agenda</u> that they are, you know, producing "<u>creating</u>" these kids that are <u>successful</u> and, you know, going to <u>these incredible academic institutions</u>. So I think that <u>maybe the priority isn't there</u>. Maybe it's, it's... <u>it's not</u>, yeah, among their top priority to really be worrying. And also, I feel like it's hard because I had some really <u>special one-to-one relationships</u> with my teachers and they were very caring and you know if someone was upset or too stressed, they would really talk to you and help you out but I think that when there is like <u>a certain standard that is being pushed</u> by the school but also by the <u>school comparing itself to all the other schools</u> in the surrounding areas.</p> <p>Researcher: Uh-hm.</p> <p>L: Yeah, I think that there is like <u>a standard you have to abide by</u> almost, and that sometimes can <u>ignore or neglect other things</u> like holistic learning and mindfulness and....</p>	<p><u>Schools need to advertise their academic rigour.</u></p> <p><u>Parents care about the statistics.</u></p> <p>School statistics only tell part of the story?</p> <p>She doesn't agree this is a good way of evaluating success.</p> <p>Paying for school makes it more likely that they will push these measurements of success.</p> <p><u>Value for money.</u></p> <p>Disagrees that schools should take credit for 'creating' successful kids. <u>This image making negates her own accomplishments.</u></p> <p>They don't care about the effect of this conflict</p> <p>Constructing a false image which she doesn't believe. Almost lying?</p> <p>Private schools don't make mental health a priority. Not a benevolent environment.</p> <p>She's conflicted. It's hard to criticise when there are wonderful relationships with teachers. <u>How can she complain? Being a number versus being seen as a person.</u> [Winnicott's facilitating relationships and environments]</p> <p><u>Relationships with caring teachers is important. Grateful</u></p> <p>Trying to understand</p> <p>Talking about herself?</p> <p>Teachers want to connect but their natural care is stopped by pressure to achieve. <u>Seeing the conflicting goals.</u> Are teachers pressured too?</p> <p><u>Schools have to compete with other schools</u> (for status and students?)</p> <p>She recognises the <u>social forces.</u> <u>Competition between schools pushes up stress</u></p> <p><u>Having to comply</u> with the image.</p> <p>Understands system of value is constructed artificially. <u>Focus on achievement pushes everything else aside.</u></p> <p><u>Commenting on social processes which negate other valuable human</u></p>

<p>Different views then as compared to now</p>	<p>Researcher: Yes, are you talking about competition?</p>	<p><u>needs</u>—ways of being which she values now.</p>
	<p>L: Yeah.</p>	
<p>Schools compete with each other as businesses</p>	<p>Researcher: Can you say more about that?</p>	
<p>Schools develop a 'brand'</p>	<p>L: I'm talking about <u>the schools being competitive with each other</u>. Yeah... And having a brand, <u>portraying themselves as an elite school</u>—a great, a <u>privileged</u> institution.</p>	<p>Schools are competitive with each other as businesses. <u>She is aware of economic forces</u>. [I am surprised and impressed by how she understands the wider socio-economic issues.]</p>
<p>Schools craft an 'elite' image</p>	<p>Researcher: Hmm. Let me ask you. What do you think of when you think of privilege? How would you define a privileged young person?</p>	<p>School brand</p>
	<p>L: That's tough. That's a tough question. Because <u>it is obviously all relative</u>.</p>	<p>[The two different types of definitions are confusing!]</p>
<p>Definitions of 'privilege' are relative</p>	<p>Researcher: Uh-hmm.</p>	<p><u>She's struggling</u> because it's difficult to pin down something which changes depending on where the viewer is situated. <u>Issues of privilege are elusive</u>.</p>
<p>The struggle to understand</p>	<p>L: But I was <u>surrounded by like extreme privilege</u> and that just meant that the kids that I was surrounded by had very, very <u>wealthy parents</u> that would allow you to travel. They would <u>allow you to go to my school</u> in the first place because it's really expensive. You, you... we were surrounded by people that obviously could spend a lot of money on clothes or, you know, go out and <u>could spend crazy amounts of money</u> a night or something. So...I think, I am thinking about "<u>teenage me</u>" and what she thought <u>privileged was</u>...I think in my school it was – and I don't really think this way anymore, but privilege is something material.</p>	<p><u>Surrounded by privilege but not identifying with it herself?</u></p>
<p>Identifying and not identifying with being wealthy</p>	<p>Researcher: Uh-hmm.</p>	<p>She is privileged by having wealth, travel opportunities and expensive school. Valuing freedom to explore the world. Grateful.</p>
<p>Definitions of privilege</p>	<p>L: But I was <u>surrounded by like extreme privilege</u> and that just meant that the kids that I was surrounded by had very, very <u>wealthy parents</u> that would allow you to travel. They would <u>allow you to go to my school</u> in the first place because it's really expensive. You, you... we were surrounded by people that obviously could spend a lot of money on clothes or, you know, go out and <u>could spend crazy amounts of money</u> a night or something. So...I think, I am thinking about "<u>teenage me</u>" and what she thought <u>privileged was</u>...I think in my school it was – and I don't really think this way anymore, but privilege is something material.</p>	<p>Access is limited to those who have lots of money. Their wealth was obvious. <u>Surrounding wealth is the norm</u> but she sounds as though it shouldn't be. Comment on materialism--spending <u>too much money</u>. (How much is too much? Did they have more than her?) 'Good' versus 'bad' wealthy people?</p>
<p>Spending 'too much'</p>	<p>L: But I was <u>surrounded by like extreme privilege</u> and that just meant that the kids that I was surrounded by had very, very <u>wealthy parents</u> that would allow you to travel. They would <u>allow you to go to my school</u> in the first place because it's really expensive. You, you... we were surrounded by people that obviously could spend a lot of money on clothes or, you know, go out and <u>could spend crazy amounts of money</u> a night or something. So...I think, I am thinking about "<u>teenage me</u>" and what she thought <u>privileged was</u>...I think in my school it was – and I don't really think this way anymore, but privilege is something material.</p>	<p>Privilege used to mean having and spending money, <u>but her views have changed now</u>. She was only young then but knows more now. So what is privilege now? Comparison of then and now shows her desire to understand and critique the values of her surroundings?</p>
<p>Changed personal value system between then and now</p>	<p>L: But I was <u>surrounded by like extreme privilege</u> and that just meant that the kids that I was surrounded by had very, very <u>wealthy parents</u> that would allow you to travel. They would <u>allow you to go to my school</u> in the first place because it's really expensive. You, you... we were surrounded by people that obviously could spend a lot of money on clothes or, you know, go out and <u>could spend crazy amounts of money</u> a night or something. So...I think, I am thinking about "<u>teenage me</u>" and what she thought <u>privileged was</u>...I think in my school it was – and I don't really think this way anymore, but privilege is something material.</p>	<p>Privilege used to mean having and spending money, <u>but her views have changed now</u>. She was only young then but knows more now. So what is privilege now? Comparison of then and now shows her desire to understand and critique the values of her surroundings?</p>
<p>Definition of privilege is wealth</p>	<p>L: But I was <u>surrounded by like extreme privilege</u> and that just meant that the kids that I was surrounded by had very, very <u>wealthy parents</u> that would allow you to travel. They would <u>allow you to go to my school</u> in the first place because it's really expensive. You, you... we were surrounded by people that obviously could spend a lot of money on clothes or, you know, go out and <u>could spend crazy amounts of money</u> a night or something. So...I think, I am thinking about "<u>teenage me</u>" and what she thought <u>privileged was</u>...I think in my school it was – and I don't really think this way anymore, but privilege is something material.</p>	<p>Privilege used to mean having and spending money, <u>but her views have changed now</u>. She was only young then but knows more now. So what is privilege now? Comparison of then and now shows her desire to understand and critique the values of her surroundings?</p>

#### **Step 4:** Searching for connections across emergent themes

At this stage, it was necessary to work primarily with the entire list of the participant's emergent themes while also carrying an internal sense of the arc of meaning throughout their text. Using coloured pens, I reorganised the list and attempted to collect the themes into groups which had something important in common or conveyed a crucial idea: items which might eventually, but not necessarily, be grouped together to contribute to the final superordinate themes. At this point, I also became aware of some of the emergent themes which were polar opposites from one another, and I recorded them as such. My clusters of meaning were still quite tentative, but they gave me a loose initial structure to follow when approaching further transcripts. I then reread the first interview to see if the grouped themes sufficiently explained the text. Phrases that seemed too far outside the combined meanings were separated from further stages of the analysis, although some were brought back at a later stage. The following list shows Suki's emergent and grouped themes. [Other examples of the participant's emergent and grouped themes can be found in Appendices 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10.]

#### **SEEKING SAFETY**

Needing to fit in socially  
Mental health problems make young people fragile  
Must hide vulnerability in order to be accepted  
Young people are reluctant to discuss mental health  
Sports are primarily important  
Feeling privileged/lucky/grateful  
Sports as a safe place  
Finding safety  
Healthy stress versus unhealthy stress  
Peer group is influential  
Positive coping strategies

#### **SEEKING HELP**

Having a good social life is primarily important  
Caring about the opinions of others  
Wanting to trust relationships

Needing individual attention from teachers  
Teachers maintain valuable boundaries  
Teachers focus on students' individual needs  
Sports help to make friends  
Encouragement is necessary for trying new things  
Importance of good facilities  
Things that improve learning  
Teachers support academically  
Importance of adult support  
Needing support networks  
Tutors manage student relationships  
Teachers regulate work levels  
Adults are gatekeepers to counselling services  
Comparison of state and private school education  
Students need help during the developmental stage of adolescence

## FEELING DAMAGED

Peer pressure to be similar to friends  
Mental health has an effect on everything  
Problems at home affect mental health  
Admitting problems makes young people feel exposed and shamed  
Showing mental health problems is seen as weakness by others  
Popular ideas of mental health problems are wrong  
Mental health issues can affect everyone  
People are surprised when they develop mental health problems  
Stress causes mental health problems  
Mental health problems develop slowly  
Forcing young people to do things is bad for them  
Being pushed to get the best grades  
Having a too full schedule and long days  
No formal education in mental health issues  
Talking about mental health feels like confrontation/too exposing  
School counsellors are not accessible  
School counsellors are not sought out by students  
Noticing parental pressure  
Grades affect confidence  
Exclusive focus on grades  
Teacher criticism undermines students' sense of self  
Having too high personal standards  
Fear of failure

Guilt for having privilege  
School experiences have long-term effects  
Being pushed versus being guided  
Separation of top students from others (Oxbridge)  
Parents are absent because of work  
Parents want value for money  
Causes of mental health problems in independent schools are different  
Too much work

## SETTING PERSONAL GOALS

School work is primarily important  
Privilege is hard to define  
Authenticity is important/being fake is bad  
Taking advantage of opportunities helps achievements  
Importance of university  
Wanting 'good enough' academic goals  
Being charitable toward less wealthy people is important  
Seeking equality  
Supporting diversity  
Working hard  
Having ambition  
Finding fun/joy  
Developing time management skills  
Wanting to pay back parents  
Keeping things in perspective  
Being a 'good enough' person  
Young people need to be independent

### **Step 5:** Moving to the next case

Subsequent transcripts were then analysed individually by repeating these first four steps in each case. Since IPA is idiographic, each participant's contribution was analysed separately in order to point out the important differences and similarities between them. I attempted to approach each transcript by putting aside, or 'bracketing', any of my learning from the previous texts, so that unique themes could emerge which would add special nuances.



### **Step 6:** Looking for patterns across cases

After all the participants' transcripts had been analysed and their individual emergent themes had been grouped together to give individual portraits, it was clear that certain topics had occurred very often, so I decided to tally the frequencies of specific ideas and phrases. I made a list of all the emergent themes and identified each participant's contribution by marking it with the first initial of their anonymised name [Appendix 3]. This eventually allowed me to recognise quickly which themes were common to all participants, which were contributed by a specific individual, and which added an entirely new idea [See Section 6.4 for similarities in the participants' emergent themes].

Once this was completed, the list of grouped themes from all participants was brought together and explored through a series of mind-maps. When I returned to the list of grouped themes, I used the frequency of common comments, the arch of meanings between transcripts, and my personal assessment of the importance of each theme to create the overarching superordinate themes which would best represent the most potent ideas throughout all of the texts. The participants had communicated a wide variety of important observations and opinions, and some of their themes appeared to be much more important than others. This crucial phase of the research process was fundamentally a creative revisiting of all the information I had collected throughout the study, data which represented both commonality and important instances of divergence.

### **5.19 Quality assurance in qualitative research**

Whereas positivist quantitative methodologies are more useful for answering specific questions, for illuminating predictable patterns, and for creating generalizable constructs, qualitative methods can reveal subtle or unique aspects of individual or group experiences. Qualitative methods offer depth rather than breadth, but with this depth comes the difficulty of ensuring that research results are valid, particularly since the range of possible approaches to qualitative research are so diverse and individual. IPA is concerned with lived aspects of identifiable world

phenomena, and the focus is on generating knowledge which can add to our understanding and create real and useful social change (Langdrige, 2007), but this methodology will only live up to expectations if it can demonstrate its value. Smith, et al (2009) suggests that the criteria used by Lucy Yardley (2000) can assess the validity of any type of qualitative research, and her categories lend themselves well to IPA: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance [See Appendix 13 for a further discussion].

### **5.20 Use of 'self' in an IPA analysis**

For me, one of the most important reasons for using IPA as a methodology is its consistency with my epistemological stance as a person and psychotherapist. I strive to be phenomenologically attuned to the experiences and meaning systems of others while also being aware of my own thoughts, feelings, preconceptions, biases, and how aspects of my own life experiences might affect my relational availability and readiness to learn [See My Journey in Chapter 3, and Appendices 14 and 16 for examples of this]. IPA demands transparency about the assumptions that have shaped all stages of a study, from the choice of a particular topic through to an analysis of the collected data. It is a profoundly humble stance yet, somewhat paradoxically, it is highly creative and has the potential to illuminate great depths of meaning which can reveal profound truths.

As stated earlier, a researcher's 'self' is the primary tool of inquiry within a narrative approach to research such as IPA. According to Josselson (2007), a researcher must be familiar with the social and cultural world around the participants in order to interact ethically and respectfully. Yet she must also know little enough to be curious and want to deeply examine the participants' stories. Intense self-reflection and the self-recognition which can come from it are therefore centrally important at all stages of an inquiry. A researcher must attempt to be aware of any biases, presuppositions or fantasies which block her learning. The use of supervision as a reflexive space, along with personal therapy and conversations with colleagues can

all help a researcher to attend to her own thoughts while planning a study, choosing interview questions, and questioning her interpretations of the data.

In IPA it is primarily important that the researcher claim her own interpretive authority as creator of the final product. During the arc of a study, the point of 'ownership' of the data, and responsibility for its interpretation, effectively shifts from the participant to the researcher. During the initial interview process, the researcher tries to cede control of what is said to the participant so that they may tell their story in whatever way they wish. During the analysis stage, ownership is shared when the researcher adds her own interpretation to what has been said. Finally, when writing up a study, the researcher's understanding of the participants' stories becomes the dominant view.

In the next chapter, I will present this study's results as my personal version of what the participants said. I have interpreted it through my own sensitivities and life experience, so the responsibility for its conclusions is, therefore, solely mine. Many other interpretations could have been possible, but this report reflects my individual meaning-making.

## CHAPTER SIX: IPA RESULTS

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of six verbatim interviews with university undergraduates who described their previous mental health experiences while attending their independent secondary schools. The analysis resulted in the emergence of three superordinate themes: 'Needing the help of others', 'Feeling pressured', and 'Ambivalence'. Consistent with the goals of an IPA analysis, a number of verbatim quotes will familiarise the reader with what was actually said during the interviews. They are presented in an order which corresponds to the resultant superordinate categories, which are themselves an amalgam of each participants' individual thematic portrait.

In discussing the writing up of results in IPA, Smith (2009) states,

*'Just as with every other stage of IPA there is not a single right way to write up an IPA analysis. Writing is a creative process, and authors, just like participants, have voices which will come out in the construction of the account... It follows therefore that the results section of an IPA write-up is much more substantial, and much more discursive, than the results section of a typical quantitative report... There is considerable variation in how this might be presented.'* (Smith, 2009: 108-109)

IPA specifically focuses on the unique meaning-making processes of each individual. Therefore, in order to capture the richness of this uniqueness, long narrative segments are often necessary in order to point out the specific meaning of the ideas they present. I have tried to do justice to the core meanings of the participants' stories, so I have included many important examples here in the main text. Other quotes have been relegated to the appendix for the sake of the word count [Appendix 16], but I will keep a brief summary of each in the main text in order to provide an overview of each individual's contribution as well as the participants' shared themes.

As previously mentioned, conducting a good qualitative IPA study requires that I acknowledge my own subjectivity in both how I interpret the participants'

statements and how I determined the final superordinate themes and subthemes. Other researchers may very well have made different choices. My hope is that the final narrative I have produced will provide a sensitive and accessible account of some of the important experiences of the participants.

## **6.2 Important psychological theories which contributed to the analysis**

John Bowlby (1973) and Mary Ainsworth (1989; Ainsworth et al, 1974) developed Attachment Theory as a way of understanding the powerful early connections we make with our primary carers, patterns of relating which we then rely on to help us learn about our world and connect with others in an endless reproduction and reworking of our early relationships. Their theory gives weight to the crucial importance of healthy relationships for an individual's psychological development and, when those strong attachments are damaged or missing, how the insecure attachments which can result are manifested in further difficulties throughout life (Freud, 1931; Bifulco & Thomas, 2013; Howe, 2011). Sensitive care within the first years of childhood, and the adult ability to provide the right kind of environment for a growing child, matter greatly.

Donald Winnicott (1965, 1971), a pediatrician and psychoanalyst, also saw the importance of early relationships when he developed his own ideas of what psychic mechanisms bind us to others. Although he is known most often for analysing the relationships between young children and their mothers, he also refers specifically to adolescence as a time when the early developmental struggles of infancy and young childhood are revisited. I have found his ideas on the growth of the 'self' and the capacity to meet the challenges of life with flexibility and creativity to be particularly valuable in my psychotherapy practice and in my own life. It therefore seems equally important to make use of those ideas here. Winnicott noticed the qualities of good relationships – their ability to stimulate growth and protect from harm – and he considered them to be a crucial building block in the 'facilitating environment' which is necessary for an individual's healthy development. (Winnicott, 1965, 1971).

Erik Erikson (1968, 1969, 1973) also focused on the quality of the environment around young people. In his life stage theory, he recognized adolescence as an important stage during which development requires good relationships within a benevolent atmosphere which validates and supports them sufficiently to allow them to explore, create a firm sense of identity, and develop their own internal motivations.

### **6.3 Evaluating the use of psychological theories in IPA**

Phenomenological research aims primarily to stand in the shoes of an 'other', so a researcher's personal reactions to all the situations, experiences and emotions contained in a participant's narrative are undeniably centrally important. In line with this, the use of an additional psychoanalytic frame can provide only a second level of interpretation. However, for the purposes of this research, I believe these first and second levels should be considered much more interdependent. One of the advantages of doing research as an experienced clinician is, I believe, being able to identify psychotherapeutic theory as a central personal heuristic. My continual attempt to understand my own life and the lives of others depends to a very large extent on the specific psychological theories which have guided both my work and my personal life.

Smith (2004) recognises this when he states that,

*'IPA and psychodynamic interpretations are coming from two different epistemological perspectives and each has its own explicit or implicit criteria for the validity of a reading...[but] that distinction has been presented in quite a strong form, for clarity... Many psychodynamically inclined researchers do include an analysis based on a close textual reading, foregrounding and the present account itself... [Even] though most IPA reading is operating close to the text, there is still a reader doing the reading and influenced by all of her/his biographical presence when doing that reading.'* (Smith, 2004: 45-46)

I believe that psychoanalytic methods of understanding fit well with the general ethos of IPA because they focus on the human condition and the personal

experiences of living life. Psychoanalytic theory encourages curiosity about emotions and personal reactions and looks at the accommodations we make when conforming to social situations by, for instance, noticing how our unconscious motivations shape our behaviour and impact our lives.

#### **6.4 Similarities in participants' emergent themes**

While an IPA methodology focuses primarily on the participants' personal experiences and how each individual makes sense of them, it is also interesting to note that many of the emergent themes which were generated during the analysis of their transcripts were strikingly similar, and this may, perhaps, point to a similarity in the participants' environments. Each of these collective themes can be traced back to individual participants by way of the idiographic analysis, but a nomothetic, or statistical, analysis of their statements can also lend weight to the collective nature of the resulting thematic categories. The following list shows the specific emergent themes which occurred very often in either five or six of the transcripts. The frequency and strength of these ideas may therefore help to explain the core of what these young people were trying to say. [See Appendix 11 for a full list of the participants' emergent theme contributions within the final superordinate themes.]

- Noticing other people being overwhelmed
- Feeling anxious about increases in mental health problems
- A fellow student (usually a girl) suffering from an eating disorder
- Identifying typical mental health symptoms in their peers
- Noticing parents who put too much academic pressure on their children
- Noticing teachers who have 'unreasonably' high expectations and are too demanding
- Having to do too much work
- Not having enough time for relaxation, sleep, friends and/or family
- Having to develop sophisticated 'adult' time-management skills and priorities
- Surrounded by too narrow a definition of 'success' and a primary focus on grades alone

- Noticing parents who are too controlling and over-involved
- Having a fear of failure
- Feeling gratitude for being privileged
- Not wishing to use school counselling
- Noticing a social imperative against disclosing vulnerability
- Believing that teachers need to focus more on individual student needs and sensitivities
- Believing that friendship is most protective of mental health for young people
- Hoping to find ways of resting and learning to stop

## **6.5 Differences between participants**

As previously stated, IPA is not only concerned with the similarities between interviewees, but also their differences in personalities, histories, personal circumstances, and relationships. It was notable that some of the participants gave much longer answers to my questions than others did, but this did not seem to reflect a difference in the strength of their opinions or feelings. Instead, it showed aspects of their personalities which I experienced as quite different: Lydia, Ulrike, and Frances seemed rather softly spoken and self-contained, while Suki, Tamsin, and Gabriela seemed more extrovert and used to being in the thick of things.

Ulrike and Tamsin more often commented on the outside world, and both used their free time to participate in caring, community-based activities, while Lydia was primarily focused on self-exploration and learning to care well for herself. Socially, the type of friendships they preferred were very different, with some describing just a few close friends while others were more comfortable in larger groups.

The schools which participants had attended were very different in terms of size. Suki's had been small, and the community members all knew each other, whereas Tamsin's was large enough that she had been familiar with only a portion of her peers. Tamsin and Gabriela had been active leaders while in school, while Lydia preferred to stay out of the limelight. They had all been self-motivated students, but that is not to say they always did well in their courses.



Frances and Tamsin seemed to have easily achieved top grades, while Lydia and Suki had had to work quite hard for their results. Ulrike had focused primarily on a specific subject while in school, while Tamsin and Gabriela were all-rounders, into anything and everything. All the participants were reading very different subjects from one another and their personal interests were diverse. Tamsin and Ursula were members of university societies which supported political activism, while Suki was sporty and spent much of her time on a playing field.

The participants had very diverse cultural and family backgrounds as well. Lydia's parents were quite wealthy while Ulrike and Frances' families had more modest means. Lydia and Gabriela had fathers who travelled often on business, so were frequently away from home, while Ulrike had parents who both worked from home and had been much more involved in her everyday life [See Table 1 in Section 5.9].

Only two participants had detailed knowledge of counselling, since they had family friends who were counsellors, but the other four had had no previous contact with, or knowledge of, mental health professionals of any kind.

## **6.6 Participants' grouped themes**

A previous example of one participant's [Suki] emergent and grouped themes can be found in Section 5.18, Step 4. The other participants' examples have been relegated to the appendices for the sake of the word count. [Appendices 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10.] Figure 4 below shows those grouped themes in grid form. The shapes with which I have identify each participant are used in Figure 5 [p.113] to illustrate how each person's grouped themes relate to the final composite of superordinate themes.

Figure 5: Participants' themes

Lydia

Noticing aspects of privileged culture	Anxiety about mental health	Feeling small and vulnerable	Trying to make sense of her experiences	Developing skills	Valuing community and connection
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Frances

Issues of privilege	Noticing the qualities of independent schools	Focusing on the innate needs of young people	Anger at things that go wrong	Making comparisons and gaining perspective
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Tamsin

Evaluating privileged/elite education	The high value of relationships	Pressure	Anxiety	Goals and values
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Suki

Seeking safety	Seeking help	Feeling damaged	Setting personal goals
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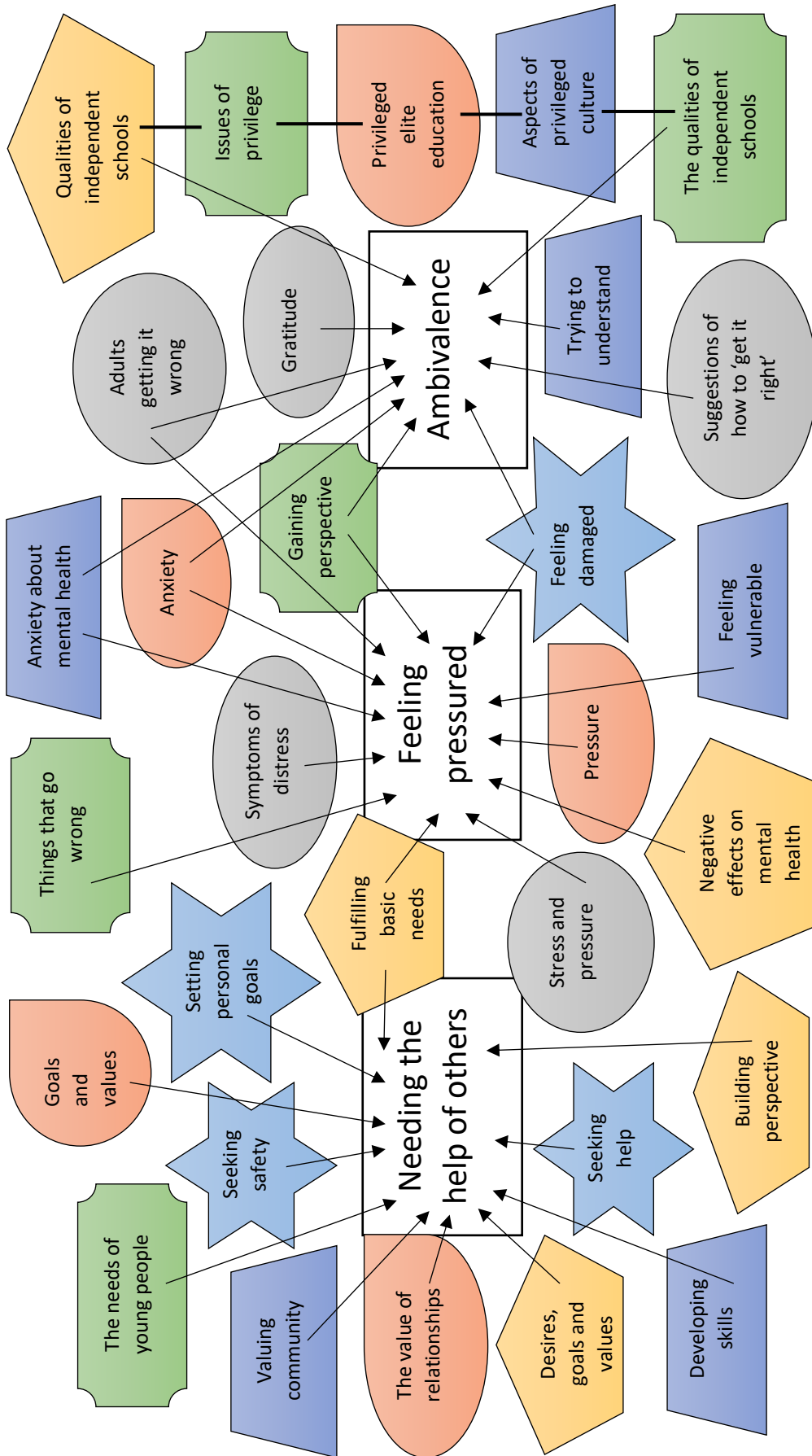


Qualities of independent schools	Fulfilling basic needs	Desires, goals and values	Building perspective	Negative effects on mental health
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Gratitude	Stress and pressure	Adults 'getting it wrong'	Symptoms of distress	Suggestions of how to 'get it right'
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Figure 6: Final composite of Superordinate Themes



## **6.7 Superordinate Theme #1 - Needing the Help of Others**

This first superordinate theme captures the participants' attempts to know and develop themselves by reaching out to others, make nourishing connections during the sometimes difficult stage of adolescence during which young people need encouragement and supportive relationships to help them develop their academic prowess, learn valuable life skills, and build a new sense of identity.

### **6.7.1 Needing adult attunement**

The participants were aware they had been gifted an exceptional education which they believed would provide a firm base for their future advancement. For the most part, they were grateful to their own parents for giving them the resources to engage with school on their own terms, and they praised their teachers for helping them to take advantage of the opportunities they were given. However, many of the statements they made also evaluated how well adults related to them and understood their needs: whether they were, or were not, attuned to them as people.

#### *(i) Relationships with teachers*

Teachers are undoubtedly enormously influential in the lives of young people. Students in private schools can spend up to 12 hours a day, 6 days a week at school, and much of this time is spent interacting with teachers. The participants described what they considered to be 'good' or 'bad' teachers and what types of relationships hurt or helped them. The consensus was that teachers who knew their students well and responded to their individual needs were the most supportive of both mental health and academic development. Ulrike said one of her teachers had had a very significant effect on her entire time at school.

*U: A lot of the experiences you have at school are because you're in such a close relationship with your teacher, and a lot is going to depend on that because it's so intense the whole time. I was very lucky with that, that I had a really great teacher, and I think a lot of people's experiences are quite swayed by that.*

Ursula's phrase, 'a lot is going to depend on that' suggests that she will rely in future on the good sense of self this important teacher helped her develop. Her gratitude reminded me of a book by Tamara Bibby (2018), *The Creative Self*, in which she describes the crucial need for good relationships between teachers and students. She relates the enormous power of teachers to their role as attachment figures who, like parents, build a young person's trust in their own personal strength and the benevolence of the world. Winnicott (1971) also believed that trust is a fundamental condition for growth, saying '*[Trust] can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living.*' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 139)

*(ii) Needing encouragement*

Suki described the beneficial effect that her school, and all her teachers, had had on her confidence and willingness to try new things. All in all, she sounds as if she had weathered her educational challenges quite well thanks to the relaxed support of her teachers and their belief in 'having a go'.

*S: At [my school] the teachers just encouraged us to do everything and try everything and speak in public and try new things. So nothing was strictly 'you had to do this'. It was more 'try this, why not?' I'm quite a relaxed, sort of, quite social person but I like to work hard so I think [my school] suited me perfectly.*

Suki's school seemed to have had a somewhat gentler and less competitive school environment when compared to the other participants. Her comments alluded to the personal courage it took to try new things and 'speak in public'; to put herself out into the world. Suki's evident joy at being allowed to explore freely may reflect Winnicott's (1971) belief that, in order for an environment to be considered benevolent, it should place 'objects' in a child's path so that they might 'find' them and claim them as their own discovery.

Teachers who protected the freedom to learn were also valued by Tamsin, as was the willingness of those adults to be flexible and sensitively responsive to her emotional needs.

*T: Sometimes people didn't have to say I'm having a hard time; the teachers just knew, which creates quite a good level of trust between people and the teacher...What was nice was that, if I had too much work, I could email the teacher and say 'Please can I have an extension?' and they would say yes.*

Tamsin constructed a way of coping with her vast workload by relying on the personal relationships she had forged with teachers who she trusted would intuitively react to her as a capable individual, trusting that she, in turn, would follow through with her promises.

### *(iii) Needing guidance*

All the participants recognised that, as adolescents, they could not have thrived without the generous support and guidance of parents and teachers who they knew truly cared about them, and they actively sought out these benevolent individuals wherever they could find them. Frances seemed to have loved being challenged by her teachers and here she hints that her whole class bonded with each other over her English teacher's warm personality and infectious enthusiasm. She described the personal characteristics of this particular teacher as having had a big effect on the development of her passions, particularly since he was generous in providing her with the intellectual knowledge she craved.

*F: I had an English teacher that was amazing. We just really had a close connection with him. He just knew what he was talking about, and whenever we asked questions, he was always really knowledgeable about the subject and things.*

Frances seemed to have experienced this teacher as sensitive to her academic needs, but she also hinted that he knew other 'things', or had other relational skills, which had helped her as well. He appeared supportive of her individual curiosity, and

perhaps it was this quality which helped her to tolerate the insecurity of acquiring new learning. This reminded me of Bibby (2018) and Salzberger-Wittenberg *et al* (1999), who believe that learning inevitably involves a certain amount of anxiety.

### **6.7.2 Friendship**

#### *(i) Protection for mental health*

Throughout all the interviews, each participant talked often of their need for deep and reliable peer friendships. They believed these relationships were crucial for maintaining their wellbeing and protecting their mental health.

*L: I also had great friends at school. I had people that I still consider my best friends and I think I was very lucky as an adolescent girl to have some really strong and deep, meaningful friendships. And if I didn't have that at the time, I think it would have been completely different, my takeaway from school, because then it just would have been like a very hard environment to be in.*

In this quote, Lydia seemed to imply that it is naturally difficult to make good friends during adolescence when young people are still developing new relationship skills. Friendship offered the participants a chance to truly be known and accepted, and the trust involved seemed to counter the more competitive and image-building elements of their school environments. All of the participants considered having good social skills and a full social life to be the core requirement for happiness and they emphasised the need to be able to trust those around them, both teachers and peers, if they were to survive the more rigorous and challenging aspects of their highly pressurised lives. Solid friendships allowed the participants to relax and gave them a valuable group identity.

#### *(ii) Friends as therapists*

Friends could make the participants feel good about themselves and act as their therapists, helping them to process difficult feelings or make plans. Most of all,



however, they acted as islands of pure joy when the rest of life seemed full of demands and deadlines.

*G: I know in my case a big thing was talking to my friends, even if just one really great friend who you just understand each other, you can talk about anything. And you know, I've realised on so many occasions how much that has helped me, and I've grown because of it. And even if it can be hard because you become aware of how much you're struggling, you're aware of it which is better than not having anywhere to address it with, or anyone... We often joked that we were each other's therapists.*

Gabriella made a strong case for the ultimate value of friendship when she described the curative effect of being truly known in a relationship. It was interesting to me that her personal philosophy also seemed to echo the general ethos of psychotherapy.

### *(iii) Safety and belonging*

All the participants compared their own schools to other institutions at some point during their interviews and the topic of small schools versus large schools brought up many different ideas about the need for friendship, safety and belonging. Ulrike's school offered her a small community with an intimacy and level of tolerance which, she believed, was difficult to find in larger schools, but here Tamsin described how she and her friends carved out a small and intimate environment within her much larger one.

*T: There were quite a lot of groups... and there wasn't that much interaction between different groups... They became quite like territorial which was quite interesting to watch. Certain people in certain groups had certain places and you could feel uncomfortable being in the wrong place. A group identity was quite important... You wanted to be in a group, and you wanted your group to have a name so that you felt like you belonged to something.*

By contrast, Suki had a safe and supportive school experience where inclusiveness was the norm. She put this communal generosity down to her community's

underlying social and academic philosophy of charity which, she believed, ultimately influenced the behaviour of all the students.

*S: I think a lot of other schools are very academically focused. They want grades. But in my school, there was a lot of diversity. In my year, there were definitely some people that were on headmaster's scholarships and bursaries. It didn't make a difference at all. [The school] supports a lot of people from underprivileged backgrounds. We interacted the same, like, we're all friends. No one cared. No one had any sort of prejudgement and I think that's the type of school it was. Everyone was sort of equal and everyone was encouraged.*

In this quote, Suki juxtaposes the rigid judgement of grades with the seeming lack of judgement involved in 'a lot of diversity'. It is difficult to know to what Suki referred when she said this. Was it the level of academic rigour required of students, or differences of race, class, status or background? She seemed to be saying that, to her, one of the most important things about her school was its acceptance of everyone into an equal community, and that 'no one cared' how much money an individual had, so people were free to interact with anyone and everyone in a spirit of togetherness.

### **6.7.3 Methods of coping with stress**

#### *(i) Self-regulation*

Relationships were also of central importance to the participants' ability to relieve stress. They recounted some of their attempts to self-soothe by listing the positive and negative methods they used which relied on their daily interactions with others. On the positive side, being able to talk about mental health with adults and openly sharing with peers was seen as the most effective and enjoyable way of processing stress or emotional problems. Sports of all kinds also provided a welcome rest from school responsibilities and gave the participants a chance to be physically present in their bodies. Inclusion in cohesive social groups could nurture a sense of belonging and act as safe havens, and parties were particularly enjoyable and necessary for helping students to relax and bond.

*S: It's sort of a skill of learning to regulate that [the stress] and knowing when to stop and when to feel, yes I've done enough today. I think it's sort of getting out and socializing rather than staying in, going out and playing something with my mates. I hate staying in and just sort of [pause] not moping but feeling really sorry for myself. I'd rather be proactive. I would work, but if I'm really stressed about something or upset, I think work is just bad for me. I can't concentrate. I think sport helps me quite a lot in terms of giving me something to focus on where I'm not thinking about work and academics. It gives me a nice break.*

It is interesting that, even though I had asked Suki about her experiences in school, this statement is in the present tense, so she may be referring to the continuation of these experiences from then until the present. Although she said she was a very accomplished student, it was clear from her interview that her friends were by far her primary focus while in school. In this quote, she turns to her friends to provide her with some fun and a rest from the pressures of schoolwork, but we can also wonder, from the term 'bad for me'. Was she finding some of her emotions difficult to bear? Were there underlying worries here about how bad things could actually get? She implied that failing to regulate her stress levels made her feel immobilised or emotionally vulnerable ('moping'). The antidote, for her, was doing something physical instead of mental. Being able to proactively recognise her own heightened stress, then knowing how to self soothe, helped her to regain personal control.

*(ii) Negative methods of coping*

The participants all said their school responsibilities had overwhelmed them at times and, although no one personally admitted to using 'bad' behaviour to deal with stress, they all witnessed their peers using a variety of negative coping strategies such as drinking, taking drugs, and breaking rules, to relieve the pressure they felt. They said they needed to maintain strong relationships with each other as a matter of urgency, even when they believed some of their 'underground parties' were looked on unfavourably by adults. These occasional social interactions seemed to

offer a variety of licit and illicit coping methods that were relatively common in their schools.

According to Tamsin, breaking adult rules, such as sneaking out of the dorm at night or transgressing sexual boundaries, gave students a valuable sense of power over their own lives. She gave an example of the more risky and self-destructive side of her friends' activities which, she believed, were meant to serve this purpose.

*T: I think people needed ways of sort of getting things out, I think. Yeah, I think some of the boys in particular I would say one of their reactions to sort of a lot of stress would be more to break a rule. The popular kids were definitely linked to kind of going out, doing drugs, drinking, sex, those kinds of things. That was always kind of how we were when growing up. It quantified what's cool.*

I wondered if Tamsin was using the term 'getting things out' to mean that there was a kind of psychic pressure which built up when her peers were stressed, and it needed to somehow be expelled. She simply equated 'breaking a rule' – presumably an adult one – with feeling better. But to me, this seemed to represent a sublimated form of anger or aggression. Tamsin believed boys were more willing to use this form of relief than girls, perhaps because they were more reliant on externalising their emotions. This observation echoes the many studies of student behaviour by Luthar (2013), Levine (2006), Galaif et al (2003), Suldo et al (2008), and Lin and Yusoff (2013).

Tamsin also suggested that social popularity hierarchies determined what kind of coping activities were sanctioned by their group. The 'cool' kids – those at the top of the social ladder – were able to define which behaviours were not only socially acceptable, but laudable. In her statement, she hinted that she may have also been one of these students.

### *(iii) Needing conversations*

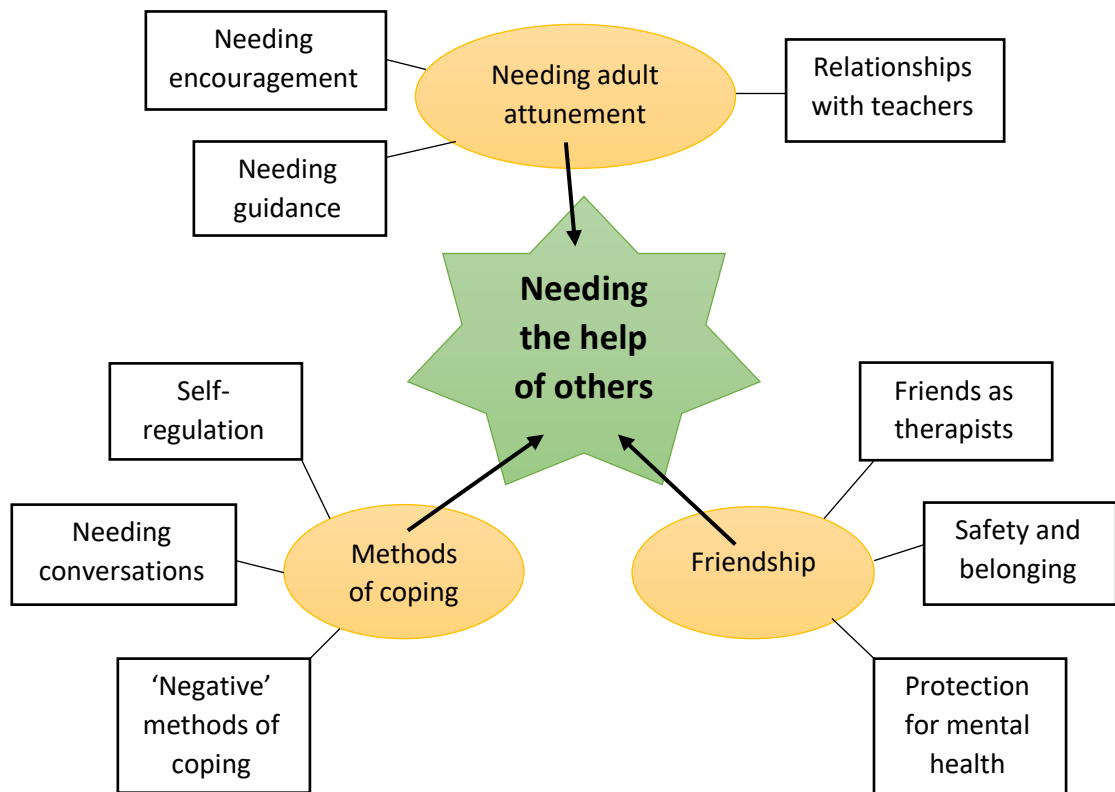
The participants described situations in which they wanted much more open discussions about mental health and an acknowledgement from adults about the importance of their social and emotional lives. They said that teachers and

housemasters were appreciated by students when they showed the capacity to understand mental health issues, especially if these adults were relaxed and knowledgeable, and the ordinary, everyday mentoring they offered was an extremely valuable source of support. Ulrike gave examples of how her teachers' emotional intelligence directly affected her mental health.

*U: I feel like there were members of staff, particularly the house masters at one point who were really, really good and tried to have more natural conversations about things rather than the very [contrived] classroom setup of 'this is mental health', which just never really sinks in. It doesn't feel personal... it felt like people were very awkward about these kinds of things, and that obviously makes an impression on how the students feel about things because you kind of learn from the adults. So, I would just wish that some of the staff would come and really openly kind of talk about what is normal and what is not.*

In this quote, Ulrike implied that the truly valuable conversations, particularly about mental health, had to feel personal and natural in order to 'sink in', and that teachers needed to be entirely comfortable speaking about these personal subjects in order to support students. She also suggested that teachers were role models who had a profound effect on students' attitudes toward their own mental health by helping them to evaluate whether their thoughts and feelings were a normal part of life and, by extension, when they might possibly need more help. [See Appendix 16 for a further quote.] Figure 6 is a schematic drawing of Superordinate Theme # 1 with subthemes and the topics discussed above.

Figure 7: Superordinate Theme #1 with Subthemes and relevant topics



## **6.8 Superordinate Theme #2 - Feeling pressured**

Whereas the first superordinate theme, 'Needing the help of others', explored the participants' experiences of their relational needs, this second superordinate category showed what they felt when those relationships went wrong. In particular, it presented the participants' views on the many pressures they felt and their musings on why they were exposed to so much destructive stress. They reported feeling intense pressure to succeed in their daily lives, and four of the six participants made explicit statements that independent schools were in danger of stressing students to the point of damage as a result. When remembering their senior school experiences, and especially their busy schedules, they identified many different kinds of pressure – some good, but mostly bad – which they said were caused by the unreasonably high standards and restrictive expectations of the adults around them.

It is also interesting to note that, most of the time, the participants spoke of others rather than themselves. Although their emotions were still very evident in their narratives, this method of talking about their schools may have provided them with a way of distancing themselves from the emotionally evocative topics they touched on: their own sense of achievement, their vulnerability, anger, or confusion, and their individual needs within relationships with parents, teachers, and peers.

### **6.8.1 A comparison of mental health**

#### *(i) The mental health of all young people*

At an early point during the interviews, I asked all the participants what they thought about the mental health of young people in general in order to allow me to reflect on their experiences in relation to those of youths in other circumstances. All the participants said they thought emotional health was steadily deteriorating for all adolescents and young adults. The explanations they offered for this were informed, they said, by their use of social media, online forums and news articles.

On a more personal level, the participants all gave many examples of psychological distress in fellow students or close friends, many of whom were taking prescribed

medication to control their conditions. Everyone had considerable knowledge about the symptoms which typically signal psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. When they were asked about the causes of poor mental health for youths, they spoke of increasing levels of competition throughout all levels of society, the difficulty of maintaining a good sense of self when using social media, and the challenges of starting a career in the present precarious job market.

The participants agreed in principle that good mental health, or the lack of it, underpins every relationship in one's life, as well as one's personal and academic achievements in school and beyond. Yet each participant implied that independent schools, being different environments from their state counterparts, negatively affected the mental health of students more often than in state-funded schools. In particular, they all believed they had been exposed to a host of special pressures which other young people did not experience. [See Appendix 16 for quote.]

*(ii) Privileged young people are invisible*

It is particularly interesting to note that, although the participants said they had enjoyed many of their school experiences, a large proportion of their comments about mental health focused on its darker side, in particular, the anxiety and anger in their fellow students. Tamsin thought the special problems of students in independent schools were essentially invisible because the world wrongly assumes that privileged young people don't need anything.

*T: There is a different kind of set of problems for privileged private school students. When we think a group is privileged, we turn a blind eye, and we say they've got everything. They've got money. They've got a glitzy lifestyle. They've got a great education. They don't need attention on this matter! And they do! So, I think yeah, this is important.*

Tamsin may be implying that she identifies with both sides of this interaction. Although she did not identify herself directly in this quote, I thought I could feel her underlying vulnerability at the time. In particular, she seemed to fear the envy of



people who make comparisons between her wealth and theirs, and she showed her anger that their judgemental attitudes and unwillingness to see behind the falsity of the 'glitz' resulted in the 'blindness' of them ignoring her needs and those of her peers. I wondered whether she might have had direct experience of this type of negation, but her use of the word 'we' also places her in the opposite position of the negator; the one who misunderstands and turns away.

## **6.8.2 Overly demanding parents and teachers**

### *(i) Parents*

An important category of response was generated by the topic of parents. None of the participants had felt their own parents were too unreasonably 'pushy' or demanding, but each gave copious examples of other parents who were. It is noteworthy that, very often, the parental behaviour they witnessed seemed to upset them, and they were especially critical of parents who were insensitive to their children's needs for love and care or who pushed them much too hard to achieve.

The participants were careful, however, to distinguish between 'lovely' parents who appropriately supported their children and unhelpful ones who undermined them.

*U: There were some very lovely parents as well but some of the most driven, in a really nasty way, people that I've ever come across in my life are, like, parents of people at school.*

Ulrike chose to comment on the very darkest side of parental behaviour when she commented on the quality of being 'driven'. It seemed she was criticising the rigidity and single-mindedness of parents who wanted something and would do anything to get it, including hurting others. Being 'driven' toward a goal implied that these parents were not amenable to listening to others or compromising. Several of the participants wondered aloud what would make parents behave this way, and Gabriela focused on parents' view of the world as a difficult place.

*G: I also think parents tended to be very high achieving and even sometimes outright famous, and they sometimes onset huge expectations on kids, which*

*was tough. It's extreme. I think they were aware of how competitive it is out there, and the level of efforts needed to get to wherever because they've been through it, so they would place that on their kids.*

Gabriela focused on parents' needs for their children to be like them. I wondered whether the 'huge expectations' she mentioned referred only to academic activities or to deeper identity issues as well. She also implied these parents were trying to be benevolent since she thought they might have good advice to give. They seemed to want to prepare their children for a critical, but invisible, task; a future test of their strength or ability. But what strength or ability, Gabriela does not say. If she was actually speaking about herself, which she may have been, 'It was tough' and 'It's extreme' conveyed a poignant sense of anxiety at having to meet an immense challenge.

Each participant had mentioned their own parents at some point during their interview, but only two talked about them at length. Gabriella believed both her parents, but particularly her mother, understood the pressure she was under, but Lydia seemed not at all surprised when her parents had not understood her situation. They simply could not empathise with her because they could not imagine her world.

*L: My parents for example were really there for me but they didn't really know just how hard - they hadn't been through it themselves. I think there are a lot of parents as well that have all these expectations for their kids, like 'you have to get this grade on your exam', but they don't know the amount of work that would take. They also don't know what their kids' mental states are. In my family, it was not really talked about, you know. If I got a bad grade on a test, my dad wouldn't be like, 'Are you feeling okay?' or 'Is there something going on in your life?' It was very much like, 'Why didn't you get this grade?'*

Although she was reluctant to criticise her parents, Lydia also implied they made things worse by always focusing on schoolwork, especially when she had 'failed' to get good grades; something which they believed should have been easy. She explained their behaviour by saying that feelings were never discussed in her house, but this implied that her parents could not truly meet her in her reality. She pointed to the importance of listening to her own inner voice, an illustration of what Winnicott (1971) called a 'True Self'.

Tamsin was somewhat forgiving of 'pushy' parents when they were attempting to gift to their children what they themselves had not had, but she also seemed critical if, instead, they simply wanted to have control over their children. She believed that parents who were too demanding damaged their children by micro-managing them or being too emotionally involved in their children's lives, and this hypervigilance and control, she said, seemed to be growing ever more ubiquitous and intense. [See Appendix 16 for an additional quote.]

Each participant gave examples of overly demanding parents who not only pushed their children relentlessly but damaged the school community by pressurising teachers into giving students extra attention or high grades which they did not deserve. Tamsin gave the impression that this type of behaviour was an entirely typical occurrence.

*T: A lot of parents were constantly in the office of the head teachers. 'My child needs more this, more that, more lessons, more concepts, more academic help, more everything'. If parents are really pushing one teacher, then quite often the Head would have to give in just for the sake of them not leaving [the school]. I think there was a sense that you complain enough, you get what you want.*

Tamsin's statement suggested that parents in this situation were very powerful in getting what they wanted, even bending the administrators to their will, and it seemed from her comments that the teachers were generally powerless.

On the other hand, Gabriella focused on the children. She seemed to empathise with students who internalised their parents' harmful ideals, especially when they mirrored their parents' negative behaviour.

*G: There was definitely a culture of parents coming in and having an argument with one of the members of staff about a grade or 'my daughter'. I witnessed it with the kids too. I would see them get so mad and rude and disrespectful to the teacher about the grade that they got, B+ instead of an A. I think these kids were so pressured in different ways and also like [parents] expected certain results and if they didn't get it, it was a big problem.*

Because of this parental attitude, she implied that young people were in danger of developing an overblown sense of entitlement or becoming arrogant and demanding themselves, but she also seemed to have sympathy for them since the consequences of not conforming to the expectations of their parents seemed so dire.

*(ii) Value for money*

All but one of the participants specifically said that the act of their parents paying for their schooling put an invisible, but powerful, pressure on them to recompense their parents for their financial investment, and it seemed to me that the consequences of this money exchange explained many important aspects of the participants' experiences. I had experienced Suki as a generally upbeat and optimistic young woman who said she had had little to complain about during her somewhat idyllic school years, but this next statement suggested that she also recognised the underlying pressure of 'value for money' at the heart of her independent schooling.

*S: I think some parents who send their kids to an independent school are, can be, very, very pushy in terms of they want their kids to get the best grades. They feel like they are paying for it so they feel like there's got to be value there.*

Suki does not specify what exactly this value is, but she suggests that students are required to satisfy the desires of their parents. Tamsin challenged this assumption that money can buy a dream.

*T: Parents think, okay, if I pay X amount of money a year that means my child will go to Oxbridge. Of course it doesn't! And what does that tell as well?*

Tamsin seems to be commenting on an entire system of interrelated mechanisms when she asks, 'What does that tell?' Was she referring to parental gullibility? Or the assumption that Oxbridge is a good destination for everyone? Perhaps she is inferring that students have to walk a single path to get to university?

Money in this quote has a simple transactional quality which, as well as being a practical form of barter, may also point out its symbolic value for parents: the

possibility of eliminating risk and the need to obtain psychological certainty and safety (Bibby, 2018; Dimen, 1994; Forrester, 1997).

*(iii) Feeling abandoned*

Although the participants observed parents who controlled their children too much, in their view, there were also others who were not involved enough to recognize their children's needs. Some of the participants felt abandoned themselves by well-meaning but neglectful adults who misjudged how much stress or responsibility they could bear. Because these adults had no real understanding of the pressured lives they led, they said that they and their peers were left woefully unsupported at times. Tamsin and Gabriela both made specific references to 'workaholic' parents who were neglectful of their children because they were frequently away from home or preoccupied with their work.

*T: I think one of the biggest things is neglect quite often, which is a weird one because you might not necessarily associate it with privileged backgrounds. But often you have, like, high-flying parents who aren't at home. So it's like... It's a different kind of neglect. It's a whole host of different problems.*

Here, Tamsin described how invisible neglect could be, and she suggested that there were other hidden layers of consequence as well.

*(iv) Teachers*

All the participants in this study remarked that, when teachers' standards were too impossibly high, this had the potential to wound a student's self-esteem and affect their ability to move forward in life.

*S: The teacher would be much more focused on the people who did well because, if you got a low grade, [he thought] that was just because you weren't trying or you hadn't worked hard enough, and then that support would be cut off from there.*

Suki expressed this idea when she said that teachers' opinions and behaviour were so powerfully influential that students were highly sensitive to them. A teacher's attention and support seemed to signal respect, but Suki also observed that their help could easily be withdrawn if a student did not achieve the teacher's goals. This suggested that praise was conditional, and Suki seemed to experience this as an abandonment and a betrayal of trust.

### **6.8.3 Time pressure**

For the participants, time pressure was a constant source of stress which they each dealt with in their own way. They felt it was important though to distinguish between the actual academic tasks they were set, which were often reasonable and achievable, and the conditions under which they were expected to carry them out. They did not say their academic work was too difficult. In fact, they said just the opposite. All of them had worked extremely hard at school, and each of them had often enjoyed this intensity, but sometimes their psychological equilibrium was compromised.

#### *(i) Too much work*

The participants said portions of their workload were challenging but wonderfully invigorating. Yet having too much work to do could easily overwhelm them. They said their overly full schedules meant they had little time off, so they rarely felt completely relaxed. The time pressures at their schools had been intense and relentless, so they suffered from not having enough time to complete daily homework, to relax, or even to sleep. Opportunities to pursue their individual interests were severely limited and they had had to jettison some of their favourite activities in order to prioritise what would keep their grades up and the adults around them happy.

Everyone reported feeling unhappy when adults expected them to work constantly to improve themselves. Because of this, Gabriela sounded as though she became

totally incapable, at times, of contemplating her situation or putting her immediate goals into perspective. She said her behaviour was entirely controlled by outside forces, so her self-care seemed to suffer.

*G: They would make these very oversubscribed schedules for their kids for example where it's like, you know, 'you're gonna do this and this and this and this' and sign up for all of these different things. The academics just take up your time completely, and it can feel like there's no way you can do all of this. It's like you're just blinded by a constant hum of 'you gotta do this, you have to do this' where you really barely ever actually have time to yourself, or to pause.*

There seemed to be a feeling of anxiety and utter despair in Gabriela's quote when her responsibilities felt never ending and she was 'blinded' to her own internal being. Erikson (1968, 1973) would have recognised the failure of Gabriela's environment to provide her with the support she needed as she attempted to 'pause' and listen to her own needs and motivations. [See Appendix 16 for an additional quote.]

Other participants also said that the continual pressure to 'do' sometimes made gaining a personal perspective on their experiences nearly impossible. Their statements illustrated the theories of Winnicott (1971) who had much to say about the effects of 'doing' rather than 'being'. He believed a state of rest, or what he called 'play', is a vital circumstance for growth because it allows an individual to commune with their 'True Self'. Lydia said she was denied this space and, as a result, her own internal voice was eventually lost to her.

*L: Then you base yourself off of what everyone else is and what everyone else thinks you should be. My desires were very much in line with I think what the school was promoting, what parents were promoting. So there really isn't time for self-discovery. I feel like a lot of my peers, when I was graduating with them, really did have still a very delicate self-identity, a fragile sense of self. We didn't have much time to develop ourselves as people, as human beings. What is it that I like? What do I want to do? Do I agree with this or do I disagree?*

Lydia's statement put me in mind of Winnicott's belief that, as a result of needing to comply with the 'impingements' of a hostile environment, the creation of an external 'False Self' is necessary in order to protect an inner 'True Self' from harm. Lydia

showed how she created this 'False Self' by internalising, or absorbing, the goals and values of the adults around her, and she implied that her entire development was affected as a result.

*(ii) No time for relationships*

As previously mentioned, the sheer number of hours spent in school meant the participants had few opportunities to sample activities outside of school or to experience potentially valuable relationships within the wider world. Tamsin believed the time pressure could prevent her from building close relationships with family and she felt her emotional life sometimes suffered. In a similar vein, no matter how much enthusiasm Frances brought to her education, she said there was often a relational price to pay for having such limited time. She articulated her internal conflict when she stated:

*F: I really liked school in general, but it was a lot of pressure, a lot of work...really a lot of work. I couldn't go out on weekends. I didn't even talk to my family anymore! I really liked it though. It was so stimulating, and our teachers were great.*

*(iii) Lack of sleep*

Neurologists advise that, during adolescence, young people need to sleep well in order to facilitate healthy brain development (Walker, 2017). However, in my experience, students from academically rigorous schools often sacrifice a considerable amount of sleep in their efforts to complete homework or manage their busy schedules. Lydia gave a good example of this when she said:

*L: I am quite weak in the sense that if I reach a certain part of the night I can't study anymore, but I would sometimes set my alarm for, crazy, like 4 a.m. so I could continue to study, or to get that thing finished. So, there was definitely a lot of sleep sacrificed during those years.*

Researcher: *Why didn't your parents say 'Books down. Bed'?*

*L: Maybe your parents talk to your friends' parents. And they say 'Oh, my kid was up until 4 a.m.' 'Oh, mine too.' Like, it's very normal. [But] I think that*



*parents also had this concern because, you know, those are your kids. They are concerned by the fact that they're staying up so late and stuff, but it wasn't something you would stop because it's, kind of, it's the norm.*

Lydia seemed to consider the dilemma alternately from a child's, then a parent's, point of view, while also asking me to imagine myself in both positions. Although she commented on parents in general, I sensed that her own situation had been similar. Through speaking of her friends, she conveyed the soothing feeling that her parents loved her and were concerned for her welfare, but she also implied that it was difficult for them to enforce appropriate boundaries around eating well or getting enough sleep because, she said, the dominant imperative to excel academically had numbed them to the physical and psychological cost of her overexertion. Interestingly, Lydia seemed entirely used to this situation. On the one hand, she gave the impression it was not the least bit unusual to sacrifice her own self-care in this way. On the other, she also sensed that her own behaviour was unhealthy and 'crazy'.

#### *(iv) Pressure to grow up too fast*

In his book, *Play and Reality*, Winnicott (1971) states that *'immaturity is an essential element of health at adolescence. There is only one cure for immaturity and that is the passage of time and the growth into maturity that time may bring (Winnicott, 1971, p. 198)*. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1998) also believes that the modern world leaves little time for human development to unfold naturally. He describes the present-day process of growing up as a manic rush toward rationality, independence and self-control. Several of the participants described this pressure to develop too quickly. They talked about adolescence as a time of confusion and experimentation where adult capacities are not yet fixed. Yet, they said, being successful in their schools had required the very early development, and skilful use of, sophisticated organisational and time-management skills.

Suki, Tamsin, and Ulrike felt this organisation was something they could do quite naturally, but Gabriela, Frances, and Lydia had found the skills necessary to organise their priorities very difficult to learn and even harder to maintain. Lydia was articulate about the pressure to 'produce' as she pointed out that she was not yet developmentally ready to take on the many challenges she was given.

*L: You're not going to be some really skilful worker at the age of 15, 16, when, you know, you just got Facebook for the first time and it's a temptation. You're not going to be your most professional self at such a young age, and you shouldn't be, really. To have a social life and academic life, it really took a lot of skilful deliberation and organisation of time. You really have to become a manager of your own life. And to be thrown into a really rigorous academic system plus being an insecure teenage girl, I really doubted that I had the capabilities of succeeding and I had a lot of performance anxiety so I would study SO much and then I'd get a test and I would be like, Ah! I had forgotten everything! I constructed this reality that I wasn't able to perform, and that was really hard.*

Lydia noted that being an insecure teenager was entirely natural, yet she also seemed to think her level of performance anxiety and self-doubt had been above the norm. Who or what was to blame? Throughout her interview, she said her academic and social challenges had been immense. She believed the need to perform on demand had compromised her ability to think, yet here, she also implied that the stress was a direct result of her own attitude. She made herself responsible for her own insecurity when saying, 'I constructed this reality'. But Winnicott might have recognized Lydia's difficulties as the result of having to comply with an overly harsh external reality.

*'... the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaption. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and life is not worth living (Winnicott: 87).*

#### 6.8.4 Having to be the best

##### (i) Primacy of grades

Most of the participants complained bitterly of their school's emphasis on top grades as the only sign of 'success', because they said this exclusivity negated their other 'more human' aspects. Frances believed her school had not paid enough attention to students as unique individuals, and Lydia put it very succinctly when she said:

*L: There is one definition of success, which is grades. It's not like what you can achieve emotionally or... I don't know. It's very much black and white. You get this grade, you're this type of person. You're doing well, you're doing badly.*

In reference to this black and white judgement, Lydia insinuated that adults who judged the worth of students so simply were doing them a grave injustice, but I wondered why they would do so. This put me in mind of Bibby (2018) who recognised the powerful anxieties which are hidden beneath the safety of quantifiable exam success, when the act of grading students 'may cover over an older terror: the impossibility of education itself and the uncertainty of knowledge' (Bibby, 2018, p. 151).

##### (ii) Competition

Throughout their narratives, the participants noticed there were good and bad types of competition. Sometimes a feeling of competitiveness would be motivating, but often it was another significant source of pressure, especially when everyone was competing for the same recognition. In the next quote, Frances conveyed the all-pervasive nature of competition within her school. She described how much she was affected by the success or failure that resulted from being continually compared to others.

*F: For a student that's doing good it's nice because they always praise you, but... if you're not, then it's just, it just brings you down and you can never get up, back up afterwards. That's the thing. It was very, very competitive. I don't think that was very good.*

The situation which Frances described felt so dangerous to me. To her, failure meant 'you could never get up again'. Then the damage to self-esteem and inability to function would be permanent. [See Appendix 17 for an additional quote.]

Other participants also discussed the need to compete in order to succeed, as well as the continual demand to improve themselves. Gabriela made sense of this by describing an underlying subtle, but powerful, assumption which shaped the goals and values of parents and children: the cultural imperative to always strive, compete, and never rest.

*G: Because parents believed they [their children] 'could', then they automatically 'should'. Because they [parents] think it's important in the competitive world. It's a really big phenomenon. I feel like the competition aspect of it is huge.*

This aspirational attitude seemed to directly mirror the results of a study by Luthar *et al* (2013) which reflected on the anxieties of middle-class parents with respect to their children's futures. It may also speak to what Gee (2000) believes is the capitalist world culture's effect on 'elite' young people who tend to see themselves as 'products to be developed'. In relating the development of people to the development of things, he said:

*'Under the "sign" of distributed systems as a master theme, our thinking about thinking, learning, and schools is, in turn, coming to be aligned with our thinking about new capitalist businesses... In a hyper-competitive world, everyone is producing high quality products or going out of business.'* (Gee, 2000, p. 47)

### *(iii) Valuing Oxbridge*

In my experience, the intense competition to achieve admission to a 'top' university is a personal ordeal which many students within private schools must face. When considering universities, all of the participants said that Oxbridge, the Russell Group, and the American Ivy League schools were promoted above all others. Although the opportunity to access these universities might be entirely welcomed by some

students, the participants remarked on their schools giving them much too narrow a band of choices. In Suki's next comment, she sounded as though it was all just hype.

*S: We had to go on this evening to a sort of presentation about Oxford and Cambridge, and why we should pick them, and why they are the BEST universities in the whole world, and all that.*

In four of their schools, the more academically able students were separated out from the rest of their schoolmates to be specially tutored for entrance to Oxbridge. Frances was separated from most of her school mates and educated differently than the rest of her class. At first, she enjoyed the lofty social position she achieved as a result, but when she did not receive an offer from Oxford, her fall in status was immediate and she became socially marginalised.

*F: The school selected this group of students that would be able to apply to Oxford and suddenly it gave me this really big status that wasn't I think very healthy because we just became a group of really cool and interesting people. But then at the same time when some of us didn't get in [to Oxbridge] or didn't get what we wanted, the students who weren't successful were just looked down on and no one really cared about them anymore. I don't think it was healthy, because then when I ended up not getting an interview and then not getting in, suddenly I just didn't know what to tell people anymore because they all expected me to go and now I didn't. It had brought my expectations up way too high.*

In the statement above, I noticed that Frances' grammar changed suddenly from 'them' to 'us'. Her pain was palpable when she recalled falling dramatically from the top of the social and academic tree to the very bottom. Frances implied that it was the system that had unrealistically inflated her dreams and she suggests that it was naïve of her to have counted on success.

Two of the other participants eventually won places at Oxbridge universities but, as happy as they both were with their new environments, they were also somewhat cynical about the system they had had to negotiate in order to get there. Tamsin was one of the successful ones, but she still had great sympathy for those students who would not be able to join her. In addition, it seemed to her that, even when a student

did become one of the chosen few, they too had suffered terrible pressure to succeed. In her opinion, no one actually won.

*T: At schools like this, the Oxbridge mentality is extraordinarily harmful on students. It's incredibly hard for all those not applying to Oxbridge because it's basically saying we value you less. But it's also the amount of pressure then put on the Oxbridge candidates. It's crazy as well.*

*(iv) Parents wanting 'safe' success*

Lydia was particularly articulate in naming the push for an elite university as 'safe success'. Even though she eventually achieved her goal, she reflected on her achievements differently now that she was at her university.

*L: I think that, you know, teachers and parents want you to go to these schools because it's a safe success. It's seen that if you go to X or Y University you are always going to be able to put that on your CV and maybe you can get a job that earns you a lot of money. If you've gone to a really great school it will definitely help you up, but it was a really 'cookie-cutter' definition of what a top school was. Oxford, Cambridge, the Ivy Leagues, all the top ones. I think that parents and kids alike enjoy saying 'Oh, I went to Cambridge!' or 'My son went to Oxford!'. There is definitely a big element of image at my school, [but] it completely disregards all the complexities of life, and if you'll like university or not, or if it's the best place for you.*

Lydia put parts of this statement in the present tense, which may signify how much her school experiences still affected her. Here, she said the opportunity to look back on her schooling had allowed her to see the status and image-building elements of what she had been through. She herself had looked at the league tables in order to choose her university, but now she seemed to see the situation differently. She sounded disappointed in the adults around her when they could not be trusted to support the individuality of their children. It seemed the lure of promised 'safety', to an elite job and to financial success, was too enticing to contemplate any alternatives.

*(v) Conforming to an image*

The participants said that having to be 'a certain kind of person' within their schools and family systems required them to continually conform to the cultural ideals of strength, dedication, and excellence. Tamsin remarked on private schools' need to advertise a particular image of themselves within the educational marketplace in order to entice parents to enrol their children. As a result, she said, each school must construct a public image that promotes its own particular brand of elite education. Lydia talked about this image building with considerable disdain. In particular, she resented that her school took credit for the success of students instead of acknowledging the hard-won achievements of the young people themselves, as if they were just products to be advertised.

*L: When you look up [a school] online, what they put on their webpage is what the IB results were from last year and all the statistics about X amount of students go to these colleges and blah-blah. So I think that there is an element of schools, especially private schools that you have to pay for, wanting to push this certain agenda that they are, you know, producing, creating these kids that are successful and going to these incredible academic institutions.*

Tamsin said her own behaviour in school fulfilled the aspirations of her parents and teachers, but she also said she experienced severe pressure to be 'elite', and this limited the type of career options or lifestyles available to her. In the following quote, she put herself in others' shoes, imagining the guilt and fear they rejected the adult-constructed paths which had been mapped out for them. Again, as she spoke of others, I wondered if she was describing her own life too.

*T: When you go to these kinds of schools, you're expected to leave school and become 'successful'. So I think there's also a fear of 'what if I'm not someone who's gonna grow up and have two-and-a-half children and a white picket fence house? It's tricky if you've been given this enormous privilege and had thousands of pounds spent on your education to kind of finish it and think 'I don't want to go to university! I don't wanna be a banker!' Like, that can be quite a scary feeling and very damaging, because that guilt must be enormous. And certainly I've had friends who had thought 'I'm gonna go [to university] even if I'm unhappy because otherwise it's a waste of the resources and the privilege I've had.*

Tamsin seemed to be fighting for her own sense of self and the right to make future lifestyle choices which would feel personally worthwhile. Her identification with 'scary' feelings and 'enormous guilt' suggested that she too had felt these feelings and, perhaps, suffered this dilemma. Although she habitually spoke of others rather than herself, her parents had undoubtedly made the same sacrifices for her. Could she justify 'wasting' their resources in this way?

*(vi) Fear of failure*

The possibility of failure seemed to be one of the most painful topics for the participants. In her interview, Tamsin presented herself as an entirely confident young woman who very rarely failed at anything, but she also reflected often on the external social mechanisms which she felt determined an individual's failure. When the very worst happened, who would really be responsible for failure? Did students simply not work hard enough? Did adults set them unreasonably high competitive hurdles? Or were they encouraged to expect far too much?

*T: One of my really close friends was told, stupidly, from a very young age, 'You're an Oxford girl' in inverted commas. 'You're very clever. You're talented. You're just what they're looking for. You're the right sort of person'. Then she didn't get in and she didn't know what to do with herself. She was depressed and stopped eating because everything that her schooling had been building up to was taken from her... She'd failed her school because her school had said 'you're gonna get in' and then she didn't. And then, you know, you think well, is that my fault? Why? So I think that is one of the biggest problems, that kind of pressure.*

As in Frances' case, Tamsin's friend had been encouraged, but failed, to reach for the top and the consequences had been dire indeed. Tamsin seemed angry that her students like her were set on a seemingly straightforward path which was, in reality, highly risky. I wondered whether her friend's shocking self-destruction was a suppression of her rage at the betrayal of her trust.



### *(vii) Perfectionism*

It was particularly striking that all the participants noted the very high incidence of serious eating disorders amongst their close friends and peers. They described in rich detail the development of the typical symptoms and what their schools did or, more often, did not do to help. Although they recognised the condition as resulting from a personal need for control, they also believed that their privileged environments actively promoted a destructive image of perfection which contributed to the condition.

*F: She started dropping all of her friends... she started really closing in and - I mean she was celebrated by the school as this huge genius you know? I know that the school didn't do anything really to address that when there was clearly an issue. All [the teachers] were doing was giving her good grades and saying 'You're an amazing student. You could go to a great university!' and so I think that didn't really help because she was just encouraged to continue.*

This brought to mind Bibby's (2018) discussion on perfectionism and eating disorders. She describes how teachers can 'collude' with a young person's 'false self' by ignoring concerns about their health and, instead, focusing exclusively on their grades. She believes this encouragement of 'precocious' abilities in students poses a serious threat to a student's 'being', even risking their internal 'annihilation' (Bibby, 2018, p.100).

### *(viii) Guilt*

The participants knew that their parents and teachers had invested significant amounts of time, effort, and money in helping them to be successful, and they felt guilty if, in their own judgement, they 'wasted' any of these resources or failed to give their parents sufficient 'value for money'.

*U: I remember a lot of people have talked about this... you have this kind of constant feeling of guilt because you always could be working. It's not like completing something that has a set endpoint. You are just constantly bettering your skills and it's a very much broader thing to do. So you never feel satisfied in the sense of like 'Oh, now I've perfected this' because it's impossible to perfect... You always feel like there could be more that you're doing. I guess*

*there is always the feeling like 'Oh, we could get in trouble because we're not working when we should be!'*

It seemed to me that Ulrike was discussing both the internal forces which compel her to excel and the external forces which influenced her out of fear of punishment. Ulrike's life was unusual in that she was training as a professional artist while also attending her academically rigorous school. She was obviously dedicated to improving her skills, but I got the sense that she realised it was entirely healthy not to expect perfection. Not feeling satisfied was then a sign of dedication rather than harmful self-criticism.

*(ix) Having no right to complain*

Most teenagers complain about the severity of adult constraints, since normal adolescence is a transition period in which young people attempt to increase their autonomy and redefine their dependency needs (Erikson, 1968, 1973), but the participants described a number of times in which their attempts to self-determine aspects of their lives were either misunderstood or harshly judged by the adults around them. When the participants looked back on all their experiences at school, there were so many circumstances where they had wanted to effect change in the world, but they simply lacked enough understanding of themselves or their situations to be able to convey what they were thinking or feeling at the time. Most importantly, they were not quite sure they were legitimately entitled to complain. Their tremendous advantages, and the obvious successes they had achieved as a result, seemed to negate their right to ask for anything more. Gabriela explained the issue clearly.

*G: I witnessed it with a lot of my friends, where they felt almost like they couldn't have issues or struggle or something because they were, you know, obviously lucky and privileged and, you know, I think there was - I mean, I'm thinking specifically with my friends but, like, a lot of guilt. I feel like if you had an issue or you felt really stressed there was a very big chance that the person right next to you was just as stressed so maybe you wouldn't really feel like you should speak up because it's kind of like the general feeling.*

*(x) Resilience*

Although the participants gave examples of the many circumstances which undermined their ability to cope, it is also important to recognize that they had enjoyed being challenged and had thrived on moderate amounts of stress which helped them to focus on their work.

*U: I think it depends on the person. I personally have never had any problems with mental health, and that kind of environment suited me. I enjoyed being pushed and stretched. I enjoyed the system. School was an interesting place to be because you could really see how different people react to stress. I don't know how much of that is something that you can learn as a skill at school, or whether it even should be something you learn at school, but I think you definitely could see a difference within people how they handle it. I think I came away with a lot of self-awareness of my abilities because you're pushed. For me it was the right amount. I learned what I was capable of in a way.*

Like many of the other participants, Ulrike seemed to believe that good stress taught her to be resilient and facilitated a good sense of self by defining the true boundaries of her abilities. However, she made the distinction between this good stress, which could be a potent motivator, and bad stress which could overwhelm a student's ability to cope. Ulrike also recognized that her peers had different natural tolerances for stress. Perhaps she is wondering what would happen if everyone were 'taught' to be resilient? Would the nature of competition change?

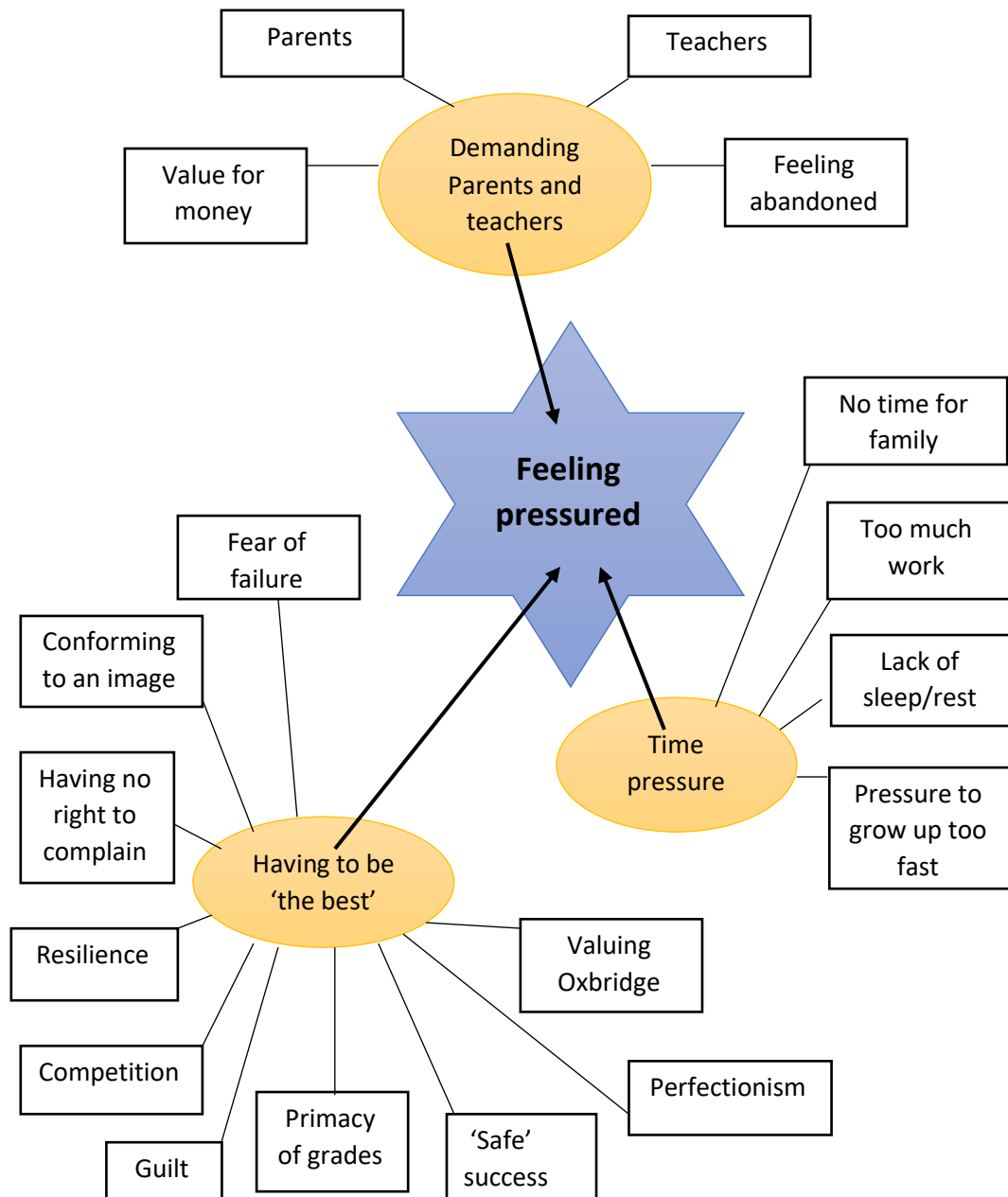
*(xi) A focus on the future instead of the present*

When Tamsin looked back at her time in school from her position as a university student, one of the last things she said took in the whole landscape of her school experience.

*Tamsin: I think it's really sad that school has become a stepping-stone rather than enjoying it while you're there. When you go to school, you shouldn't always just be thinking about university and getting somewhere else. You should enjoy school for being in school.*

Figure 7 below is a schematic drawing of Superordinate Theme #2 with its subthemes and the topics discussed above.

Figure 8: Superordinate Theme #2 with subthemes and main topics



## 6.9 Superordinate Theme #3 - Ambivalence

Overall, I believe this superordinate theme captured the most important elements of the participants' recollections since it portrayed the moral dilemmas and clashes of feelings which resulted from their school experiences. An analysis of their transcripts suggested that they had struggled with a variety of confusing feelings, such their desire to reconcile their gratitude with their anger at having to conform to the cultural norms of their group. Although each person saw their past schooling differently, I was left with the impression that these older and wiser versions of themselves still carried a sense of ambivalence about their school years which lived inside them each day and shaped their present reactions to the world.

### 6.9.1 Feeling grateful but feeling damaged

#### *(i) Definitions of 'privilege'*

All the participants described their circumstances in school as 'privileged', although they described that privilege in different ways. They all talked about having had access to resources, such as wealth and special opportunities which others had been denied. But more subtle ideas emerged as well, such as the advantages that high social status affords, and the individual care and support they had been able to rely on to help them develop their personal potentials. Suki mentioned the wonderful facilities available in her school and the exclusivity that separated her from the mediocrity of unmotivated or unproductive groups of people. Frances talked about having been given more respect and deference because of her privileged position, and Lydia was simply thankful for having been born with 'privileged' traits; innate abilities that had helped her to thrive in school and at university.

*U: if you say privileged education to me it would be kind of the care that goes into it. [Whereas] you might get left to your own devices, you [instead] have a kind of a system in place and you're looked after. I guess a feeling of not being one of the masses and masses is quite a privileged feeling. And I think also just having resources available to you.*

Ulrike felt she had been ‘noticed’ in a way which other people were not. She believed she had been bequeathed an autonomy and power which others did not have, and she recognised her family legacy – what sociologists call ‘cultural capital’ – as having made her path much easier.

*(ii) Too much of a good thing*

Ambivalence was most evident in the participants’ attempts to explain how different types of parental or teacher attention had helped or harmed them. At times they felt abandoned by those they needed whereas at others they felt invaded and over-controlled, but rarely could they articulate what it was that made these experiences so confusing for them. How could they feel justified in criticising the people who so obviously intended to help them? They struggled to articulate how having ‘too much’ of something valuable could destroy the very thing it was meant to protect: too much attention, too much independence, too much help all resulted in too much pressure. Yet the participants also sympathised with the caring concerns of the adults around them. They realised their parents loved them and that their teachers pushed them hard so they could succeed. They could see that even administrators struggled to balance the standardised organisational systems of their schools with their desire to truly educate each individual child well.

Lydia encapsulated this dilemma very well when she described the personal consequences of her rigorous IB programme.

*L: I learned discipline, self-discipline, and how to really work for something over an extended period of time, which is something that is so valuable and that is really amazing that I had the opportunity to do something like that, but I did think it was traumatic when, right at the end, the stress I felt during that time was really, I’m not exaggerating, like, crazy! And that wasn’t just me. Everyone was so stressed. I worked so hard, but I take away from it a level of discipline, but that has to be kept in check. I’ve had to mould it into something desirable. When I was finished with the IB, I told my parents I will never let my children do the IB. I would never put them through that.*

This quote suggested that Lydia was continually caught between the two poles of feeling strong and feeling weak. She seemed to believe her hard-won self-discipline had to be softened somehow and kept under control so that it did not undermine her ability to live her life well. Lydia had conveyed the feeling throughout her interview that she wanted to be able to relax - to be kind to herself - but here she stated that she must instead be vigilant, and actively 'mould' her attitudes so she could use her learning productively.

*(iii) Good and bad wealth*

Independent schools are, by nature, schools where parents have enough personal wealth to pay yearly school fees. As such, these institutions are, for the most part, made up of people who have a certain level of wealth which is above the norm (Savage et al, 2015). In the next quote, Lydia seemed to compare her wealth to others' at her school while attempting to decide when using wealth was legitimate and when it was not.

*L: I was surrounded by extreme wealth and that would allow you to travel. It would allow you to go to my school in the first place because it's really expensive. But we were surrounded by people who could spend a lot of money on clothes, or they could go out and spend crazy amounts of money every night.*

Lydia explained here that spending money for educational experiences could be acceptable but that more conspicuous consumption might denote greed or irresponsibility. When, she wondered, is having 'crazy amounts of money' too much? It is interesting to note, though, that compared to all the other participants, her family's wealth level was considerably higher, and this may have caused her to be particularly sensitive to public censure or envy. It is also interesting to note that her attitudes were also observations by Sherman (2017) who researched the values and behaviour of wealthy couples in New York.

#### *(iv) Guilt*

When I began this doctoral project, I had expected the participants to feel more 'entitled', or at least to be oblivious of their many advantages. Yet, although they clearly took full advantage of their many privileges, at no point did I get the sense they felt they deserved the tremendous gifts they had been given. Instead, they were keenly aware of social inequalities and believed 'everyone should have the opportunity to get a great education'. Yes, they felt enormously lucky, but they also spoke in great detail about the guilt they carried as a result of their exceptional circumstances. The experience of being judged in university by other students from more humble backgrounds was painful for Tamsin and this made her consider the morality of her privileged position in the world.

*T: It's really hard because you're often made to feel guilty for having that privilege, I think. And when you come to university there's a lot of judgement around 'Oh you went to a private school' from people who didn't because... well how is it fair, in a lot of ways? Like, education should be equal, one would hope.*

Tamsin's phrase, 'made to feel guilty', suggested there was something about the outside world which forced itself into her psyche unbidden. But, later in her interview, she used her 'unearned privilege' to 'do good' in the world, and perhaps this was an attempt to redress some of the inequality. These thoughts reminded me of Suki's description of her inclusive school where everyone had had the opportunity to participate and everyone was treated equally.

#### **6.9.2 Emotional wellbeing versus academic wellbeing**

The participants seemed to believe their elite schooling had given them the opportunity to hone crucially important academic and social skills which would increase their confidence and help them to succeed. However, they also appeared to suffer from internal conflicts in which they struggled to define themselves in relation to all opposing values: wanting to stand out while also to fitting in; wanting to be exceptional while embracing their 'good enough' qualities and vulnerabilities;



and presenting a polished image of success while also connecting to their own unique developmental needs and allowing their true selves to unfold.

*(i) Mixed messages from adults*

The participants' transcripts seemed to show that their ambivalent feelings about their past schooling were often a direct result of the mixed messages they received from adults who were themselves trying to accommodate the opposing goals of developmental wellbeing versus academic wellbeing. The teachers who set strict homework schedules were also the concerned adults who worried about the stress and fatigue they saw in their students. Parents who cared about their child's sense of self and emotional stability could also be hypercritical if exam grades were at stake. Lydia recognised this when she said:

*L: I had this one history teacher who was amazing. I love her. She always said 'just enjoy life' and 'don't get too caught up in this', but then she gave a lot of notes to do... There were all sorts of adults and teachers that would say you need rest, but then they would assign ridiculous amounts of homework. So, there is kind of this double-standard.*

In this case, it seemed the need to 'do' trumped the desire to 'be', and I was aware that this 'crazy' situation went against my own value system as well as Lydia's. Mixed messages, such as these, are sometimes called 'double binds' in psychology. They are recognised as especially painful and paralysing dilemmas which cannot be resolved, only balanced. It seemed Lydia had been left to her own devices to grapple with this.

### **6.9.3 Avoidance of mental health issues versus engagement**

Whereas all the participants said they were concerned about the poor mental health of their peers, and they supported making mental health services freely available in schools, none had ever considered asking for counselling themselves. In fact, they said they would never have sought help in school, no matter how emotionally distressed they were.

This was surprising and, given their self-descriptions and the high levels of stress they said they had experienced, it is possible they might have actually benefitted from some sort of personal therapeutic support. Frances had suffered a significant bereavement during her last year in secondary school but, although counselling was offered to her and she could see at the time that it might have helped her, she decided against it, saying that her mental health issues were much too personally sensitive to share with an adult. In a similar vein, Gabriela had this to say about discussing her mental health, even with her parents:

*G: I don't think I was ever that open with my parents about my own mental health. I think we had a close relationship and I think more recently that I've shared more, but I didn't then because it can feel very private so maybe I didn't want to. I think they had to work into it and just attune.*

Gabriela seemed not quite sure why she needed to hide her vulnerability from her parents, but she did want them to know her by 'attuning'. Her statement gave me insight into my own research task as well. The participants implored me to pay attention to their experiences, but I was seldom given direct access to their sensitive inner worlds. Instead, I had to intuit and interpret the things they felt from their statements about others.

*(i) Societal taboo*

Every one of the participants also identified a general, underlying, societal 'taboo' against seeking specific psychological support in their schools, even when they could see their fellow students were in need of professional help. Students simply learned to cope on their own and got on as best they could with everyday life. The following statement from Tamsin, and similar ones made by each of the participants, pointed to a possible systemic social imperative in private schools against admitting vulnerability.

*T: I've seen that a lot amongst my friends, of people who were going through difficult periods in their life and feel like it's wrong to talk about it, or they can't talk about it for some reason. And I think it's particularly great that you've*

*worked quite a lot with private schools, and I think that there is definitely a kind of a stigmatization in those kinds of environments.*

So, it seemed that the participants were not alone in rejecting available help, yet since Tamsin and the others had decided to talk to me about their experiences, I suspected they hoped that I could somehow bring about some change. Perhaps they then might more easily get support if they needed it. Many of the participants said it was the fear of being seen as weak or unsuccessful which forced them to hide their true feelings behind a façade. The implication was that hiding was both protective and potentially destructive because the need for psychological care could not then be recognised or attended to.

*(ii) Feeling exposed*

Tamsin believed that young people became exposed emotionally when disclosing their mental health challenges. The ambivalent feelings she conveyed seemed to speak to the heart of why these young people seemed so apprehensive about counselling.

*T: I think there are a lot of young people having issues with their mental health and, for a whole number of reasons, they are not getting the right kind of treatment, or they don't have the right vocabulary to even voice that they're going through these things. I do think people treat them differently [when they identify with mental health issues], which might be a good thing because being careful with people who are more vulnerable is never a bad thing, but they might feel like they are being treated differently because they've been labelled in some way, and people make assumptions that might not be true.*

Tamsin's image of not knowing the right words implied both an inability to understand the internal language of the psyche and an inability to communicate its subtlety and depth in a way that would guarantee its correct interpretation by others. In thinking about Erikson's life stage theories (1968), her cautious attitude may have reflected a general adolescent mistrust of adults, but it may also have been rooted in her own experience.

*(iii) Accessing mental health services*

Frances' school had neither a school counsellor nor procedures to assess the pastoral care needs of students, but all of the other participants' schools had at least some sort of provision. It seemed that most had staff or prefects who were officially responsible for the general wellbeing of students. However, the participants reported widely differing standards and levels of involvement ranging from everyday interactions with teachers to therapeutic consultations with highly trained psychological professionals.

Five out of six participants had had school counsellors, although most were available only very occasionally. Suki said her school had benefitted from a part time counsellor, but that the woman was not at all a familiar face to most students.

*S: There was a school counsellor but I'm not really too sure how - I think you would have had to go through your tutor to talk to her. I never spoke to her personally, but I did notice her around the school a few times. There may have been more people seeing her than I knew but my interpretation was that everyone was, or most people were quite content, quite happy. They had someone to support them, someone to talk to. You could go to the Head or the Deputy Head but there were Sixth Form Prefects and a House Prefect as well... [But] I think it wasn't necessarily advertised... I think if you had issues, I think you would have had to sort of maybe ask what to do.*

It sounded as though Suki was worried that a young person would have to identify themselves as vulnerable before the access road to help would be revealed. The phrase 'sort of maybe ask' makes this whole process sound very tentative indeed. In fact, going to the Headmaster or the Department Head sounded quite frightening to me and I doubted I would have been capable of doing it at her age.

Gabriella and Lydia had each known family friends who were counsellors, yet, surprisingly, this familiarity had still not convinced them to use services themselves. In Gabriela's next comment, she gave a reason.

*G: I think there was a taboo at my school against the counsellor. It was considered maybe a bit weird. I don't know, because I'm so pro, you know, talking to a counsellor or a therapist and like that. But I think among teenagers*

*that's weird, you know? That's not something you do. That's like considered weak or you can't handle it.*

There seemed to be a split here between what Gabriela 'knew' about the benefits of counselling, and what she 'felt' about accessing help in this way. This attitude was also found in a number of research studies (Puura, 1998; Luthar, 2003; Wolfe and Fodor, 1996) which suggested that individuals in wealthy communities do not consider counselling because of their concerns about disclosing vulnerability. In my experience, this also reflects the general stigma surrounding mental health in schools as well as the difficulties schools have in guaranteeing students confidentiality while also making counselling more visible, understandable, and approachable (Cooper, 2013).

As mentioned before, the participants' personal refusal to seek out any form of talking therapy conflicted with their evident distress at the thought of other people being denied mental health support. In contrast to the negative opinion Gabriela expressed above, she mused on the ultimate value of being able to talk about emotions and personal problems.

G: I think were you get a lot of value is when you're in an environment that you feel comfortable enough that you can be vulnerable. Put down your guard, which is really hard to achieve. That's like when you can have those conversations where you're really exploring with someone and maybe you're realizing things in the moment about yourself, about why you're feeling that way. That's what you want. That's huge. That's really the curative effect.

#### *(iv) A clash of values*

Whereas the participants showed signs of having great respect for counsellors, they also seemed to distrust many of their values, motives, and actions. In many ways, school counsellors represented the benefits of self-care and the acceptance of vulnerability, but I wondered whether the promotion of these mindful or introspective attitudes might have confused the participants since, in their schools,

personal strength, independence, academic excellence and an image of success were so highly valued. In a typically succinct comment, Lydia said:

*L: It was an internal thing. Our school had the counsellor and she would talk to me sometimes, but she would tell me things that I would only later realise myself, like 'it doesn't matter', or 'do your best'. I wouldn't really believe it.*

Lydia appeared to be struggling with the two opposing, and sometimes irreconcilable, values of caring for her emotional wellbeing versus the personal sacrifices she needed to make in order to achieve academic excellence. The participants had all said that the demand for top grades had sometimes overwhelmed them, yet if they made the decision to care more for themselves psychologically, this would entail giving themselves more permission to rest, an attitude which might possibly relax their desire to strive and their subsequent ability to excel.

Unfortunately, the participants said their teachers seemed totally unaware of this fundamental conflict, since they simply encouraged students to share their concerns with counsellors as a way of 'solving their problems'. In her final thoughts on her school's counselling service, Ulrike believed her counsellor was mostly used for either very serious mental health conditions, or as a disciplinarian.

*U: I think normally a person would see a school counsellor as a result of being in trouble for something or already sort of quite major difficulties having already come up, so it was discipline, and it seemed very much more retrospective than pre-emptive.*

It is hard for me to imagine volunteering to make use of a counsellor under these circumstances, but, according to Cooper (2013), the use of counselling for disciplinary purposes is a relatively common experience in British schools.

#### *(v) Mental health education*

Four of the participants said they regretted their schools had not been more proactive in teaching them about their own mental health since they believed it would have helped them to cope better with both adolescence and the pressure of school. Even when their schools tried to provide occasional psychoeducational events, these participants were often not willing to take part because they felt the topics were not personally relevant to them. Ulrike was quite dismissive of her school's attempt to provide something of value.

*U: They would have people come to the school during lunch or something and give a talk about some mental health issue, but I don't think they ever made the effort to involve the kids... It didn't feel relevant and I think that was like the only way they really addressed mental health.*

It sounded as though Ulrike felt 'talked at' rather than 'talked with', and, given her primary focus on making connections and having conversations, the events described above would hardly have counted as significant encounters. It is also likely that the speakers' sincere attempts to engage busy students during their valuable free time at lunch would have failed.

#### **6.9.4 Optimism and pessimism: an uncertain future**

Finally, there were many statements in the narratives which I believe were particularly poignant since they betrayed the conflicted feelings participants had toward their futures. Although I believe Erikson (1968) would have seen their anxiety as developmentally normal, I experienced many of the participants' comments as quite pessimistic about the world.

In her final thoughts, Gabriela took a dark view of the future which may have reflected how difficult her school life had been for her. Although she admitted that she had been given many wonderful opportunities for her future, and that she felt truly grateful for them, the ordeals she imagined ahead seemed to fill her with anxiety instead of excitement.

*G: I get anxious thinking about what people expect in the long term because I don't really know what I want to do and I'm happy to just kind of take things slowly and explore and enjoy living, but I sometimes feel anxious about that because I feel like I'm almost not allowed to. And kids are thinking about university so much younger, doing all these extra things. Where is the limit in terms of the growing competitive nature of schools and the schooling system, and then going to university? I just think it seems to be getting more and more extreme.*

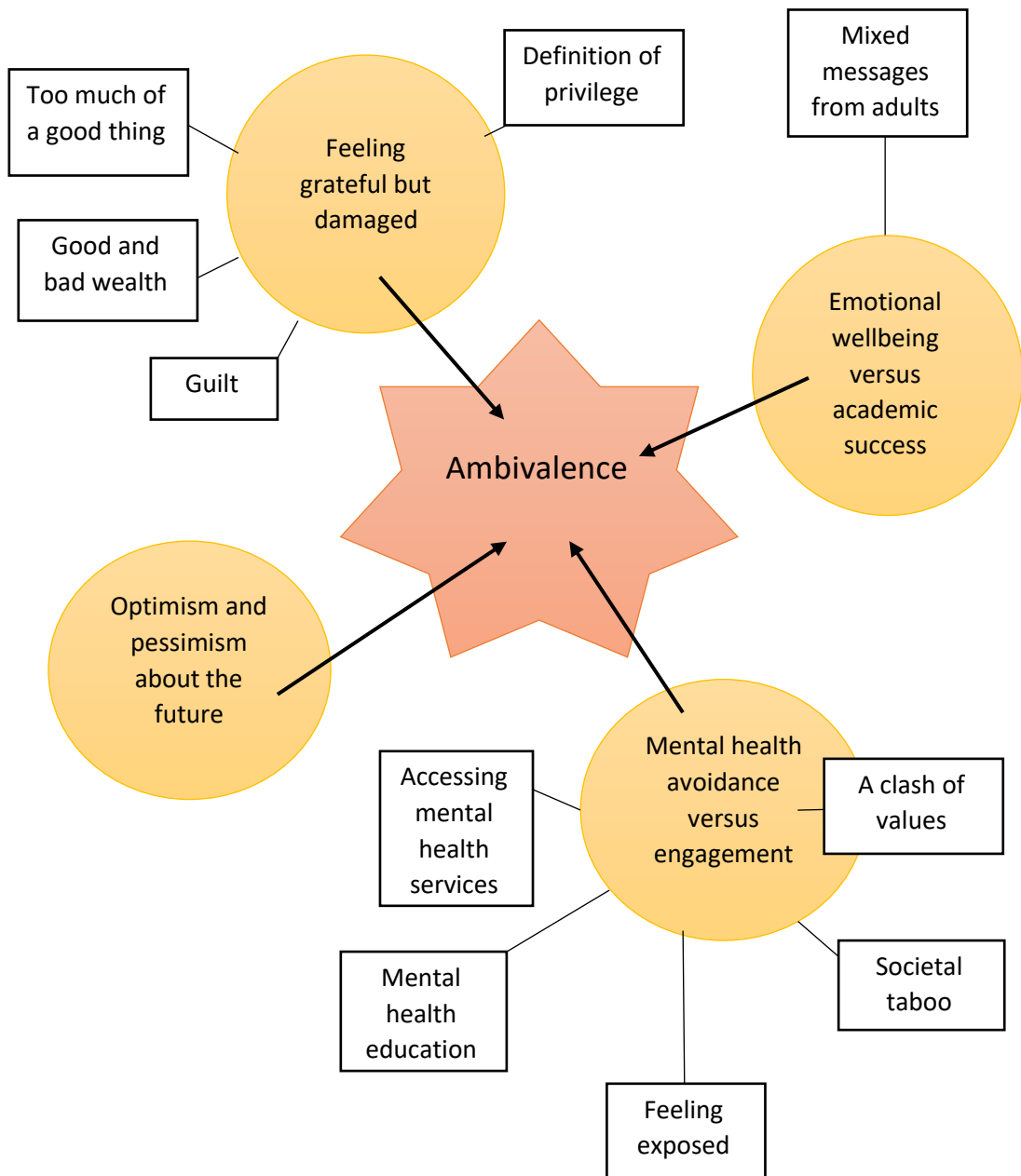
Although Gabriela said here that she wanted to slow down and take her time, she seemed to worry that competition was increasing and that her challenges would grow more and more difficult. In contrast, Ulrike presented a much more optimistic view of her life ahead. I experienced her as a very competent and vibrant young woman who felt she was ready to meet the challenges of her future. Yes, she worried about the vast societal changes she and her peers were experiencing, but these were countered by her general optimism and feelings of hope that young people could fashion positive changes in the world by sharing and supporting each other.

*U: I think recently there has been a lot more talk about mental health and awareness and communities coming together with young people sort of trying to help each other out, so for me that's a change. You hear a lot more about it in social media and that kind of thing. People share their experiences all the time which is definitely interesting I think with my generation.*

Figure 8 below is a schematic diagram of Superordinate Theme #3 with Subthemes and the topics discussed above.



Figure 9: Superordinate Theme #3 with Subthemes and relevant topics



## **CHAPTER SEVEN: RESULTS OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Although the results of this IPA study are interesting in themselves, taking a second look at the participants' quotes from a sociological perspective gives us the opportunity to view the experiences of these young people through a different lens, one which will lend additional depth to the analysis. Sociologists such as Annette Lareau (2003) typically use qualitative research techniques such as Grounded Theory in order to map social phenomena and develop theories. Not all of the superordinate themes and subthemes which are listed below are suited to a sociological critique because they are primarily psychological in nature, but those which are relevant will be discussed further here.

### **7.2 Results of IPA: Superordinate themes and subthemes**

#### **1 - Needing the help of others**

- Needing adult attunement
- Friendship
- Methods of coping with stress

#### **2 - Feeling pressured**

- Overly demanding parents and teachers
- Time pressure
- Having to be the best

#### **3 - Ambivalence**

- Feeling grateful but damaged
- Emotional wellbeing versus academic wellbeing
- Mental health avoidance versus engagement
- Optimism versus pessimism: An uncertain future

### **7.3 Superordinate Theme #1: Needing the help of others**

#### **7.3.1 School as a developmental context**

Michel Foucault (Faubion, 1994) coined the term 'normalising power' for the invisible social forces which shape our ideas of what is, and is not, considered 'normal'. This, for him, is the most important type of power because it ultimately influences everything we want to 'do' and 'be' as we attempt to fit in with the people and situations around us. He believed that we incorporate powerful collective values so deeply that we cannot easily identify or rid ourselves of them.

Schools use normalising power when authority figures determine what student qualities are valued. However, the adults who judge these qualities are also themselves influenced by the powerful, but hidden, social forces around them, so they are, in turn, equally moulded by the prevailing cultural norms. In this way, society reproduces and reinforces communal social structures and systems of power within an endless, repeating cycle. Yet in Foucault's view, it is critically important that we are aware of how these forces create our desires so that we can examine them and eventually rid ourselves of their influence. Only in this way, Foucault states, will we be free to determine our own values and goals.

Foucault's theories seem particularly important when thinking about the participants' narratives and the ways in which the participants were struggling to articulate the personal consequences of the socialization processes which had shaped, and sometimes damaged, them. When discussing the theories of Foucault in relation to schools, Ball (2013) states the critical importance of looking under the surface of things by putting the focus on individual lives.

*'Power only remains tolerable by hiding itself within the everyday, the mundane and the intimate. One task of the intellectual... is to make people aware of how intolerable taken-for-granted exercises of power actually are and show them that things could be different... This involves working on and caring for the self.'* (p. 145)

In the 1970s and 80s, Pierre Bourdieu developed his theory that both state education and elite schools are a major force for the cultural transmission of elite ideals because they reproduce power and wealth differentials in favour of the privileged sectors of society. Like Foucault, he believed the top socioeconomic classes define which personal qualities, actions, and goals have 'worth', particularly in relation to their adoption by the global business world.

When we consider the superordinate themes that resulted from this study, we can see these forces at work in the participants' lives. What they notice about the behaviour of parents and teachers, their descriptions of their personal relationships and the ways in which these everyday interactions created and sustained their school environments, give some clear examples of these social processes.

One of Bourdieu's other major contributions to the study of elite schooling was his theory on the acquisition of 'social capital', or networking skills, which provide crucial insider knowledge for young people, helping them to feel at ease within an elite subculture. Students in independent schools are taught sophisticated 'people skills' – how to make connections, how to gain entry to certain institutions or seats of power, how to dress, speak, and behave – attributes which then identify them as belonging to a privileged sector of society. Being 'the right kind of person' was considered an important task by all of the participants.

*T: One of my really close friends was told, stupidly, from a very young age, 'You're an Oxford girl' in inverted commas. 'You're very clever. You're talented. You're just what they're looking for. You're the right sort of person'.*

Other sociologists, such as Gee (2000), have since built on Bourdieu's theories to explain what 'the right kind of person' is at present: a global citizen.

*'Ensembles of family, peers, communities, and schools are networked with others in ways that enhance the possibility that [students] will move through them into a global world.'* Gee, 2000: 62)

### **7.3.2 Friendship**

The environments of privileged schools have been described in recent research (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010, 2013; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; and Khan, 2011), and the specific parenting practices found within advantaged communities are beginning to be mapped and understood (Lareau, 2003). As part of this, researchers have started to examine the social interactions between peers. While the protective power and healing nature of friendship became a central theme in the present study, the time pressure which threatened these vital relationships was also noted.

These two topics have been similarly addressed within ethnographic studies by Khan (2011) and Gaztambides-Fernandez (2009). They note that elite schools have become increasingly overburdened with 'value-added activities' which severely restrict students' opportunities to socialise away from the gaze of adults. As a result, the intimate friendships which are so vital to adolescent development become much more difficult to maintain. They suggest that, although social volatility is amongst the many hallmark attributes of normal adolescence (Pipher, 1994; Luxmoore, 2006, 2008, 2010; Coleman, 2011), recent cultural changes have turned up the heat on social and academic competition. They believe this pressure may make it increasingly difficult for young people to maintain loyal, supportive friendships as they compete with each other for distinction (Clark, 2004; Levine, 2006; Luthar, 2006; Luxmoore, 2010; Wiseman, 2002). As a result of these changes, young people may be in danger of becoming socially isolated at a time when they should be learning about themselves within close peer relationships.

#### **7.4 Superordinate Theme #2: Feeling pressured**

The second superordinate thematic category of 'Feeling pressured' showed us the emotional impact that high levels of stress can have on young people, so it offers us a unique opportunity to empathise, on an emotional as well as intellectual level, with the difficulties these students faced.

##### **7.4.1 Overly demanding parents**

The participants often mentioned parents who demanded too much of their children: too much hard work, self-control, self-sufficiency, and productivity. Sherman (2017) found that, in the eyes of her participants, these personal qualities, goals and values defined 'good' people who had earned their right to be privileged. The participants were aware that they were required to embody these qualities but, as immature adolescents, they felt they could not always live up to these standards. Even though they looked and sounded like adults, they knew they were still highly dependent on those around them. They needed continual guidance and support, firm but flexible boundaries, help to control their impulses, and role models who were actively engaged in their lives without exerting too much control. (Kastner and Wyatt, 2002; Apter, 2001).

##### **7.4.2 Aspects of elite education which create privilege**

The primary value of a study such as this is the opportunity to see the experiences of young people through their own eyes, from the inside out. They are the ones who know intimately what their world was like and the effect it had on them. I was impressed when they had some understanding of the institutional tensions which were created as the goals and values within their school communities clashed, yet they seemed to be generally unaware of the circumstances in the wider world which had shaped these important interactions within their homes and schools.

Based on sociological evidence, I believe that numerous social factors conspire with each other to continually escalate the pressure which privately educated young

people feel, and these forces shape the formidable hurdles which students must overcome in order to secure their place at university. Looking for the specific societal reasons why young people within independent schools are put under such pressure is a bit like asking about the 'chicken and egg' conundrum. The situation is complicated, to say the least, but it makes sense to start the present overview with an investigation of the nature of elite universities.

### **7.4.3 Valuing Oxbridge: Competition between universities for high status**

Globalisation and the growing aspirations of middle classes everywhere have increased competition to reach all forms of higher education (Anglionby, 2018), and universities are responding to this trend by increasing their brand recognition. This, in time, increases the competition for status between all universities. In his ground-breaking work on elite practices, Bourdieu (1984) argued that, as educational opportunities increase, the goalposts are moved to ensure that only a highly selective group of universities can facilitate access to further elite positions in society.

A recent study by Wakeling and Savage (2015) compared different students' paths through the traditional secondary and tertiary education process in England to determine the eventual job opportunities and social status that young people can expect to receive upon graduation. They showed that attending privileged educational institutions at a secondary or higher education level significantly increases the likelihood of entering the global elite. They also found considerable internal stratification which distinguished amongst even the most prestigious universities, such as the Russell Group, as those universities at the very top conferred even more advantage than those which were slightly below. A very small group of universities, including Oxford, Cambridge, and a select few University of London colleges, emerged as a kind of 'super-elite'. Attendance at one of these institutions, especially those considered 'world-class', significantly increased one's future economic and cultural advantages.

#### **7.4.4 Increasing university requirements: The pressure to achieve**

As competition for 'world class' status between universities increases, it inevitably forces up admissions standards. Secondary schools that feed into these universities then respond by raising their own standards for students, and the pressure to achieve academically increases. Minor variations in the number and type of student accomplishments differentiate them from one another. Van Zanten (2015) says that, even though independent schools are not required to follow a standard national curriculum,

*'the relative homogeneity of elite institutions encourages the development of very limited frames of reference within which young people can position themselves, so that small differences in degrees of accomplishment and merit between them and close peers loom larger than wider social differences.'* (Van Zanten, 2015: 8)

#### **7.4.5 Concerted cultivation**

Gaztambide–Fernandez (2009) and Khan (2011) have used extensive ethnographies of American students to illuminate some of the multi-layered feedback systems which teach young men and women to become 'highly accomplished' people: 'the best of the best'. Annette Lareau (2003) uses the term 'concerted cultivation' to describe the socialisation processes by which parents and schools inculcate students with the academic and social capital which will allow them to compete for success on a global stage.

The participants in this study knew they needed to work extremely hard to achieve the excellent grades which would satisfy their parents and teachers. Top grades had undoubtedly helped them to enter their elite universities, but they had also been required to project just the right image. Zimdars (2009) agrees that, in addition to students' classroom grades and examinations results, 'cultural capital', or the knowledge of elite systems and ways of being that students acquire at home and school, still play a major role in admission to Oxford.



#### **7.4.6 Schools teach 'soft skills'**

In addition to academic goals, schools have started to focus on a variety of 'soft' skills which are highly valued in the labour market (Stephansen & Aarseth, 2011; AQR International, 2017). The websites of independent schools generally highlight these qualities, such as 'control', 'challenge', 'commitment', 'confidence', 'resilience', 'determination', 'persistence', 'adaptability', 'courage', 'self-regulation', 'leadership', 'creativity', and 'perseverance' (Forbes & Weiner, 2008; Wardman et al, 2010, Vincent & Maxwell, 2015, ISC, 2017). Whereas these soft skills undoubtedly serve the purpose of helping students to develop their academic and social skills, their advertisement on school websites show their popularity with parents.

#### **7.4.7 Parents use their resources**

The participants said they noticed parents in their schools using their considerable economic and 'social capital' to pressure teachers and administrators to overly attend to their children's needs. Van Zanten believes *'elites have recently developed new and very powerful ways of securing educational advantages for their children through their skilful use of both economic and private resources'* (van Zanten, 2015: 5). She sees this behaviour as an integral part of 'concerted cultivation' [See section 7.4.4] in which parents demand support from teachers and administrators to resolve issues which their children are experiencing, and they manage their children's school careers very carefully (Lareau, 2011; Lareau and McCrory Calarco, 2012).

In a slightly cynical vein, Duffell (2000) believes that the British aspiring classes simply do not trust that children will develop into capable adults without 'concerted cultivation' processes (Lareau, 2003) being brought to bear. Whether or not this is true, this study should make us wonder if the messy, unpredictable, and emotional characteristics of normal adolescence are valued in some situations. Parents who feel that they are totally responsible for the development of their child's 'intellectual, social, cultural, physical, and emotional skills' may worry that their child will be left behind if they themselves are at all passive (Vincent & Maxwell, 2015).

Parents who participate in the more radically interventionist strategies within ‘concerted cultivation’ may be highly anxious about their child’s future as they attempt to instil in them the same drive and ambition that they themselves have internalised. Yet, the participants stated, not all children naturally conform to this level of ambition and many are unwilling to follow the particular route to success which their parents envision.

Individuals who criticise ‘helicopter’ or ‘snowplough’ parents use these terms to dismiss their behaviour, as if parents are somehow simple-minded or selfish. Their actions may indeed be unhelpful or counterproductive, I believe they are also equally understandable given the somewhat homogeneous social conditions in which these parents live. My professional experience, together with the participants’ statements, suggest that parents are generally unaware of the wider social processes which drive their feelings and behaviour, so they are often unable to choose alternative paths for themselves or their children which are outside of their cultural norms.

It therefore seems crucial that we, as researchers, search for the immense complexity behind this seemingly simple, but deceptive, situation. It makes sense that parents love their children and want the very best for them and, if they see opportunities to further their child’s interests, they make use of them. Yet, based on the participants’ reactions in this study, the consequences are not always what parents anticipate or intend.

Very little research has been carried out to investigate the parenting styles of affluent or socially advantaged parents, what choices they make when raising their children, and what effect these choices have on a their child’s psychological development, but Maxwell (2015) believes we need to dig much deeper into the elite practices, such as educational choices, the orientation towards transnational mobility, and the consumption of goods which make privileged groups distinct from others.

#### **7.4.8 Enrichment activities**

Although the specific use of enrichment activities to further the school careers of young people cannot be considered an entirely classed pursuit, the researchers suspect that elite or ‘aspirational’ parents make more use of ‘added value’ activities than other groups. For sociologists Vincent and Maxwell (2015), the parental insistence on providing children with enrichment activities is a prime example of this classed behaviour. Parents are now expected to offer their children continual, ‘value-added’ opportunities to develop their natural talents and skills. According to the researchers, these parents also take primary responsibility for helping their children to secure future employment opportunities by actively ‘sculpting’ their children into leaders who will assume positions of power.

#### **7.4.9 The ‘responsibilitisation’ of motherhood**

Vincent and Maxwell (2015) see these enrichment activities, including the use of tutoring, as evidence of a growing ‘responsibilitisation’ of parents, mostly mothers. They believe the current cultural template for ‘good’ mothering is an all-consuming process which requires copious amounts of time, energy, and effort.

*‘This is an approach that is child-focussed, with the mother (rather than the father) having the responsibility to care both intensively and extensively for all aspects of the child’s physical, moral, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Even if mothers do not, will not, or cannot mother in such a way, Intensive Mothering Expectations (IME) (Johnson & Swanson, 2016) have become pervasive...Thus [mothers] have to think, plan, and be purposeful in relation to that task – what Arendell (2001) calls ‘intentional parenting’.* (Vincent and Maxwell, 2015: 6)

In other words, parents who engage in ‘concerted cultivation’ are ‘good’ parents who are intent on keeping a very high level of control. Lareau (2000, 2003) also found that the middle and upper-middle class parents she studied were typically ‘hands-on’, intervening in all aspects of their children’s lives, and they behaved in very similar ways, regardless of their race or ethnicity. They organised activities for their children which were ‘constructive’ as opposed to simply letting their children ‘hang out’. In

this way, parents controlled everything their children did, and where, when, and with whom they did it. These observations resonate with many of the participants' experiences in the present study.

Beck (1992) has commented on the neoliberal attitude of individualism which is behind these practices, in which:

*'parents are responsible for generating their children's biographies through the development of the children's intellectual, social, cultural, physical and emotional skills... Bringing up children within this paradigm becomes a risky process where children are positioned as investments for the future, needing to be nurtured and protected (Smeyers, 2010). Thus, parents are required to be pro-active, and passivity therefore denotes a lack of effort. (Vincent & Maxwell, 2015: 6).*

Suissa (2006) suggests that these types of parents 'do' things for their children rather than 'be' with them, which may explain why the participants in this study felt parents could be over-involved while also being absent.

#### **7.4.10 Class anxiety**

Weis, Chipollone, and Jenkins (2014) believe that increasing globalisation and deep economic uncertainty have resulted in significant 'class anxiety' for aspirational parents. As the economic dominance and influence of the middle class gradually erodes (Savage *et al*, 2015), privileged families must now 'win' elite status and class position for their children rather than bequeathing it to them through a type of social inheritance (van Zanten, 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013a, Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009). In response to this threat, parents mobilise all their available resources, and the extreme competition that results fuels much of the increased demand for high levels of educational achievement. This, in turn, affects the behaviour of parents and the nature of their family relationships (Varrenne & McDermott, 1998; Stevens, 2007; Demerath, 2009), as well as the characteristics of university entrance requirements, which are constructed to give advantage to some students over others (Stevens, 2007). Although top universities have instituted new admissions policies to

increase student applications from state schools, a small number of elite independent schools still contribute a disproportionate percentage of successful candidates (Weale, 2018).

#### **7.4.11 Increased demand for higher education**

In a UK government report on the wellbeing of young people, Lessof et al (2016) commented on the increasing seriousness of students and their desire to go on to university. The proportion of young people planning to study A-levels after year 11 rose from 59% in 2005 to 65% in 2014. In addition, whereas fewer than 60% of year 10 students said they had intended to apply to university in 2005, an impressive 71% intended to apply in 2014, and the figures seem to be rising still. Even though tuition fees have increased substantially during this time, it seems there are many more students vying for places now than there were in the past.

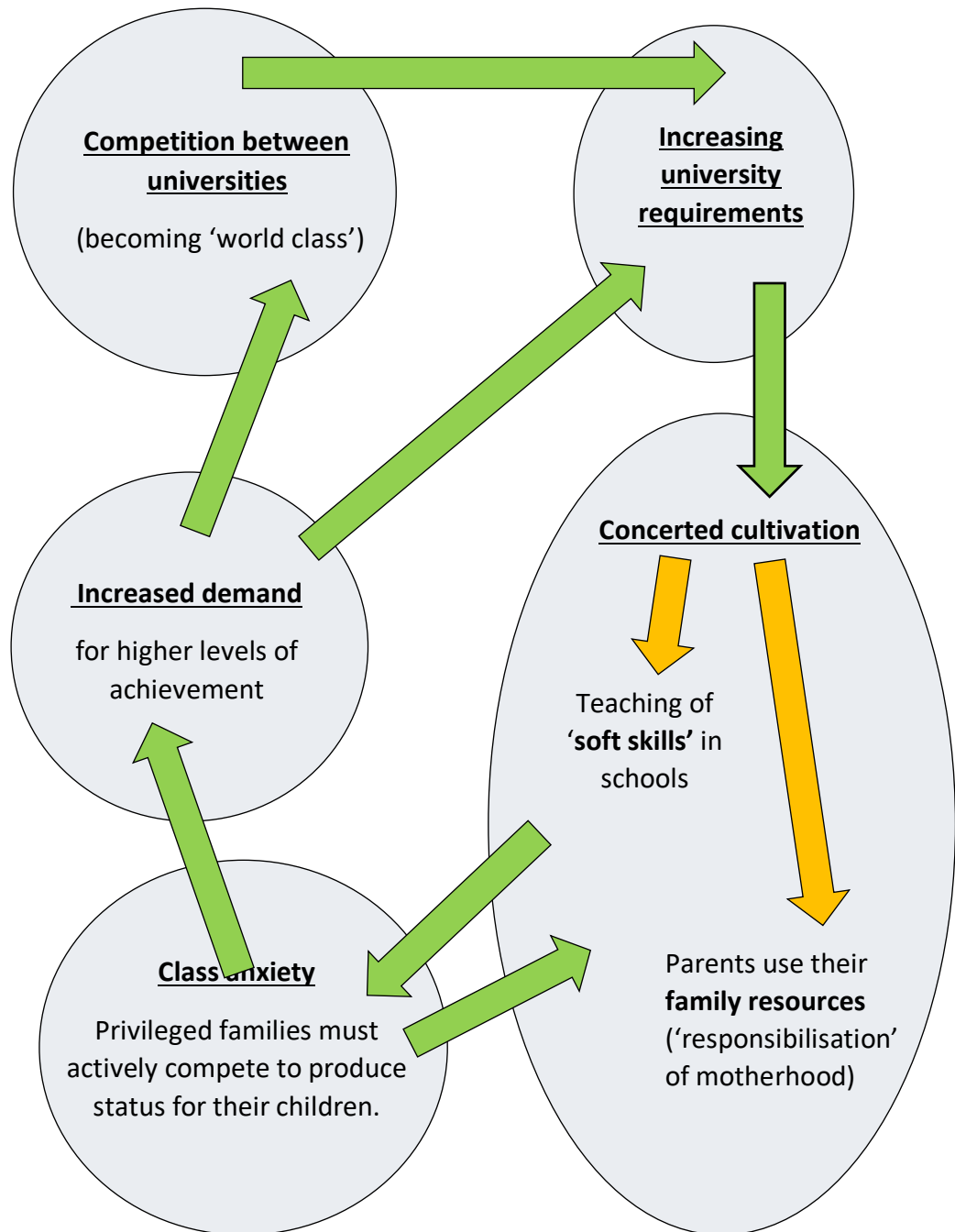
Universities are also contributing to this upsurge in aspiration. Most are now targeting students from disadvantaged or less well represented populations with outreach programmes intended to inspire many more school students to apply (Cambridge University, 2018), and their admissions officers say they are intent on selecting the 'very best students' from this increasing number of candidates.

#### **7.4.12 The cycle intensifies**

As the competitive nature of our world increases, Vincent and Maxwell (2015) have argued that every level of society is moving generally toward the normalisation of 'concerted cultivation' as a parenting strategy. If this is indeed true, then the participants in this study may be describing a set of circumstances - and typical emotional responses - which will become more prevalent everywhere as the need for all young people to compete makes these achievement-oriented socialisation processes grow more intense throughout all levels of society. As a result, it is likely that many more young people will be affected by competitive stress in future, no matter whether they are educated privately or in the state sector.

The following schematic drawing [Figure 9] shows the interactions of the secondary and higher education processes which were described above. The directions of the arrows denote the causes and effects of the social phenomena which shape the continual evolution of academic and extra-curricular standards.

Figure 10: The cycle of competition between universities, parents, and schools



#### **7.4.13 Parents passing values to children**

As previously stated, Attachment Theory reminds us that parents are powerfully influential in passing parental values to their children via the physical and psychological nurturing they provide in childhood and adolescence (Winnicott, 1965; Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth, 1974; Ainsworth, 1989; Bretherton, 1992; Bibby, 2018). Social research has confirmed that the surrounding community and wider culture also significantly influence how children behave and what they believe (Golombok, 2000; Lechner, 2009), so at both the micro and macro level, children are encouraged to fit into the existing personal, familial, community, and cultural expectations of the adults around them.

Sherman (2017) found that parents within economically advantaged environments expressed a strong wish to pass on their own values and behaviours to their children, and many of them said they hoped their children would turn out to be ‘nice people’ who work hard, are non-materialistic, and kind. They discouraged feelings of entitlement and encouraged their children instead to look at themselves as ‘just like everyone else’, ordinary individuals who are no better than others. Of course, some families who place their children in independent schools are neither wealthy nor particularly socially advantaged, but for those who have much greater economic resources, Sherman believes the need for privacy becomes a significant issue, especially as people struggle to define their legitimate entitlements and obligations.

*‘My conversations [with the research participants] reveal the challenges of managing privilege in a society that prides itself on egalitarianism and meritocracy at a historical moment of extreme and increasingly visible inequality.’ (Sherman, 2017: 230)*

It is interesting to note that this attitude was also evident in the participants’ ambivalent feelings toward their privileged status and advantages.

#### **7.4.14 Parental support for mental health services**

The term ‘social referencing’ refers to a child’s sensitivity to the verbal and visual cues from their parents about what they should believe when responding to



emotionally charged situations. This process is considered by many researchers to be one of the major mechanisms by which a child comes to understand the world around them. With this in mind, it is possible that the young people in this study may also have looked to their parents for guidance on the ultimate value of mental health services, such as counselling.

The participants were all disinclined to take advantage of counselling services in their schools and this may have reflected their parents' views on the usefulness of therapy. Puura *et al* (1998) found that, in general, parents tend not to seek psychological help because of their concerns about disclosing personal vulnerability and protecting their family's privacy (Luthar, 2003; Wolfe & Fodor, 1996).

#### **7.4.15 Having no right to complain**

It was clear from the participants' comments that aspects of their schooling, and some parental behaviours, caused them emotional distress which they could not fully understand and were powerless to change. Of particular note was their comment that it did not feel 'legitimate' to complain about their situation because of their obvious privilege. Sociologists believe that western culture at present is centred around the values of individualism and meritocracy (Sherman, 2017; Gaztambide-Fernandez; and Khan, 2011). In other words, one can only 'own' or deserve success if one has achieved it on one's own. Yet reliance on these concepts alone can greatly obscure the reality of the lives of young people and compromise their fundamental ability to see themselves as necessarily linked to others.

In the case of independent schooling, these cultural ideas throw a veil over attempts to acknowledge or investigate the advantages, as well as the disadvantages, which young people may experience. In my experience, schools often chafe at the insinuation that their students are 'privileged'. To them, the term seems to negate the fact that students work extremely hard for their successes. But if we are to make progress in looking at the mental health of young people within independent education, we must be able to look their privileges, as well as their pressures, in the face and call them by their rightful name.

## 7.5 Superordinate Theme #3: Ambivalence

### 7.5.1 Privilege

Striving to balance the individual experiences of participants with knowledge of the socially constructed attitudes which surround them helps us to recognise the dilemmas in which these young people find themselves without invoking justifications for or against the 'fairness' of their advantaged education. Given the painful consequences of social inequality in our present world, it is easy to see why the circumstances around privilege are so hard to discuss. The danger, when we talk about 'privileged people', is that we see them as 'other' and lose our empathy for them. Words like 'entitled' or 'wealthy' can be critical terms which imply greed or an abuse of power.

According to Sherman (2017), the truly privileged don't often refer to themselves as such, but she believes this attempt to place themselves in the middle rather than on the extreme is fraught with difficult moral conflicts. This partly results from a sensitivity to the harsh judgements of those outside their social set, but she believes it is also evidence of their genuine wish to see themselves as 'good' rather than 'bad' privileged people.

The participants felt a certain amount of guilt because of their privileged position in society. They all recognised themselves as having had exceptional access to resources and they had all noticed the plight of other young people who, in an 'unjust' world, were not as fortunate as they have been. The evidence of this struggle can be found throughout the participants' interviews.

*T: It's really hard because you're often made to feel guilty for having that privilege, I think. And when you come to university there's a lot of judgement around 'Oh you went to a private school', from people who didn't because... well how is it fair, in a lot of ways? Like, education should be equal, one would hope.*

According to Sherman (2017), working hard, consuming prudently and giving back to others were the central qualities which her participants believed legitimated their privilege. In a reflection of this, several of the participants in this study said they

distanced themselves from their more materialistic peers who they believed were flaunting their wealth and consuming irresponsibly. In contrast, Tamsin identified her desire to balance the scales by 'giving something back' to society.

*T: 'When you come from a privileged background, it's how you use that for the benefit of other people. You know, while there are charities to help, really awful things are happening across the world.'*

It is interesting to note that the participants' heartfelt personal reactions closely matched those of Sherman's young, economically advantaged couples in New York who were highly anxious about their economic and social advantages. They were aware of, and grateful for, their wealthy lifestyle. They were self-deprecating and modest, and they did not feel as though they deserved more than others. However, they took full advantage of their considerable privileges while also believing themselves to be middle class and 'just like everyone else'. Although Sherman shows a great degree of empathy for her research participants, she also believes their attitudes were, ultimately, impediments to our ability to comment on, and change, the deep and growing inequalities of our world because they take our attention away from the complex reality of social inequities of all kinds.

Like Sherman's interviewees, the young people in this study were struggling to position themselves in relation to others who had fewer advantages. As Sherman implies, they may simply have been reproducing the typical discourses within their privileged sector of society, but I believe this should not take away from their genuine desire to develop identities as good people or to live honourably with their privileges. The private sector in education exists in order to give young people a 'leg up', and parents pay dearly for this advantage, but the participants' ambivalence about their privileged lives reflects our society's general ambivalence about privilege, and this circumstance makes all conversations around the consequences, at an individual and societal level, extremely difficult.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION**

### **8.1 Introduction**

I will begin this discussion by providing a summary of the IPA results, then attempt to answer my main research question and several subsidiary questions based on these results. I will consider the implications of my findings for parents, teachers, schools and counsellors, and for the psychological profession as a whole. Finally, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of this research and give recommendations for further research in this area.

### **8.2 Summary of IPA results**

All the participants in this study believed that independent schools are different environments from their state counterparts and that the mental health of students in these schools is fundamentally unique. Although school seemed to have been largely a good experience for each of the participants, it is striking that the great majority of their comments focused on the darker side of mental health: the high levels of stress, difficult relationships, intense competition, and the insistence on excellence in grades and eternal image. Above all, they considered the intensity of this pressure to be the major cause of the poor mental health they saw around them.

Many of the statements the participants made had to do with how adults were, or were not, attuned to their developmental needs. The relentless time pressure they experienced prevented them from building close relationships with family and friends: intimate relationships which, they said, provided the core support for their mental health. They were distressed by parents and teachers who pushed them too hard or held top grades as the only legitimate signs of 'success'. In particular, the participants felt the academic pressure and excessive competition between students imbued them with a fear of failure which undermined their ability to take chances, to test themselves, or to enjoy their learning.

The participants' narratives also betrayed several areas of ambivalence when explaining how different types of parental or teacher attention had helped or

harmed them. Too much attention, too much independence and too much help all resulted in too much pressure. Dealing with the tension between academic success and self-care had required a mature self-awareness and sophisticated time-management skills which were difficult for them. Yet, they were also ambivalent about asking for help, particularly mental health support, since they worried this would make them seem 'weak' in their own eyes and those of their peers. In addition, they believed their tremendous social and academic advantages negated their right to complain or ask for help. This attitude evidently conflicted with their belief in the healing nature of therapy.

### **8.3 Addressing the research question**

Before I address the overarching research question, it is important to state again that, by using an IPA methodology, the findings of this study must be considered emergent and provisional. Therefore, they cannot be strictly generalised. The resulting superordinate themes may, however, point to aspects of the participants' lives which perhaps parallel those of other young people in independent secondary schools.

#### **8.3.1 Research Question**

*What are the participants' memories of their mental health experiences as they look back at their independent secondary school education?*

My longstanding curiosity about the lives and mental health of young people in private education originally inspired this project and provided a focal point throughout all the tasks involved. Being able to hear the voices of the participants as they remembered their personal experiences illuminated a wide variety of themes, and although many of the participants' experiences in their independent secondary schools were uniquely personal, it was striking how similar some of them were.

When asked about their own mental health, the participants frequently described the feelings or behaviour of their peers instead of staying with the felt quality of their own experiences and I wondered whether this might betray a reluctance on their part to recall difficult feelings.

They reported their anxiety about the increase in mental health problems which they saw around them, both at school and within the wider world. Their views may have been indicative of the general rise of mental health problems in British youths (UK Office of National Statistics, 2017) but the participants also said that they and their privately educated peers had suffered more because of the effects of additional academic and social pressures which, they believed, were specific to their independent school environments. This belief was generally borne out by a comparison of their experiences to those which have been noticed by a number of other researchers.

Throughout their interviews, the participants shared memories of their schools – the people and relationships they had experienced as well as the tasks they had been expected to perform – and they agreed without exception that their schools had been highly demanding environments. They provided personal descriptions which clearly illuminated the elite nature of their schools, social ecosystems which have also been described by Lareau (2003), Maxwell & Aggleton (2010, 2013, 2014) and van Zanten *et al* (2015).

Although studies which directly compare independent fee-paying schools to other types of educational environments are virtually non-existent, the participants' experiences seemed quite similar to those of privileged young people in America. Luthar's studies into the mental health of 'advantaged' youths (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999; Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2005) began to show the contrasting duality of their school environments as both privileged spaces and sources of damage, ideas which harkened back to Crenshaw's 'intersectionality' of privilege (1989) and Rocco & West's (1998) 'polyrhythmic realities' of interlocking forms of advantage and disadvantage.

All the participants believed they had been ‘privileged’ as a result of their privately funded education, yet their gratitude was also tinged with anger when they described the stress they had suffered when they experienced too much academic pressure and had too little time to rest. Their comments showed their attempts to make sense of their multiple realities – such as the difference between good stress and bad – and the competitive pressures of their elite educational environments were often depicted as damaging rather than supportive of their growth. Taken as a whole, their comments closely reflected Misra and McKean’s (2000) definition of stressful events as either challenging, when stress results in a feeling of competence, or threatening, when stress causes feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness.

According to the results, many aspects of the participants’ school circumstances may have influenced their mental health and emotional resilience, and many of the educational goals portrayed, such as the teaching of ‘soft skills’, have also been noted in other studies (Forbes & Weiner, 2008; Wardman et al, 2010; Vincent & Maxwell, 2015; ISC, 2017). In trying to understand their worlds, the participants outlined many of the goals and values of their parents and schools, how these goals mapped onto the organizational systems with which they interacted, and how these systems eventually determined what was expected of them.

Conforming to those expectations had not been easy for any of them, but some had found it easier than others. Researchers, such as Ruus et al (2007), have categorized school value systems and teacher attitudes by the degree to which they support student interests and coping strategies. They found that environments which effectively balance the competitive academic aspects of schools with pro-social, humanitarian values more positively affected the mental health of students and, indeed, the participants’ comments about their own health and development reflected this.

Although the participant’s narratives were mostly concerned with the effect their school communities had had on them, their statements also suggested that their individual personalities traits, sensitivities and personal expectations had significantly affected their ability to thrive and had coloured their unique perceptions

and points of view. The participants' inborn traits may indeed have contributed to their ability to weather the many challenges they described, however, additional research is, as yet, unavailable which explores the many possible expressions of innate predispositions, the personal choices which students make, or other factors which may allow students to thrive in school.

*(i) What general factors affected the participants' mental health?*

Mental health as a concept covers a wide range of aspects which relate to an individual's ability to function in the world and to enjoy their life. Mental health as a state of being is, by definition, experiential, multi-dimensional, and difficult to describe. Therefore, in line with the personal interpretative stance of IPA, the participants were asked to provide their own descriptions of the term.

The participants very seldom mentioned the subjects they studied or specific events in their lives. Instead, the experiences which had best supported their mental health were their relationships, and they described in detail how the nature of these personal relationships had largely determined the quality of their experiences, their growing competencies, their capacity to cope with stress, and their ability to know and value themselves. In particular, the participants described how their sensitive, emotionally responsive and reliable relationships with peers were centrally important for supporting their mental health, comments which echoed the views of Pipher (1994), Levine (2006), and Luxmoore (2010).

Questions about their mental health consistently sparked the participants' views on aspects of their family circumstances which had either supported their personal growth and emotional development or had undermined it. They reported that their successful academic and personal development had depended largely on the quality of their close personal attachments with parents. These statements were reminiscent of the findings of Hardy *et al* (1993), Kliwer *et al* (1996) and Hill & Tyson (2009) who all considered good parental relationships to be necessary for a child's healthy development.



Although each of the participants reported having good relationships with their own parents, they all complained of other parents who expected unreasonably high achievement from their children or who were overly controlling and critical. Their observations reflected the results of studies by Luthar (2013), Yates et al (2008), Luthar & Becker (2002), and Levine (2006), all of whom found that this type of parental behaviour had the potential to erode a young person's internal motivation and damage their sense of agency.

Many of the participants' experiences illustrated the ideas of Winnicott (1971) and Erikson (1973) as well as research by Ainsworth (1989), Pianta et al (2003), Allen (2008), Bibby (2019), and Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) who have all stressed the psychological attachment value of close teacher relationships during adolescence. In particular, their feelings added depth to previous research by Ruus *et al* (2007) which focused on the necessity of sensitive, responsive teacher relationships for the healthy development of student attitudes, physical and psychological wellbeing, and academic success. In particular, the participants made it clear that their intimate bonds with adults influenced their core ability to trust and to reach out to the world, comments which supported previous research by Suldo et al (2008), Galaif et al (2003), Einberg et al (2015), Lin and Yusoff (2013), and Shaunessy and Suldo (2010).

However, based on the evidence from this study, if these important relationships were too invasive or demanded too much compliance, they seemed to compromise the participants' health and wellbeing. The theories of Bibby (2018) and Winnicott, (1958, 1971) as well as studies by Luthar & Becker (2002) show that severe criticism from adults or a lack of respect for a student's psychological vulnerability can erode self-worth and compromise a young person's ability to learn. For the participants, their ability to engage with their learning seemed to depend on whether they felt safe in their environment, ideas which were entirely consistent with the findings of Roesner *et al* (2011) and Eccles & Roesner (2011). Teacher attitudes also had a profound effect on their ability to cope with stress, ideas which again supported the views of Ruus *et al* (2007) and Bibby (2018).

Intense pressure was a constant theme, and the participants described a number of different types of pressure which had significantly impacted their lives. They described the need to comply with educational systems and surrounding social forces which, they said, demanded that they internalise a number of highly stressful, but culturally sanctioned, values and behaviour. When describing these stressors, their examples reflected a number of sociological theories on the effects of 'normalising' socialization processes in schools (Foucault, 1994; Bourdieu, 1996; Ball, 2013, 2015; Chomsky, 2003).

Each participant made comments that their schools had put preeminent emphasis on top grades and Oxbridge entrance as the primary evidence of 'success', and these specific educational goals have also been noted by a number of other researchers who have explored aspirational educational environments (Green et al, 2010; van Zanten, 2015; Savage et al, 2015; Clough & Strycharcsky, 2015; ISC, 2017). Because the participants experienced this 'success' as highly restrictive, five out of six of them said they and their peers had developed a fear of failure, yet to my knowledge, this is the first instance where research has identified this particular student experience.

However, the participants' sensitivity to being shaped by a competitive grading system seemed to reflect much of the previous research on stress in schools (Mayberry & Graham, 2001; McKnight et al, 2002; Suldo et al, 2008; Misra & McKean, 2000; Dwyer & Cummings, 2001; Dusselier et al, 2005; Stoppler & Marks, 2010), and it specifically related to Winnicott's ideas about the damaging psychological effects of too much compliance (Winnicott, 1965; 1971).

The participants spoke of their search for effective coping strategies, such as the use of proactive organizational skills, optimistic thinking, and the processing of feelings within close personal relationships. They also noted a number of negative coping strategies, including transgressing adult rules and using drugs or alcohol to relieve stress. Other researchers have found that these externalizing behaviours are more prevalent in privileged, but stressed, communities of young people than in other student populations (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999; Luthar & Ansary, 2005; Levine, 2006).

The participants all recommended increasing student access to a full range of mental health services. However, they also seemed surprisingly conflicted about their own engagement with their schools' pastoral care systems, including their school counselling. Although they desired more open conversations about emotions, relationships and mental illness, they also equated the need for mental health services with being weak and feeling shamed. Other researchers have found similarly negative attitudes toward counselling (Cooper, 2013, 2015), yet it is interesting to wonder whether the participants' rejection of counselling may reflect specific cultural attitudes toward inadequacy, imperfection, and failure.

Sherman's research (2017) within a wealthy adult community noted her participants' unusual need for privacy and their extreme sensitivity when discussing their status and privilege; attitudes which, she believed, betrayed a culturally constructed self-protection against societal envy. We can see many versions of this attitude in the present study, since four of the participants were highly sensitive to being misunderstood and judged by others because of their wealth or private education. In particular, they blamed public envy for contributing to the invisibility of many of their mental health challenges.

*(ii) How similar were their experiences, given that the participants were educated in different types of independent schools?*

It is striking that all the participants told similar stories about their school experiences regardless of whether they came from a large or small, day or boarding, British, International, or European school. The participants all believed that independent schools had something important in common: they were fee-paying schools which were independent of the state sector and they provided a rigorous, bespoke education with the overall goal of providing entry to a top university.

Under these circumstances, it was perhaps not surprising that, even though Frances' European secondary school was included in this study, she described her experiences in very similar ways to other participants who were educated in Britain. When there were significant differences between the participants' stated experiences, they

seemed to mostly concern the personal qualities of individual teachers, the philosophies and values which shaped their school communities, and the subtle balance between competitive academic rigour and care for the emotional and developmental needs of students.

*(iii) How did the participants situate their experiences within the wider world?*

As previously mentioned, the participants identified their privileged school environments as fundamentally different from state-funded schools. Because of their highly pressured lives, they believed their mental health needs were different from those of other students and they hoped this project would publicise their situation. Now that they were attending university, they looked back on their schools as very small homogeneous communities.

Many of the participants also recognized that their schools were businesses which needed to compete for students in an increasingly competitive global marketplace, and they related some of the defining characteristics of their schools to this economic necessity. Finally, they believed that global competition to gain access to elite universities is escalating, so they worried that future generations of independently educated young people might be less likely to succeed than in the past.

*(iv) How were the participants' experiences similar or different from those of the young people whom I see for psychotherapy?*

Because my interest in conducting this study grew out of my work with clients, and because I was familiar with only a few schools in my immediate area, I was particularly interested in what the participants' stories might say about their experiences in other school communities. As I had expected, many of the participants' statements very closely matched those of my clients: the pressure they felt, the parental and teacher relationships which had helped or harmed them, and the effects their school environments had on their sense of self. Yet the participants

also contributed novel ideas which I had not anticipated, insights which have since helped me to relate better to my clients and their families.

I had known that peer relationships are highly prized by all young people, but I was surprised by the participants' strong emphasis on the enormous power of their close friendships to both heal and protect their mental health. As a result, I now consider social isolation to be one of the most important contributors to mental health problems in young people, and my present goals as a therapist reflect this.

Other results from this project surprised me as well. When my research began, I had not yet become aware of the many mixed messages which the participants described - difficult paradoxes and dilemmas which seemed to stem from the need to engage with, and balance, their personal wellbeing with the demand for academic success.

I was particularly struck by their keen awareness of, and ambivalent feelings toward, the many 'privileges' which their wealth and private education had gifted them. I had expected them to be heedless of their advantaged position in society, but they instead showed a mature social consciousness which was focused on issues of fairness, inclusiveness, and kindness toward others. From the design of this study, there is no way of knowing whether these particular participants were unusually concerned with these issues or whether their sensitivities would also be representative of the attitudes of other independent school students.

An IPA methodology acknowledges that participants construct their stories subjectively according to their own individual agendas. When asked about their mental health, the participants in this study, like my clients, focused primarily on the potentially destructive elements of their school communities. We cannot know from their comments just how ubiquitous these circumstances were; whether they made up the majority of the participants' school experiences, or whether their emphasis on the negative was simply a result of their desire to bring these seldom discussed topics out into the open.

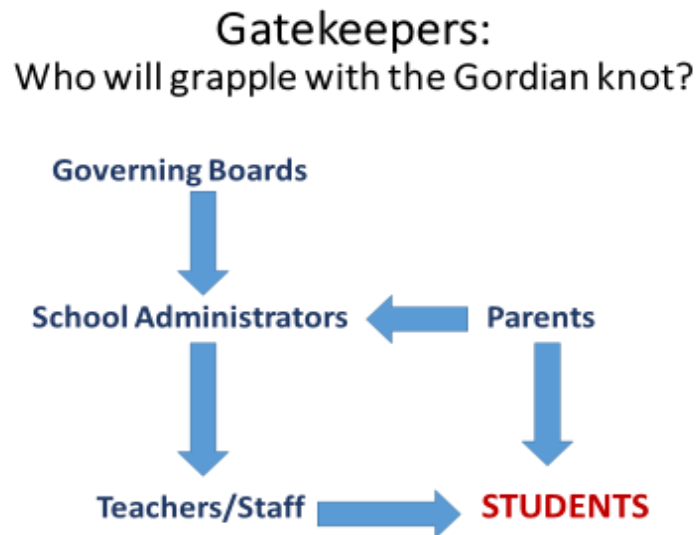
## **8.4 Implications for parents and schools**

### **8.4.1 Emotional wellbeing versus academic wellbeing: the Gordian Knot**

It seems to me that there are no obvious solutions to the tensions created when adolescent developmental needs for nurture and acceptance are juxtaposed with the imperative to excel socially and academically, but the necessity of finding methods for accommodating both aspects of wellbeing is undoubtedly a central finding of this research. I have come to think of this dilemma as a 'Gordian Knot': a system in which, if one tries to untangle the knot simply by pulling, or focusing on, one side of the equation, the knot binds together tighter and blocks progress on both fronts.

I also find the concept of 'gatekeeping' useful when considering the crucial need to consciously 'hold' these two important, but opposing, goals. The following schematic drawing [Figure 9] shows the opportunities which exist in schools for balancing the two types of wellbeing inherent in the Gordian Knot. It maps the hierarchies of engagement which are necessary for protecting students from the confusing, sometimes destructive, tension which can exist between academic excellence and a healthy sensitivity to individual needs. It expresses the need for adult gatekeepers to make minute to minute, flexible decisions which continually 'dance between the two poles'. Figure 10 below illustrates this schematically.

Figure 11: Hierarchy of engagement for finding a balance between two potentially opposing types of wellbeing: emotional health and academic success



As is illustrated above, if a school community is to engage with both mental health issues and the demands of ‘concerted cultivation’, schools need to encourage constructive conversations about the Gordian knot at all levels. In this model, if governing boards have a keen awareness of the often paradoxical need to incorporate both emotional and academic aspects of wellbeing, they can take the opportunity to give their explicit permission for each member of their school community to make the difficult decisions needed to balance them.

If, however, they abdicate this responsibility by electing to support one side over the other, individual administrators must then take up the task of holding, and dealing with, the tensions. If, again, those people fail to engage, teachers must make painful individual choices of whether to ‘nurture’ or ‘demand’ when facing students and parents. Equally, as the results of this study suggest, parents who understandably desire both types of wellbeing for their children, are also caught in this confusing bind, so they must become aware of, and assume responsibility for, how they respond.

Finally, if the adults in a school community cannot actively engage in shaping the ethos of that environment because they are unconscious of the conflicting goals they serve, it is the young people themselves who must attempt to balance their own academic and mental health needs when they are undoubtedly the individuals least likely to be capable of doing so.

In my experience, independent schools wish, above all, to educate young people extremely well, and these institutions shape their pedagogical systems very carefully in order to offer students the best possible chance to excel. Unsurprisingly, fee-paying independent schools have evolved to have the best facilities, provide the most 'value-added' activities, and produce the best exam results when compared to other types of schools.

All these systems are put in place to help young people to be 'the best they can be', but, as the results of this research imply, they may also sometimes compromise the mental health of their young students (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1999; Bibby, 2018). Schools take on a difficult struggle when they attempt to reconcile the emotional and developmental needs of young people with the requirement that they excel academically. Yet it is only by identifying and engaging with the incompatibility of these two aspects of wellbeing that concerned adults will truly be able to 'take care of the whole child'.

#### **8.4.2 Pastoral care**

I was pleased that the participants in this study were willing to seek emotional support from the adults they knew and trusted, but the participants still wished these adults had been more aware of mental health issues so they could talk more freely about emotions and relationships. Given the central place these adults typically hold in student's lives, it seems important that parents and schools also recognise the mental health needs of teachers. In addition, if pastoral care networks, such as house parents or tutors, are used to support students, the quality of their care will depend on how psychologically mature these adults are, as well as the type of training they



receive which will allow them to take on, and succeed in, the challenge (Dept for Ed, 2016).

The wonderful common sense of young people themselves so often goes unrecognised, yet the participants in this study implored us to listen to their views about mental health and consult with them about their care. Although the results of this IPA study are not strictly generalizable, their value is in making us stop for a moment to carefully consider what these individual young people had to say. The participants were obviously highly capable and motivated students, yet they have told us that the academic pressures in school, and the constant demands for high achievement, caused them considerable distress. It follows then that schools wishing to reduce anxiety in students must find creative ways to support their self-esteem, feelings of efficacy, and emotional intelligence, while giving serious thought to limiting the pressures their systems place on students.

Having time to develop deep friendships seemed an essential priority for the participants, but the need to connect interpersonally seemed to be given a low priority by schools within their highly time-pressured lives. Studies such as mine suggest that schools should consider putting more time aside for these valuable relationships and students should also be offered some privacy in which to explore them.

Unfortunately, recent changes to government rules on child safeguarding may be making this less likely. Ofsted (2018) have recommended that schools increase their vigilance as a way of minimising risk to students. I believe it is likely that this attitude has increased the anxieties of parents and teachers, making them even more reluctant to leave young people to their own devices. Finding the right balance between safety and privacy will continue to be a major challenge, yet it is evident from the participants' comments that too much vigilance and too much control can indeed be problematic.

Whereas the competition in schools, even when quite intense, is not necessarily destructive, the participants saw a need to balance the intensity of competition with much more communal ways of thinking. I feel confident that schools can indeed find

creative methods to bolster a cohesive sense of community and promote inclusivity, perhaps by providing opportunities for non-competitive team-building activities which specifically decrease individualism and increase a sense of group identity.

Fortunately, the participants have given us useful guidelines about what they think these new practices should include. Informal and inclusive team sports were mentioned by Suki as an obvious example, but the rest of the participants also suggested changing the formal ethos of their classroom settings by, for example, by sitting on the floor, studying outdoors, and encouraging organised, but informal, student-led discussions. Overall, the participants wished for a greater say in how their schools were run and the decisions which were made on their behalf.

Finally, if schools are to make use of psychological knowledge in order to address the mental health of young people, I am confident that counselling professionals will be able to contribute, but only if they are integrated into the fabric of school life, with psychoeducational support consequently made available to all levels of these communities. It is my belief that school environments are ripe for this sort of change since the steadily rising levels of emotional distress in students are motivating parents and administrators to search for new insights and solutions. As a result, pastoral care professionals of all kinds have a growing opportunity to develop better care for all school-aged children, whether or not they are privileged. [See Appendix 16 for my personal reflections on why we may not listen to the distress in young people.]

### **8.5 Implications for school counsellors**

As stated previously, the participants in this study were highly ambivalent about accessing school counselling, so it follows that counsellors who want to offer their services should be more consciously aware of these sensitivities, particularly in independent schools where a high level of personal privacy may be the cultural norm and a strong image of success is valued. In my experience, school counsellors generally respond to the privacy concerns of young people by offering them individual therapy within the confidential spaces of their consulting rooms, and most

counsellors in independent schools have been trained according to theoretical models which indeed favour this one-to-one therapy (Rogers, 1961; Clarkson, 1995; Cooper, 2013).

However, for teachers and administrators, school policies which require the sharing of personal information about students are now standard practice. As a result, schools may have difficulty understanding one-to-one counsellors' concerns about the need for client confidentiality. These new policies have recently reduced the level of privacy which school counsellors can offer students, possibly making young people feel even less confident about asking for help.

Under these circumstances perhaps more holistic, systemic forms of therapy might be more appropriate, since systemic ideas consider an individual's thoughts and behaviour to be the products of the communication between all of a community's parts (Minuchin, 1974). As such, the causes of problems are deemed to be multi-dimensional and circular rather than discrete (Penn, 1982), so their resolutions are the responsibility of the entire system rather than of just one individual.

Counsellors who are familiar with systemic ideas have the opportunity to bring together the personal explorations of students with equally important conversations with parents, teachers, and friends. Because these conversations are co-created, visible and active, they may counter the self-protective and isolating cultural imperatives in some independent school communities. But, before setting up these types of services, it is my belief that counsellors should carefully investigate a school's willingness to develop a holistic wellbeing programme by assessing the attitudes of stakeholders at all levels.

As difficult as this may sometimes be, the ultimate challenge for a counsellor is to develop the courage to step out of the shadows and ask for honest conversations with teachers, parents, and administrators, taking every opportunity to promote their expertise while also understanding, and working within, the complicated systemic processes around them. I believe it will be especially important then for counsellors to understand the special nature of privileged independent schools so

they are able to tailor their services to fit these special environments (Kirkbride, 2017; 2018).

### **8.5.1 Impediments to change**

There are a number of issues which I believe limit the existence of counselling services in independent schools. The effective provision of mental health services is undoubtedly economically costly, so boards of governors may be ambivalent about commissioning them. At the moment, counsellors in schools are often peripatetic professionals who are recruited from the private sector to see a small number of students (Cooper, 2013). As a result of this limited provision, it is highly unlikely that counsellors will be able to contribute to whole-school, psychologically oriented programmes.

Also, as tangential members of a school community, counsellors can be mistrusted as outsiders, and marginalised when they are unconsciously co-opted as containers for the psychological problems, or the 'dark side', of a school community (Young-Eisendrath & Dawson, 1997). The possibility that educational systems which are put in place to help students might also hurt them is a powerfully subversive message which can easily be relegated to the unconscious underground of a counsellor's office.

Realistically, counsellors themselves are the most likely people within a school community to recognise this, so they must process their feelings with the help of clinical supervisors, then actively engage with the forces which isolate them by developing clear strategies which promote their professional positions. While counselling services in independent schools are not yet universally existent (Cooper, 2013), there is undoubtedly an enormous opportunity to decide what kinds of counselling these schools wish to provide, who should do it, and who will be allowed to access it.

## **8.6 Implications for the provision of effective therapy**

The results of this study suggest that all school counsellors, regardless of their particular counselling methods or theoretical orientation (Rogers, 1961; Freud, 1931; Minuchin, 1974; Beck, 1975), should offer educationally privileged young people the chance to recognise and cope with the unique aspects of the elite culture in which they live (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Cooper, 2013). These aspects may include the pressures and ambivalences they feel, the mixed messages they have internalised and the confusion or damage they may feel as a result. This 'consciousness raising' (BACP, 2019) should also contextualise their experiences of being 'privileged', as well as identifying the personal elements of their histories and family circumstances which can create an intense pressure to succeed. As Foucault (1994) states, it is only in this way that privileged youths will be able to choose their personal positions in relation to the cultural narratives which surround them while reconciling some of the dilemmas they face internally and externally.

## **8.7 Implications for the psychotherapy profession**

The young people who have contributed their personal observations here have had many valuable things to say about elements of their lives which may differentiate them from their less privileged peers. Throughout this methodologically pluralistic project, I have alternated my focus between the personal experiences of individual participants and what other research tells us about the wider sociocultural patterns inherent in privileged families and elite schools. On the global stage, society is moving inexorably toward increasing academic competition and socio-economic inequality. As a result, the psychotherapy profession has a vitally important part to play in engaging with issues around privilege (Reeves, 2015; Cooper, 2015; BACP, 2019).

There is no doubt we are seeing an unprecedented increase in serious symptoms of mental distress amongst all British young people, yet the specific solutions we seek are wholly dependent on where we choose to locate the causes of this situation: either within the young people themselves, or within the social situations around

them which determine the day to day rhythms of their lives. Training in mental toughness and 'soft skills' such as resilience, mindfulness, control, and commitment undoubtedly have a valuable part to play in helping young people to thrive individually but, if psychological professionals wish to also reduce the pressure on all young people, we must first incorporate knowledge of the social processes involved into our therapeutic models and become much more vocal about the public need to change potentially harmful attitudes and practices (BACP, 2019).

The results of this study, as well as my experiences as a psychotherapist, have led me to believe that students within fee-paying, independent schools can sometimes suffer significant psychological damage when they are pressured by overly demanding academic and social standards, by a lack of time to rest, and by having to conform to rigid images of success. Yet it is likely that my participants have presented a particularly extreme version of what is happening to all young adolescents in Britain today as parents and schools throughout Britain pressure students to compete for university places and jobs within a global marketplace. In advocating for privileged youths, and in searching for a deeper understanding of the interpersonal and social forces which affect their mental health within independent schools, it is my hope that young people at all levels of society will benefit.

## **8.8 Limitations of this research**

There are many important issues which will inevitably limit the usefulness of this piece of research:

1. Many of my interview questions asked the participants about their experiences with teachers, parents and peers in school and perhaps this unnecessarily restricted the type of responses I received. On reflection, this may have been an example of my preconceived notions influencing my interactions with participants. If so, my interest in specific topics may have restricted the participants' freedom to move their stories in whatever direction they wished. It is difficult to know whether their comments, about the behaviour and feelings of others, were examples of empathy, were a

psychological defence against their own emotionally painful experiences or were simply a response to my stated interest in those topics.

2. The provision of confidentiality is of prime importance for keeping participants safe, particularly when a sample size is small. Whereas I believe my participants will be able to identify themselves in the statements made here, my concern is that others who know them might recognise their contributions. I have taken pains to obscure any details which might identify them and, since my method of contacting participants was through friends and family who knew them, I hope my efforts were sufficient.
3. As second-year undergraduates, the participants had only left school two years previously, yet their recollections as 20-year-old adults may not have represented their previous experiences as younger adolescents. Time changes memories, whether consciously or unconsciously, and recollections can lose their definition when they represent only selective aspects of personal histories rather than the immediacy of present experience.
4. I found, in many ways, what I thought I might find, and this raises questions as to why. I was aware throughout the interviews that I held many of the same opinions as the participants. My own feelings may have magnified theirs, either during the interviews or during the analysis. It is possible, given my own personal expectations, that I unduly influenced the participants to tell my story rather than theirs. Unfortunately, I have no way of knowing this, but I must take full responsibility for my interpretations of the participants' stories and for the conclusions which I alone have made.
5. Instead of IPA's traditionally singular focus, my criteria for choosing study participants required two things: a history of independent secondary school and matriculation at a top-echelon British university. These conditions may have unduly narrowed my explorations and made the results less useful and more difficult to interpret. If my interest was in exploring student experiences

in independent schools, it might have been better, with hindsight, to have required only that the participants had attended independent schools.

6. Because the participants came from very different backgrounds and cultures, it could also be said that they were not a sufficiently similar group to legitimise the use of an IPA methodology, especially since the ultimate validity and strength of this form of inquiry depends on the participants having an important experience in common. Since my inclusion criteria required only that participants had experienced their secondary schooling at a fee-paying, independent school, and that they presently attended a top-ranked British university, the fact that their lives diverged so much in other ways may have made them too dissimilar to justify grouping them together. For example, although all the participants spoke English, not all of them were British. Their schools were of considerably different sizes, and some were identified as 'International' rather than 'British'. Although IPA does not produce strictly generalisable results, these differences may have further reduced the usefulness of any findings.
7. Given their widely diverging backgrounds, the small number of participants in this study may limit the usefulness of any results. While an IPA study inevitably sacrifices generalisability in favour of achieving more depth, a slightly larger sample may have shown other significant similarities and differences between participants which would have illuminated other hidden veins of data. Having said this, my experiences with privileged young people, together with the discovery of a remarkable degree of convergence between the participants and those of my clients, hints at something which is still only partly visible, but crucially important. My hope is that this tantalising evidence of commonality, although limited, will encourage other researchers to look for further opportunities to conduct more detailed research.
8. Whereas the similarities in the participants' statements are striking, and this may indeed point to something important about their schooling, many crucial



questions remain. The interviews were only a short moment in time and, as such, it was impossible to explore other important variables in their lives which could have contributed to the final results.

9. Although the participants presumably volunteered because of their interest in communicating something about their mental health, it is interesting to consider why only one man offered to take part in the study. I found myself reflecting on the differing relational styles of the young men with whom I have worked, their general reluctance to engage in introspection, and the shame they can feel when they connect with their vulnerability. It is therefore highly probable that, having interviewed mostly young women, the results are skewed in favour of female points of view. However, this may inadvertently provide a good measure of reliability when the present research's value to young women is considered. Many of the statistics on the mental health of young people in Britain point to the differences in mental health of girls relative to boys (Lessof et al, 2016; Sweeting & West, 2003). The participants in this study also stated their belief that men and women deal differently with their problems. Having said this, I believe it is not entirely obvious which of the participants is male, so perhaps the differences are not as large as one might have expected.
  
10. The participants were recruited with the help of other psychological professionals who have specialist knowledge about mental health issues. They may therefore have identified potential participants according to their own personal or professional biases by contacting only those who displayed particular qualities or held opinions which reflected their own. The participants may have been closely associated with these adults, which might have exposed them to more analytical or in-depth psychological ideas than their peers. Yet it is impossible to know whether specialist knowledge would have made a significant difference to their attitudes. It seems likely that these undergraduates were approached because they had more of an interest in mental health issues than their peers and, perhaps, a greater ability to

communicate their ideas. They may have had histories of more personal problems, or they may have simply been more aware of their own mental health. Perhaps they were more empathic or observant than other young people, and these possibilities should be taken into account when judging the value of this study.

11. My practical attempts to learn something useful as a therapist for distressed young people may have had an effect on my ability to remain phenomenologically open to the more positive experiences of these young people. This may also have influenced the recommendations I make for parents, schools, counsellors, and for my profession, perhaps making more sweeping generalisations than are justified by the results of this study. Again, I claim my interpretive authority and take responsibility for my personal conclusions.

12. Although therapy has much in common with research, especially when it is phenomenologically based, and the ethical focus of both roles, whether caring for a client or a participant, is essentially the same, I have also experienced these two roles as very different and, at times, incompatible. The type of therapy I practice offers a longer time frame in which to get to know a client by building a brick-by-brick interpersonal bridge. In contrast, the interviews engaged in here required only a short interaction which I found frustratingly limited. I am aware that my participants embodied much more as individuals than I was able to see or experience during our short encounters. Their past histories and present lives informed their opinions in ways I will never know, and the majority of their thoughts, feelings and behaviour were closed to me, just as mine were to them.

### **8.10. Recommendations for further research**

When searching through the existing research literature, we very rarely hear the voices of young people themselves when they speak of their school experiences: what innate personality traits they need in order to succeed, how they learn to be resilient, how they develop their own internal motivations and goals, and how they learn to care for themselves. This study has worked toward filling this vacuum by phenomenologically attending to, and interpreting, the personal comments of a group of former secondary school students as they remembered their mental health experiences in their independent schools. In particular, this study illuminates some of the hidden pressures which influence this cultural subgroup of young people as well as the gratitude, anxiety and ambivalence they felt. The study contributes one small step toward a better understanding by allowing us to contemplate how their lives felt to them, then the exploration of sociological theory and research has added a further view of some specific socialisation processes which may have influenced them. I hope others will use my contribution as a springboard for further research in this area.

#### *How do young people experience 'privilege'?*

All the participants identified themselves as highly privileged and, although the concept of privilege is admittedly nebulous, I have nevertheless used it to inform both my choice of study population and the questions I asked the participants. Their personal definitions of the term 'privilege' have further explained the nature of this complex social phenomenon by giving it much needed shape and colour. Still, much more work remains to be done in this area. We must learn how these young people conceptualise or experience 'privilege' within their school environments and within other types of privileged spaces, and how being privileged affects their sense of self and behaviour.

*Are young people in fee-paying independent schools more psychologically distressed than those in other types of schools?*

Since an IPA study focuses on the experiences of its participants as individuals, the results cannot be generalised to any others. Therefore, at this point in time, we have no way of knowing the extent of the distress I have reported here. Of course, this topic will remain a mystery until schools and parents invite researchers into their midst. With the current crisis in mental health facing all young people today, and with the push to get counsellors into all schools, psychotherapeutic professionals based in schools will likely have a growing opportunity to gather valuable data about the uses and effects of mental health services, the mental health experiences and attitudes of different types of student populations, and the socialisation processes which affect them.

*What are the views of other stakeholders?*

Extensive interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators within elite educational environments will become a necessity if we are to achieve the depth of understanding which will allow us to help students. Providing effective therapy for students within independent schools will undoubtedly be valuable, but we must also tackle some of the more problematic relational and environmental factors which surround them. In order to accomplish this, we will need to study the needs and attitudes of other stakeholders such as parents, teachers and administrators.

For example, it will be important to learn how the personal backgrounds of parents affect their choice of schools, the type of education they want for their children, and their attitudes toward their children's achievements. Clark (2009) provided a tantalising example of a study of this sort when she examined how specific parental histories, and their understanding of what makes a 'good education', can affect a child's academic, extracurricular, and sporting choices (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014). Many more studies like this one are needed.

*What personal and environmental variables allow some students to thrive within academically pressurised schools while others do not?*

It is likely that, as the competition for top grades within and between independent schools intensifies, the academic and social pressures on their students will increase. As schools search for dependable methods of supporting the development of effective coping strategies, researchers must start to identify the myriad reasons why some young people seem naturally able to cope while others founder, and schools must be willing to use this research to support students' academic, emotional, and developmental needs.

### **8.11 Conclusions**

This research has investigated the experiences of former students who received a fee-paying, independent school education. Although all the participants were academically successful students, they spoke of their secondary school experiences with a mixture of gratitude, anger, and anxiety. Their elite schools had given them valuable opportunities to excel academically and had provided them with the cultural capital to win places at top-ranked universities, but when they were asked about their mental health experiences and those of their peers, they recalled the emotional consequences of their over-busy schedules and of their experiences of overly demanding parents and teachers. Although they were enormously grateful for their many advantages, they were also ambivalent about the personal price they had had to pay for their privileged education.

Of particular note was the participants' belief that neither they nor their peers would have used counselling services to support their mental health while they were in school. Instead, other adults, such as teachers and tutors, had been informally enlisted as pastoral supports, but only if those adults were psychologically healthy themselves and could be trusted to understand a students' mental health needs. Sociologists have identified the special privacy concerns of 'elite' populations, as well as the social proscription against disclosing vulnerability in environments which promote images of success, and their research places the experiences of these young people within a wider socio-cultural perspective.

This has important implications for the future of school counselling in privileged environments such as independent schools, where specific social imperatives may discourage students from asking for emotional help. As questions mount about the deteriorating mental health of young people, academically rigorous schools must seek methods of reducing the stress levels of their students. Furthermore, as schools attempt to balance the two opposite forms of wellbeing – the need for academic success and the need for nurture – they will have a valuable opportunity to redesign all aspects of their pastoral care to include a full range of mental health services for their students and teachers. Parents must also play their part in understanding the

many damaging forms of pressure their children experience and the possible consequences of leaving them to cope alone.

Finally, the psychotherapy profession must begin to see these young people, who are at the pinnacle of achievement-oriented education, as a particularly 'at risk' group who experience multiple stresses which threaten their mental health. I encourage psychological professionals to engage in conversations with students, parents, school administrators, and the wider world about the global effects of competitive educational strategies on all secondary school and university students.

## **CHAPTER NINE: PRODUCTS**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This final chapter documents the products which I created as a result of my doctoral research, as well as some of my plans for the future. The creation of a conference organisation, 'Counselling for Young People from Privileged Environments' (CYPPE), is my main doctoral product. It is a vibrant interactive space in which psychological and educational professionals can share ideas in order to improve school environments and facilitate better mental health services for students. I will recount its evolution below through the list of topics which have been presented at the annual conferences during the five years of its existence. I also give examples of my experiences as a presenter of parent and teacher workshops and at professional conferences. All of these experiences have given me opportunities to validate the results of this study and disseminate its findings.

### **9.2 'Counselling for Young People from Privileged Environments' (CYPPE): Creating a community of mental health professionals**

CYPPE was initiated during the third year of my doctoral project. There were several reasons why I created an organisation which could explore the experiences and emotional needs of adolescents in independent schools. First, I believe the lives of these youths are generally less visible than those of state-educated students. Second, public conversations about young people in general seem to miss so many of the important factors which influence the behaviour and mental health of privileged young people, so an annual conference which would investigate their unique experiences in much more depth seemed a timely and important endeavour.

In addition, my experience had taught me that professionals who provide mental health services to privileged young people, whether in schools or private practice, often do so in isolation, so they are unaware of how their own insights, personal experiences, and skills reflect those of other colleagues. I hoped they might therefore be interested in interacting with other professionals like themselves. I also wished to



build relationships with other concerned professionals who could engage creatively with my ideas, and I sought the wisdom of other colleagues who could teach me what they had learned. With these goals in mind, I organised my first annual conference for CYPPE in 2016. I made initial contact with potential delegates by contacting school counsellors at academically successful independent schools and, although I had no idea what level of interest there might be in a conference of this sort, the response was wonderfully enthusiastic.

The conference has since occurred yearly in order to gradually identify and explore some of the special challenges which privileged young people face. I had originally made contact only with school counsellors, but eventually other concerned professionals – psychotherapists, teachers, school administrators, psychiatrists, house parents, psychologists, and nurses – became well-represented amongst the participants. The conference has therefore been influenced by a wide variety of views and concerns, with all stakeholders becoming fully engaged in shaping the future of CYPPE. As a result, the name of the organisation has recently been changed from ‘Counselling for Young People from Privileged Environments’ to ‘Care for Young People from Privileged Environments’.

The inaugural CYPPE conference then served to map out my initial thoughts and invite others to engage with them. Each subsequent year, as the themes which resulted from my study took shape, I used these topics to organise the next year’s conference agenda. By 2018, the conferences were entirely structured in response to my results. I presented select portions of my thesis and expert presenters were then chosen in order to engage with, and add their insights to, these specific issues. I now intend to hold at least one conference per year for the foreseeable future.

The purpose of the CYPPE conference organisation is seven-fold:

*1 - Countering the isolation which mental health professionals often feel within school organisations:* The conferences have helped delegates to connect with each other and given them the opportunity to share their own experiences within a collaborative group of like-minded professionals.

*2 - Providing education about what we know and don't know about privileged young people:* Presentations about relevant research and open discussions with delegates have attempted to map the current difficulties which privileged young people have, while also exploring the possible psychological, socio-economic, and cultural factors which may contribute to their experiences.

*3 - Seeking the wisdom of delegates:* The conference participants have pooled their knowledge based on their different experiences and expertise (as teachers, administrators, counsellors, etc.), and have 'brainstormed' possible practical activities and therapeutic interventions which may help privileged young people.

*4 - Bringing together the research world and the world of professional experience:* Motivating the delegates to actively use the wealth of published research, while also encouraging them to conduct their own research in this area.

*5 - Getting the word out:* Motivating professionals, both inside and outside of schools, to engage with their institutions and the general public in order to examine the relevant issues and enlist others in seeking solutions.

*6 - Informing my own research:* The opportunity to ask questions of delegates, and to communicate my own research findings, has allowed me to test my assumptions while gathering corroborative evidence for my ideas and expanding my thinking. My active engagement in all aspects of the conferences, before, during, and after they take place has been a crucial tool for investigating the concerns of stakeholders and maintaining my ethical stance within my research project.

*7 - Creation of training resources:* Approximately half of the delegates return to the conference every year in order to develop their own practical resources for counsellors, parents, teachers, and administrators.

### **9.2.1 Responding to the evolution of CYPPE**

When first I conceived of an annual conference, I had hoped that the development of CYPPE would be primarily a creative and collaborative effort. So, although I organised presentation topics in line with the results of my own research, I also enlisted independent speakers each year to contribute their own ideas. In addition, the delegates stated their own interests, and these determined some of the next year's focus. As a result, the conferences have evolved year to year as we have explored a wide variety of issues around privilege in ever finer detail. Although the initial conference covered an almost random assortment of ideas, the foci of subsequent conferences have become increasingly concerned with 'educational' privilege in fee-paying, independent schools.

### **9.3 CYPPE presentations 2016-2020**

#### **9.3.1 The Experiences of Young People in Privileged Schools (2016)**

As the creator of CYPPE, I was responsible for the presentations during its initial 2016 conference, so these were necessarily shaped by the early stages of my doctoral research. I presented what I had found about the current research on young people from privileged environments and attempted to delineate what I understood to be the social, cultural, economic, and historical variables which might define them as 'privileged'. My initial intuitions that these young people can be affected by surrounding cultural processes which are different from other groups, and that they possibly suffer specific types of psychological distress as a result, was generally supported by the delegates, who also added their own observations to mine. The possible consequences of parental and academic pressure during adolescence were tentatively discussed, as was the need to balance the productivity of school with the building of relationships. Since I was also attempting, at this point, to make connections with schools who could host my initial school-based Action Research inquiry, I enlisted the delegates to introduce me to their administrators.

#### **9.3.2 The Experiences of Parents in Privileged Schools (2016)**

The second presentation in this inaugural series investigated aspects of the relationship between economically successful parents and their children. I introduced ideas around the transfer of economic, social, and cultural capital, while also addressing some small, but interesting, studies on the parental behaviour of upper-middle and upper-class parents. I then addressed the phenomenon of 'helicopter parenting' and presented my ideas about the changes in society which are possibly fuelling anxiety in parents. I also began to wonder about the role of mothers in helping their children to succeed. By presenting my own ideas on parents, I was primarily interested in eliciting the reactions of delegates and recording what they could tell me of their experiences.

### **9.3.3 The Experiences of Schools: Teachers and Administrators (2016)**

The third presentation in this series looked at the nature of 'elite' schools and some of the socialisation processes noticed by previous researchers. I then outlined some of the challenges which I believed schools might face in 'caring for the whole child' while also being true to their competitive academic and business goals. I noted some of the reasons why schools might have no awareness of, or be defensive about, students who are emotionally distressed, and I quoted some of the important conversations I had had with administrators and teachers who denied that their school environments had any negative effects on students. The response from the delegates overwhelmingly validated my assumptions and I was left feeling that I was definitely on the right track.

Even though this was only the third year of my doctoral journey, I developed, and presented the concept of the Gordian Knot in order to explain the paradoxical relationship between academic wellbeing and developmental wellbeing, and had identified the crucial necessity for 'gatekeepers' in schools to engage with these opposing student needs. [See section 8.4.1]

### **9.3.4 Are Privileged Young People Really at Risk? (2017)**

During this presentation, I continued the previous year's explorations by delving further into the research literature in order to show what we know and do not know about the mental health of privileged young people. The processes of socialisation that underlie elite education and family organisation were more specifically outlined, and delegates had the opportunity to discuss the implications (See Appendix 13).

### **9.3.5 Superstar Dads (2017)**

Because of my interest in the relationship between fathers and sons, I asked a colleague who had extensive experience in providing therapy for young men to present on the consequences of having a highly successful father. The presentation

covered a number of topics which we subsequently explored, including: what do young men need from their fathers, and how does a privileged lifestyle help or hinder this crucial emotional attachment?

### **9.3.6 Experiences at Boarding Schools: Are They Always Privileged? (2017)**

Many independent schools incorporate boarding programmes which inevitably influence both their pastoral care systems and the felt nature of their school communities. Two speakers, a 'boarding school survivor' and a school counsellor with experience working in several boarding schools, discussed the emotional legacy of students living away from home within an institutional setting. Both presenters focused on the isolation which counsellors sometimes experience when they attempt to provide effective psychological support to students within these kinds of settings.

### **9.3.7 Teaching Mindfulness: Is it Welcome? (2017)**

The speaker for this presentation outlined her teaching methods for mindfulness and resilience courses in schools. She shared her experiences working with large groups of students and what she had learned about students' and schools' attitudes to personal development. The discussion encompassed both the need to help students with their personal resilience while also considering what processes might need to be changed in schools in order to make them less stressful environments for learning.

### **9.3.8 Neurobiological and Developmental Perspectives on the Meaning, Experience and Impact of 'Privilege' on Adolescent Lives (2018)**

The participants in my study spoke of the very high levels of stress within their school lives. The specific neurobiology of adolescence is arguably one of the most important

contributors to the emotional volatility of young people and their subsequent sensitivity to stress. In an attempt to tease apart typical adolescent development from some of the additional effects of a privileged school environment, I chose the speaker for this presentation because he was a paediatrician, child and adolescent psychiatrist, mindfulness teacher, and yoga instructor who had a wealth of experience with many different populations of young people, ranging from refugees to highly privileged youths. During his lecture, he explored the potential advantages and disadvantages afforded by various privileges through the lens of neurobiological and psychosocial development by:

- Summarising the critical developmental changes in the brains and minds of adolescents and how these create both opportunities and vulnerabilities for their ongoing lives;
- Considering the various meanings of 'privilege' within this developmental framework and, more specifically, how these meanings can shape the future lives of privileged youths;
- Highlighting the ethical, educational and therapeutic issues arising from our work with adolescents across a spectrum of privileged conditions and environments;
- Identifying the key areas of understanding while encouraging more research to develop this emerging field so that service providers, young people, and their families can benefit.

### **9.3.9 Economically Privileged Parents and Issues of Money Exchange in Private Education (2018)**

One of the defining features of independent schools is the requirement that parents pay for their child's education. This presentation took the form of a conversation, in which a colleague and I discussed the many consequences of money exchange between parents and independent schools, as well as what children learn about money from their parents. My colleague spoke about her own life as a child of wealthy parents, as well as her experiences as a school counsellor in a private secondary school. The delegates then discussed their experiences of money

exchange between parents and external mental health services, such as private practice counselling.

### **9.3.10 The Acquisition of Privileged Identity in English Independent Schools: Boys (2018)**

This session was presented by a sociologist and senior teacher who had studied four elite, single-sex boarding schools: a military school, a religious school, an experimental 'progressive' school, and a comprehensive school. She covered a wide variety of subjects which resulted in a lively discussion amongst the delegates:

- Patterns of peer and social interactions;
- The boys' perceptions of school and family expectations;
- The boys' emotional lives, including the difficulties and conflicts they said they experienced;
- How each school's socialisation processes had shaped the individual expression of their identities;
- How the boys reacted to the totally enveloping environments of their boarding programmes;
- How the use of school curricula expressed social class and gender;
- What motivations the boys showed toward their learning and their future careers;
- How they used the 'cultural capital' they acquired as a result of attending elite institutions.

### **9.3.11 The Acquisition of Privileged Identity in English Independent Schools: Girls (2018)**

During this talk, I presented an overview of some current sociological research into girls' schools and the pressures and mixed messages which young women experience, especially in relation to feminist ideology. I explored the nature of single-sex schools and theorised about the effects of gender identity processes within co-educational environments.



### **9.3.12 How Can Boarding Schools Support the Psychological Needs of Young People? (2018)**

Even though none of the research participants in my doctoral project were enrolled in boarding programmes themselves, some chose to comment on the effects of boarding on other students and these views were presented and discussed. Since boarding schools are becoming more popular than ever in Britain, CYPPE delegates had the chance to explore how boarding schools might minimise possible damage to young people and, instead, maximise their healthy growth and development. Following this theme, the speaker for this session was a Deputy Housemaster in a prestigious public school, who was also the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead. He shared his thoughts on the difficulties of dovetailing his two very different roles; one which was concerned with personal development and attachment needs, while the other focused on discipline and minimising risk. He spoke of his school's evolving use of psychological insights and the emotional and relational supports which are put in place for the young men in his boarding programme.

### **9.3.13 Workshops for conference delegates (2018)**

In response to feedback from delegates, this third conference included two workshops which allowed us to consider how our increasing knowledge about the mental health of 'privileged' young people could be used more practically to shape both school environments and psychotherapeutic interventions. Comments made by delegates about students, parents, and schools can be found in Appendix 14.

### **9.3.14 Discussion day (2019)**

Following on from the wonderfully creative and collaborative discussions during the previous year's conference, a group of interested participants from many different professions (teachers, school counsellors, house parents, school administrators and

parents) came together to discuss the consequences of privileged education in much more depth. Those who attended were asked first to consider the emotional and relational needs of young people, then to reflect on the familial, academic and family pressures which privileged students may face.

As part of this discussion, I again presented what I had learned from my doctoral project as a way of orienting the discussion, then we considered the possible reasons why independent schools might be slow to recognise and act on emerging psychological knowledge, even though these insights are becoming ever more clear and ubiquitous. Finally, participants were helped to use the information we had outlined to identify and to plan a variety of practical interventions or personal projects which would advocate for change in each of their unique environments.

#### **9.3.15 Influencing Future Generations of Privileged Young People (2019)**

During the fourth annual conference, the first presenter was a school counsellor with many years of experience in health education and the running of discussion groups for students at a prestigious British private school. She had conducted parenting courses and peer mentoring programmes for many years which allowed young people to help their fellow students. She offered insights into how she created these innovative programmes, the difficulties she encountered which related to her 'privileged' environment, and how she overcame them. The presenter's anecdotal descriptions of her students' thoughts echoed many of the comments from my research participants, and her musings on the nature of 'privilege' at her school, and its effects, were particularly relevant to many of my findings.

#### **9.3.16 Psychological Aspects of Teaching in a Privileged School (2019)**

One of the most significant themes from my research was the importance of good student-teacher relationships. In response to this, I enlisted a former teacher and

head of science at an international school to present examples from his own personal experiences while using some of Donald Winnicott's key theories of child development to explain what happens when teachers and students interact in the classroom. He then explored how teachers might identify and respond to young people with mental health challenges.

### **9.3.17 Opulent Neglect (2019)**

During my research, several participants had said that students were sometimes neglected because parents were either too busy to respond or they were blinded by specific cultural pressures which were 'unhealthy'. In this presentation, a social worker and child protection officer with many years of experience in safeguarding children within privileged communities presented her ideas on why the nature of neglect or abuse is often different in privileged populations and why it can remain undetected. She gave advice on how and when social services should be contacted, then explained how children, parents and schools are supported by her service when abuse or neglect is reported.

### **9.3.18 CYPPE conference (2020)**

The 2020 CYPPE conference was originally planned for October 2020 but, because of the global Covid-19 pandemic, it will now take place at a later date. It will be entitled, 'The Image of Success in Independent Schools: Learning to becoming the right kind of person'. I intend to detail the results from a select portion of my doctoral research, showing what each of my study participants said about their independent school's image of 'success', how their schools shaped them to conform to this image, and how the social processes involved affected them personally.

Our second presenter will explore cultural images of 'the right kind of body' by sharing her professional insights into the connection between 'privileged status' and

‘personal presentation’. As a self-proclaimed ‘body image activist’, she has collaborated with the Department of Education, the National Health Service, and mental health charities, and has many years of experience engaging with all types of students in a wide variety of independent and state schools.

Finally, a university admissions officer will discuss what types of students the top tier institutions are looking for and what she believes to be a successful strategy for an application to these universities. In particular, she will focus on the rigours and intangible qualities of ‘image presentation’ in contrast to the usual ideas of academic and extracurricular success.

#### **9.4 CYPPE ethical issues**

When I first conceived of an annual conference as a means of exploring issues of privilege in the lives of young people, its most important aim was to offer an opportunity for delegates to share their thoughts. But I also wished to post as much of the proceedings online as possible so that the greatest number of professionals could benefit. I hoped that detailed knowledge of the topics and discussions would motivate others to attend conferences in person. Published data in the way could also inform the research of other psychologists and sociologists. However, this demanded that a clear ethical policy be developed in order to provide for the presenters’ and delegates’ safety.

As a result, all presenters from the CYPPE conferences were given editorial control over their filmed lectures or any discussion transcripts which pertained to their topic. Although this eventually necessitated removing some fascinating, but controversial, aspects of the discussions, it ensured their private and professional privacy.

Yet offering the same degree of personal permission to each and every delegate who participated was not logistically possible. Instead, the delegates were informed before and during the conferences that my intention was to publish the presentations and discussions on the internet and that, if they chose to make

comments during the discussions, their statements would be used verbatim but anonymously as part of my doctoral research. If they objected to their comments being included, they could contact me to remove their contributions. In addition, all personal information and any sensitive data, such as school identities, would be removed from the transcripts before they were published. The CYPPE website, [www.cyppe.org](http://www.cyppe.org), now includes most of the presentations and discussions from the first three years of its existence, and the delegates' comments, which are listed in Appendix 18, have been taken directly from that site.

## **9.5 Additional conferences and workshops in schools**

Since the very beginning of my doctoral journey, I have been intent on bringing the needs of privileged young people out into the open. This has entailed sharing, on an ongoing basis, whatever I have learned with colleagues, parents, and schools so that, together, we can develop practical action strategies which will reflect our growing understanding. As part of this, I have given a number of workshops for parents, teachers, and administrators which introduce them to concepts around academic, social, and economic privilege, how privileged identities are formed and maintained in young people, and how the many socialisation practices within academically competitive schools may affect the personal development and mental health of young people.

As I have practiced my presentation skills and learned to tailor the talks to specific populations, I have consistently found that the most illuminating aspect of these workshops have been the discussions which follow, since much of my learning is based on the reactions, questions, and comments of those who attend.

### **9.5.1 Workshops for parents**

Listed below are the workshops I have given which have been a result of, and contributed to, my doctoral research.

(i) International School of London (ISL), Woking, Surrey (8, 15, 22, 29 January 2015) A series of workshops for parents: *'Mental health challenges for young adolescents in independent schools 12- 14 years of age'*

These four workshops gave me the opportunity to help parents recognise normal aspects of their child's development during young adolescence, but they were also my first attempts to understand the interactions of parents and children outside of my consulting room. I asked parents about their attitudes toward their children's independent school education, then we focused on the possible pressures their children might feel toward school as they attempt to fulfil their parents' wishes.

(ii) Southbank International School, (March 2018) Workshop for parents: *'The mental health of young people in privileged schools'*

This workshop for parents presented some of the psychological and sociological research which was reviewed in my thesis and offered the initial results of my study. It focused on the social mechanisms behind the 'Gordian Knot' in schools and the need for effective 'gatekeepers' when attempting to reconcile the tension between academic wellbeing and developmental wellbeing.

### **9.5.2 Presentations to counsellors and pastoral care professionals**

When presenting to school counsellors and other pastoral care professionals, I have attempted to explore the nature of independent schools, the growing use of counselling in schools, and the types of counselling that are being put in place there as well as some of the typical attributes of students, parents and teachers who use these services.

(i) 'Boarding School Syndrome' Conference, University of Brighton, (September 2017) Workshop topic: *'The role of school counsellors in boarding schools: What can they do to help?'*

During this conference workshop, I presented select portions of my research. In particular, I spoke about the participants' belief that reliable, trustworthy adult relationships and close peer friendships were centrally important for the maintenance of their mental health. With this in mind, I discussed the possible psychological effects of boarding and then examined how different forms of school counselling could contribute to the mental health of young people who board and therefore spend the vast majority of their time in school.

(ii) Girls Day School Trust, School Counsellors' Conference, (March 2018) Keynote Speech, *'Counselling in Girls' Independent Schools: What makes them different?'*

The GDST conference again gave me the opportunity to present some of the findings from my research to discuss some of the relevant research literature on the nature of girls' schools. My own research had sensitised me to some of the underlying mixed messages and ambivalences within independent school environments so, for this talk, I focused on the mixed messages my participants said they received from parents and teachers. A special focus on the cultural ideals which girls internalise brought up issues around current feminist ideology and the girls' future roles in society as leaders in the arts, government, and business.

(iii) Metanoia Institute Research Academy (March 2018), Workshop: *'Researching a difficult to reach population.'*

During this seminar, I spoke of the specific challenges I experienced during my doctoral research, particularly with respect to accessing participants, and some of the ethical challenges I faced when researching a vulnerable population of young people.

### **9.5.3 Presentations to school administrators**

(i) Deputy Heads' Conference at Canford School, Dorset (15 March 2017) *Keynote presentation: 'The mental health of young people in privileged schools'*

During this conference, I presented my literature review of the incidence of mental health problems in 'privileged' American and British youths, some sociological concepts relating to parents within elite schools, as well as the results of my own study and what young people themselves had to say. The Deputy Heads were particularly interested in the behaviour of parents and wondered how they could discourage them from interfering too often in the school lives of their children.

### **9.5.4 Workshops for teachers**

(i) Southbank International School (30 October 2017) Workshop for teachers and administrators: *The Mental Health of Young People in Privileged Schools* (See Appendix 14 for PowerPoint)

Teachers in independent schools are under tremendous pressure to get top grades for their students, and to deal on an everyday basis with parents, so they look for practical solutions to the 'Gordian Knot': the need to balance academic wellbeing with the developmental needs of their students [See discussion Section 8.4.1, p.187]. I presented portions of my doctoral results and emphasised these paradoxical dilemmas which students must negotiate daily. I then suggested



practical methods for teachers to make decisions about child welfare in collaboration with parents and administrators.

As an example, when presented with the question, 'What do I do when a student hasn't handed in their homework, but I know they're exhausted?'

1. I helped to deconstruct the question.
2. I mapped the different viewpoints of parents, teachers, administrators and students.
3. I discussed the possible consequences of different courses of action.
4. I emphasised the crucial need for conversations between stakeholders, then suggested possible courses of action which might create a workable balance between the need for compliance (academic wellbeing) and the need for rest (developmental wellbeing).

## **9.6 Intended future products**

### **9.6.1 Future workshops for parents, teachers, and students**

Workshops in schools are an important source of learning for members of a school community. I have thoroughly enjoyed the workshops and presentations I have been invited to give to parents, teachers, and administrators and I intend to look for opportunities to do many more of them in future. It is interesting to note, however, that I have not yet been asked to speak with students themselves and this will be one of my goals in the future.

### **9.6.2 Workshops for colleagues**

During the process of carrying out this study, I have realised that counsellors and therapists generally know very little about the cultural imperatives which create their school cultures, so I believe they are generally not engaging with these hidden pressures themselves or helping young people to recognise the special nature of

their school environments. In response, I intend to run training workshops that will help my colleagues to develop more awareness and specific approaches to address the issues involved.

### **9.6.3 Articles for psychotherapy and counselling journals**

I intend to produce a number of journal articles from the results of my doctoral research in order to educate my colleagues about the special nature of independent schools and the life experiences of the 'privileged' young people within them. In my experience, there has never been an article on this particular population of youths in any of the BACP, UKCP, or BPS journals. Professional journals reach a significant portion of psychological practitioners and researchers so I am looking forward to opening up this important subject and I hope my contributions will initiate conversations everywhere.

### **9.6.4 Other conferences**

I am hoping to reach a wider audience by participating in larger conferences, either as a workshop presenter or keynote speaker.

### **9.6.5 A book written for the public**

Given that there is little in-depth public discussion about the deteriorating mental health of young people today, and even less about the mental health of privileged young people in independent schools, I intend to write a book, aimed at the public, which will explore the wider cultural forces which affect young people within private education. As part of this, I hope to carry out additional interviews which will investigate the attitudes of parents, teachers, school administrators, and university admissions officers in order to further illuminate the cycle of competition which is escalating the pressure to excel in secondary schools. Engaging in a wider discussion

seems crucial if we are to find ways to truly ‘educate the whole child’ within these environments.

I anticipate that my book will be a valuable resource for elite school communities in Britain, but I also hope it will be useful for making comparisons between independent schools and other, more diverse, school environments. Knowledge of the important socialisation practices which underpin elite education will likely be relevant to all students everywhere.

#### **9.6.6 Continuing with CYPPE**

CYPPE has been one of my most influential sources of learning over the past four years but, because of time constraints, it has been primarily a once-a-year event. Delegates have suggested a number of additional activities which could be developed in response to our yearly meetings including supervision groups, workshops, parent and teacher training, the development of a social media presence (such as blogging and online forums), and increasing the recruitment of delegates and speakers for conferences, all of which I am interested in pursuing.

#### **9.6.7 Further research**

In addition to the research needed for a book for the public, I will make myself available for collaborative research with others.

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## Appendices

### Appendix One: Information for participants

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project. Before we begin, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. You will find some general information as well as a section about ethics, and a consent form for you to sign. I value your contribution and recognise that you may disclose some personal information during your interview, so I hope this consent form will enable you to feel secure enough to do so.

**I am the researcher, Leslie Lund**, and I can be contacted by the following means:

3 Norrels Ride, East Horsley, Surrey KT24 5EH

Telephone: 01483 281435, Mobile: 07742 718008

[Leslielund20@gmail.com](mailto:Leslielund20@gmail.com), [www.leslielund.co.uk](http://www.leslielund.co.uk)

*Please do not hesitate to ask questions of me now, or to contact me at any time in future about any aspect of this project.*

### Academic support:

I am doing this research as part of a doctorate in psychology (DPsych) at Middlesex University, Metanoia Institute, 13 North Common Road, Ealing, London W5 2QB.

My academic advisor is Dr Marie Adams, [marie.adams@metanoia.ac.uk](mailto:marie.adams@metanoia.ac.uk), and the Director of Studies is Professor Simon Du Plock, [simon.duplock@metanoia.ac.uk](mailto:simon.duplock@metanoia.ac.uk). They will be happy to help you with any inquiries you may have.

Study title: An Exploration of Mental Health Issues in Independent Schools: Undergraduates' Memories of their Secondary Schools

### What is the purpose of the study?

Although recent research has identified the subgroup of 'privileged' or 'affluent' adolescents as having special mental health advantages and disadvantages when compared to other youths, the existing research on their mental health often fails to take into account the actual views of the young people themselves. The results of this study seeks to address this imbalance by interviewing young people like yourself, in order to explore the experiences, observations, and opinions of a small group of academically successful undergraduates when they remember their years in elite secondary schools.

This is a qualitative narrative research project which means that, during my analysis, I will attempt to look beyond the surface meaning of what you say so I can understand the way you make sense of your experiences.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be interviewed about your views regarding the mental health of young people. You will have the opportunity to tell me what you know about mental health in general and you will have the time to reflect on mental health issues within your previous school, your family, and your friendships. Your interview will last about an hour, although more time will be made available, if you wish, in order to fully explore anything which you believe is related to this topic.

I will ask some simple questions and you can answer them however you wish. There is no right or wrong. I truly want to know what you think and am very grateful that I have the chance to record your thoughts.

### **What are the possible benefits to me if I participate?**

I hope you will be able to express your opinions freely about the mental health issues that are important to you, and I hope you will feel satisfied that your opinions have had a direct effect on the findings from this research. I intend to publish information about the topics we discuss so you may have a significant influence on other researchers, other young people who read about this research, the general public and those of us who wish to support the psychological development of students within independent secondary schools.

### **Ethical considerations:**

A research proposal for this project was approved by the Ethics Committee of Metanoia Institute and I am therefore bound by Metanoia's Ethical Framework. Research in the field of personal experience can be very emotive for participants, so I will endeavour to be collaborative, transparent and honourable in my relationship with you, and in gathering and interpreting your contributions.

### **What are the possible disadvantages if I take part?**

The study may encourage you to think about things that you have not considered before and you may possibly feel distressed if the interview brings up difficult feelings about your life. If this happens and you feel your distress is not adequately dealt with by me during the interview, I will help you find another qualified therapist who can provide you with individual therapy.

**Will what I say or produce in this study be kept confidential?**

YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO OUR DISCUSSIONS OR TO ANY OTHER ASPECT OF THE RESEARCH WILL NEVER BE IDENTIFIED PERSONALLY either in my notes or in the analysis of my data, and I will maintain strict confidentiality about your identity when submitting my thesis or publishing any results, although specific statements you have made will be shared ANONOMOUSLY with my advisors at Metanoia Institute and will form an essential part of my thesis. If you sign the consent form, you will also be giving me permission to use your quotes anonymously in anything I publish, including materials, such as articles, books, or conference presentations, in order to illustrate themes that emerge from the narrative analysis.

The final results of this study will be submitted to Middlesex University as my doctoral thesis, but if at any time before my thesis is submitted, you decide to end your participation in the study, all the data you have contributed to that point will be removed from my analysis, and the voice recording and transcript of your interview will be destroyed. However, once my thesis has been submitted, no further omissions will be possible.

**What will happen to the information gathered about me?**

Our interviews will be recorded, then the transcript will be given to you for your comments. You are then free to subtract any information you are not happy with including or to add further thoughts to the transcripts. The final transcript of our discussion will be used by me to explore how you make sense of the many mental health issues you have observed or experienced personally during your school years. Any information produced within this study will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored either in a locked cabinet, an encrypted memory stick, or on my password-protected computer.

**Will I be able to see the results?**

As previously stated, you will be given a copy of your transcript to comment on or change. I will also give you a copy of my thesis before it is submitted, and you can comment on this as well.

**Do I have to take part in this study?**

Definitely not. It is up to you to decide. If you do wish to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form which confirms that you have read and understood this information sheet. Even if you choose to participate, YOU ARE FREE TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY AT ANY TIME WITHOUT GIVING A REASON.

**Thank you for reading this information.**

**If you are interested in participating in this research, please sign the accompanying consent form.**

## Appendix Two: Participant Consent Form

**Study title: An Exploration of Mental Health Issues in Independent Education: Undergraduates' Memories of their Secondary Schools**

**Researcher:** Leslie Lund

To be completed by the participant. Please mark an 'X' in each of the right-hand boxes if you agree with the statement.

1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study.	
2.	I have had sufficient information about this study.	
3.	I have had the opportunity to consider the information and discuss the study with the researcher.	
4.	I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
5.	I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. In which case, any data I have contributed to the study before submission of the thesis will be destroyed.	
6.	I understand that the data collected during the study may be looked at by advisors at Metanoia Institute and other psychotherapy professionals who have been enlisted by the researcher to oversee the research. I give my permission for these individuals to have access to this data.	
7.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

Signature of participant:

Date:

Printed name of participant:

Address:

Telephone:

Email address:

Signature of the researcher:

Date:



## **Appendix Three: Participant contributions to superordinate themes**

### **Superordinate Theme #1: Feeling Pressured**

#### **(a) Damage**

##### **(Seeing damage in others)**

- Many different types of pressure (U, T)
- Noticing other people being overwhelmed (S, L, G, U, T)
- Feeling anxious about increase in mental health problems (S, L, G, F, U, T)
- It is difficult to define a mental health problems (T)
- Personal friends had mental health problems (U, F, T)
- Eating disorders are common in girls (L, G)
- Fellow student/girl with eating disorders (S, L, G, F, U, T)
- Many friends in university have poor mental health (L)
- Mental health problems are frequent and are increasing (L, G)
- Mental health of young people in general is bad (T)
- Knowing something about typical mental health symptoms (S, L, G, F, U, T)
- Mental health problems make young people more vulnerable (T)
- Rising levels of anxiety in all young people (G, F)
- Recognising internalising and externalising symptoms of distress (U)
- Social media causes harm: stress and isolation (L, G)
- Too much pressure creates anxiety (F)
- Anxiety is major reason for mental health problems in privileged youths (T)
- Young people are not getting the right treatment (T)
- Mental health problems are socially contagious (G)
- Symptoms start early (L, G)
- Mental health problems increase as kids get older (G)
- Early onsets mental health problems persist into later life. (L)
- Labelling someone can damage them (T)
- Gender fluidity issues greatly affect mental health (U)
- Everyone overwhelmed - no gender difference (L)
- Boys find it hard to process their thoughts and feelings (F)
- Boys more likely to be emotionally open with girls than with each other (U)
- Boys didn't ask for help and hid vulnerabilities (U)
- Girls participate in more relational intimacy in order to process feelings (U)
- Technology a source of stress (G)
- Rapid pace of social changes (G, U)

#### **(b) Demanding parents and teachers**

##### **(Parents)**

- Parents too demanding (S, L, G, F, U, T)
- Parental put too much pressure on academics (S, L, G, F, T)
- Pressure to do many extra activities (U)
- Overestimation of a child's achievement (T)
- Highly achieving so expect this from their children (S, L, G)
- Manage child's life carefully (G, F)
- Manage resources for their advantage (G, F, T)
- Some parents 'driven and very nasty' (U)

Pushing children from very early ages (U, T)  
Parental demands force teachers and admin to comply (U)  
Vicariously living through child (T)  
Demanding parents raise the level of competition in school (U) at home (T)  
Parents worry for kids (G)

**(Teachers)**

Teachers are too demanding (U, T)  
Teachers are too strict (F, U, T)  
Too high expectations of teachers (L, G, F, U, T)

**(c)Time pressure**

Not enough time (S, G, F, U, T)  
Too much work (S, G, F, U, T)  
Too long days (U)  
Using free time to study (G, U, T)  
Need for time off/rest/sleep (L, G, U)  
No time for reflection (L)  
Being protective of limited free time (G)  
Extra tutoring uses up valuable free time (T)  
Not enough time to socialise (F)  
Not enough time for family (F)  
No time for activities outside of school (G, F)  
Parents assume because students 'can' do something, they 'must' (G)  
Social norms demanded extras as well as academics (U)  
Must develop time management skills and priorities (S, L, G, F, U, T)

**(Pressure to grow up too fast)**

Noticing own development over time (L, U)  
Describing developmental stage of adolescence (L, G, F, T)  
Teens lack adult abilities, but these are required in school (L)  
Teens are vulnerable when they are developing (G)  
Need to develop slowly over time (F)

**(d) Having to be 'the best'**

Having to be the best (S, G, T)  
Constant quest to better oneself/never satisfied (U)  
Perfectionism (L, G, F)

**(Primacy of grades)**

Too narrow definition of success/focus on grades alone (S, L, G, F, T)

**(Competition)**

Competition is very high (L, F)  
Competition is increasing (G)  
Kids are highly competitive for grades (S, L, F)  
Everyone competing for the same recognition (U)  
Competition over the number of activities kids do (G)  
Competition between teachers for the primacy of their subject (U)

Competition between different aspects of school (U)

**(Conforming to an image)**

Having to construct an image (T)  
School experiences mould character (G)  
Similar wealth level means similar definition of success (L, G)  
Parental goals for children are professional careers and big salary (L)  
Limited number of professional careers promoted (T)  
False image/dishonesty (U)  
Having to be sensitive and dedicated while also relaxed and brilliant (U)

**(Having to be compliant)**

Parent controlling/over involved (S, L, G, F, U, T)  
Having to comply with 'the system' (F, T)  
Being compliant with the wishes of adults (F, T)  
Fear of ostracism for non-compliance (L)  
Fear of being punished for non-compliance (U)  
Adults don't approve of young people pushing boundaries (U)  
Not having a powerful voice/vocabulary (T)

**(Parents wanting 'safe success')**

Parents want 'safe success' (L)  
Emphasis on Oxbridge (S, L, F, T)  
Choose school by looking at statistics (T)  
University is the norm (S, L)  
Universities are chosen for elite status and recognisable brand (L, F, T)  
Acceptance at top university confers high social status (L, F, T)  
There is a connection between school, university, job and salary (L)  
School is only a 'stepping-stone', not a place to enjoy learning (T)

**(Fear of failure)**

Fear of not being 'normal' (T)  
Fear of failure (S, L, F, U, T)  
Some people crushed by failure (F, T)  
Feeling personally damaged (F)  
High status sets up potential for public failure (F)

**(Guilt)**

Parents want return on financial investment (S, L, G, T)  
Guilt for letting people down/letting the school down (F, U, T)  
Guilt for wasting resources (T)  
Guilt for being privileged (S, T)  
Privilege (high status) negates value of lower status individuals (F)  
Differentials in status make relationships difficult (F)  
Concerns about fairness (T)

**(e) Feeling abandoned**

Parental absence/neglect (G, T)  
Fathers away from home on business (L, G)  
Cultural norms make mothers blind to children's needs (L, G)

Need for sleep (L, G, T)  
Need for MH support (L, G, U)  
Need for healthy eating and good body image (G)

**(Boarding programmes)**

Boarders have more severe family problems (G)  
Boarding parents don't communicate with their kids (G)  
Boarding students are more affected by eating disorders than day students (G)  
Living all the time at school causes intense psychological pressure (U)  
Boarding program good for young people with parents who interfere too much (U)

**(International schools)**

International lifestyle separates young people from extended family (L, U)  
International lifestyle makes it difficult to keep friends/make attachments (G)  
International schools are highly pressurised (L)  
Difficult to relate to young people from different cultures (F)  
Being forced to make friends with different types of people (U)

**(f) Feeling judged and misunderstood**

Feeling unfairly judged (U, T)  
Feeling criticised (S, F)  
Feeling continually judged/misunderstood (L, G, T)  
Adults think young people complain too much/'snowflake generation' (T)  
People negate the reality of mental health problems in privileged young people (T)  
Inequality creates envy and anger so 'our problems are not understood' (F, U)

**(Having no right to complain)**

Complaining not legitimate because of being lucky (L, G, T)  
Stress is the norm so can't talk about mental health or ask for help (L, U)

**(g) Coping and resilience**

Liking pressure (T)  
Feeling stress when improving talents gives strength (U)  
Pressure can help YP to find the boundaries of their abilities (U)  
Learning to be resilient (U)  
Good stress helps a person to achieve (T)  
Enjoyed being pushed/challenged (U, T)  
Individual reactions to stress: Ability to cope innate or taught? (U)  
School was demanding but interesting (F)

**(h) Ambition**

**(Internalising destructive social norms)**

Social rules to 'push through'/ignore problems (U)  
Internalising too high personal standards (S, G, F)  
Internalising criticism (T)  
Thinking of self as a failure because not 'the top' (L, F)  
High status unhealthy because it creates a false sense of self (F)

**(Internalising positive social norms)**

Young people learn social rules from adults (S, U)

Having ambition is beneficial (S, F, T)

Internalising parental values creates self-motivation (L)

**Superordinate Theme # 2: Ambivalence**

**(a) Definitions of privilege**

Opportunities (S, L, F, T)

Wealth (L, T)

Access to resources (U)

Access to things other people don't have (T)

Exclusivity (T)

Above-average facilities (S, T)

Status (F)

Innate personality traits (L)

Individual care and support (U)

Being noticed (U)

Family knowledge as a resource (U)

Autonomy and freedom to make decisions (U)

**(b) Gratitude for being privileged but feeling damaged**

Feeling grateful for privilege but wanting freedom to reject prearranged path (T)

Being grateful but feeling damaged (L)

'Too much of a good thing' (F, T)

**(Gaining perspective: making comparisons of self and others/then and now)**

Gaining a perspective from comparison of then and now (S, L, G, F, U, T)

Gaining a perspective makes young people more powerful (T)

Not everyone has problems (U, T)

Looking for clarity: young people in university often talk about mental health (L, U)

Young people in university try to help each other in social communities (U)

More comfortable with mental health issues now than when young (U)

Wondering why the world works as it does (U, T)

**(The attributes of private schools)**

Private schools are generally all alike (T)

Mental health problems are different than in state schools (S, G, U, T)

Private schools don't make mental health a priority (L)

Schools are in competition with each other (L, T, F, U)

School experiences have long-term effects (F)

**(Gratitude for being privileged)**

Gratitude for privilege (S, L, G, F, U)

Gratitude for the privilege of having good innate personal traits (L, G, F)

**(c) Wanting to be exceptional but also normal/good enough**

**(d) Mixed messages from adults**

**(Self-care versus high achievement)**

Mixed messages self-care versus academic pressure (L)

Conflict of counselling values versus parental values (L, G)

Difficulty assimilating mental health knowledge when counter to culture (L)

**(What adults say versus what they do)**

Disjoin between what adults say and what they do (L, T)

**(e) Avoidance of mental health problems versus engagement**

**(Accessing the school counsellor)**

Admitting mental health problems brings either help, or prejudice (T)

No personal use of school counsellor (S, L, G, F, U, T)

Talking with school counsellor made students uncomfortable (U)

It is socially unacceptable to seek help (U)

Young people don't often use school counsellor (S, G)

There was no school counsellor (F)

Being seen as weak (S)

Subject too sensitive to share with parents (G)

School counsellor used for discipline (U)

**(Feeling exposed and shamed)**

Feeling exposed and shamed by teacher (S, F)

Need a wider perspective to counter feelings of failure/shame (T)

Feeling damaged by teacher's individual attention (F)

Teachers mocking students (U)

Having to hide vulnerabilities (S, U)

Shame for having problems (T)

Mental health problems are stigmatised in private schools (T)

**(Lack of discussion about mental health)**

No personal experience of severe mental health problems in school (S, L, G, F, U, T)

Had very limited knowledge about mental health while in school (S, L, F, U, T)

Young people are especially reluctant to talk about mental health (S)

No one talked of mental health in school. (U, T)

Being surprised by development of mental health symptoms (S, T)

Not understanding own emotions (G, T)

Very little support offered for mental health in school (U)

No focus on prevention, only reaction (U, T)

Mental health education (PSHE) was vague, useless, and not relevant (U)

Very little information about how to access support (S, U, T)

School misinterpreted signs of mental health problems (F)

Staff were not comfortable talking about mental health (U, T)

'Expert' mental health speakers not relevant to students' needs (L, G)

**(f) Optimism/pessimism about the future**

Young people worry about themselves and their future (G, F)

Things are getting better (T)

### Superordinate Theme #3- Needing the Help of Others

#### **(a) Needing adult attunement**

##### **(A sympathetic and caring relationship)**

Need for close personal relationships with teachers (L, F, U)

Sympathising (T)

Listening (T)

Understanding mental health (T)

##### **(Support and guidance)**

Support, guidance and encouragement are crucial in order to learn (S)

Need attention from teachers without having to ask (S)

Support academically and emotionally (S, L, F)

Teachers need to focus on individual student needs (S, L, G, U, T)

#### **(b) Appropriate boundaries**

Neither too strict, nor too lenient (S, G, U, T)

Flexibility (L, G, U, T)

Teachers can help by maintaining valuable boundaries (S)

Teachers should be flexible (T)

Grateful for teacher's skill in dealing with parents (U)

#### **(c) Needing approval**

Caring about the opinions of others is natural (S, L, F)

Sense of self is a result of being mirrored by others (T)

#### **(d) Freedom/privacy**

Need for freedom (G, F)

Forcing young people to do things/too much control hurts them (S)

Need for privacy (F, U, T)

#### **(e) Friendship**

##### **(Protective of mental health)**

The most protective of mental health (S, L, G, F, U)

Value of long-lasting friendships (G, U)

Friends as therapists (L)

Help to relax (F)

Needing to fit in socially/belong (S, T)

Having good social skills and a full social life (S, L)

Being able to trust relationships (S, T)

To be known, accepted, and supported (L)

Group identity formation (T)

Sports as a means of making and keeping friends (S)

Social media helps young people to share and become more aware (U)

Need for fun! (S, L)

## **(f) Methods of coping with stress**

### **(Positive strategies)**

- Learning to self-soothe (L)
- Needing support from young people of the same age (U, T)
- Creation of exclusive social groups/cliques in order to 'belong' (T)
- Sports as a safe haven and a rest (S)
- Talking as a way of processing stress and emotional distress (L, G, U, T)

### **(Negative strategies)**

- Breaking rules as a way of coping with pressure/reducing stress (U)
- Separation into popular and unpopular people (T)
- Parties and drinking (G)
- Drinking and smoking (U, T)
- Drugs (T)
- Leaving the dorm at night (U)
- Physical intimacy/sex (U, T)

### **(Needing conversations)**

- Trying to find adults who can discuss mental health openly and naturally (U)
- Needing to talk openly with other students (L, G, U, T)
- Wanting to be able to negotiate/ share power (T)
- Finding a 'voice' (T)
- Open discussion about mental health issues (G, S, T, U)
- Open discussion about LGBTQ+ issues (U, T)

## **Superordinate Theme #4: Setting Goals**

### **(a) Development of self**

- Evaluating own abilities (L, F, U)
- Keep things in perspective (S, L, G)
- Develop personal insights (L)
- Pride in accomplishments (L, F, U)

### **(b) Mindfulness and self-compassion**

- Need to balancing achievement and self-care (L, U)
- Self-acceptance (T)
- Find ways to rest/learning to stop (S, L, G, U, T)
- Learn self-care (L, G, T)
- Valuing more than wealth (G)
- Wealth disparity forces an individuation of values (G)

### **(Being 'good enough')**

- Learning to fail (F, T)
- Allowing for development (S)
- Being well-rounded and happy (T)
- Wanting good enough academic aspirations (S, L, U, T)



**(Developing personal traits and abilities)**

Discipline (L)  
Self-motivation (F)  
Organisational skills (S, L, F)  
Flexibility (F)  
Adventurousness/taking chances (F)  
Developing resilience (L)  
Managing school/life priorities (S, L, G)  
Working hard (S)

**(f) Gaining a realistic evaluation of self**

**(c) Seeking joy**

Development of own interests (F)  
Seek opportunities for achievement (S)  
Joy and dedication to learning (S, F, T)

**(d) Valuing diversity and equality**

Embracing multi-cultural experience and values (L, G, F)  
Familiarity and ease of interaction (L, G)  
Valuing diversity (T)  
Caring about fairness (S, F)

**(e) Being charitable**

Charity is important (S, U, T)  
Use privileged position to advocate for welfare of others (T)

**(f) Offering suggestions for making things better**

**(For parents)**

Parents can help by influencing without control (F)  
Parents can help by thinking creatively about the future (F)  
Parents must give approval (F)  
Parents should be trusting (F)  
We need a secure base during our transitions (F)  
Don't rely on power or status/talk to kids as equals (T)  
We wish to be guided in future (S)

**(For schools)**

Talk 'with' young people instead of 'at' them (G)  
Foster collaboration (G)  
Let young people talk together with each other in groups (G)  
Let young people lead the discussions (G)  
Choose general topics that are relevant (G)  
Make small groups (G)  
Make sure young people are comfortable so they can be vulnerable (G)  
Divide boys and girls (G)  
Have discussions in an informal setting (G)  
Teach outside of school/experiencing nature (G)

Promote communal activities (L, G)  
Make the timing of mental health education not during lunch or breaks (G)  
Explore, don't tell (G)  
Young people should create and control their own spaces (T)  
Value something other than grades (F, T)  
Award good human qualities (F)  
Build a support network of adults and kids (S, T)  
Provide encouragement (S)  
Listen to us! (U, T)

## Appendix Four: Additional example of analysis columns

<p>Needing to fit in socially</p> <p>MH problems make YP fragile</p> <p>Must hide vulnerability</p> <p>Adolescent stage is different</p> <p>Making and keeping friends</p> <p>School work is primarily important</p> <p>Having good social skills</p> <p>School work important</p> <p>Things that damage MH</p> <p>Being reluctant to discuss MH</p> <p>Caring about the opinions of others</p> <p>Must hide vulnerability</p> <p>Being able to trust relationships</p> <p>Reasons for poor MH</p> <p>Family relationships effect on MH</p> <p>Exposing MHPs feels shameful</p> <p>Social isolation feels unsafe.</p>	<p>You — can you tell me anything about just generally the mental health of young people in Britain?</p> <p>T: The mental health of young people in Britain? I think, especially in schools and stuff, so the mental health of young people, from my point of view could potentially be quite fragile just because a lot of people <u>especially young people sort of try to fit in at school and to make friends necessarily don't want to show vulnerability.</u> I think when you're growing up, it's quite all people want, want to do when they're growing up is sort of like fit in and like make friends and stuff but I think sometimes if <u>your mental health is affecting you, like your school work or perhaps maybe even your social skills then I think that just takes an effect on everything in it.</u> I guess it can be quite detrimental but I think it gets generally quite—<u>people are quite reserved to talk about it I think, especially students</u> in particular for that reason but...</p> <p>R: Why do you think they are so reserved about talking?</p> <p>T: I think — I just think sometimes, yeah, <u>people will just sometimes try and put on a bit of a show.</u> Not as in your sort of false when you're talking to people but as in say you've had some, say, problems at home or whatever, sometimes you were just on like don't feel comfortable to talk about it but I think—so if, yeah, <u>people would just want to, don't really want to be out of place,</u> I think. And I think if</p>	<p>MH of YP is fragile because YP want to 'fit in'- be like everyone else. It's primarily importance for her happiness.</p> <p>In order to make friends, they must not show vulnerability.</p> <p>Recognition of adolescent developmental stage being different from other stages. One makes friends by being like everyone else. Similar goals and attributes.</p> <p>School work and social skills primarily important. Being unable to do schoolwork or make friends has a big effect on everything else.</p> <p>MH problems can damage everything in life. Dangerous to keep silent? <b>But</b> believes YP are '<b>especially</b>' reluctant to talk about MH. She wonders about why. Because of their vulnerability to the opinions of their friends? Because it effects everything? Will she get depressed?</p> <p>People try to hide vulnerability Hiding problems are not 'fake' (a bad sort of false face). Recognising something that is hidden. Lying versus pretending.</p> <p>Hating 'fake' people. Alluding to social interactions that are not safe. Disloyal? Authenticity is important. Problems at home cause poor MH (and other unspecified reasons) She recognises that making MH problems visible makes people uncomfortable. Does she feel exposed? (shame) Not fitting in socially is uncomfortable (feels unsafe?).</p>
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## **Appendix Five: Participant comments about draft thesis**

*'I just read through your results and discussion, and I really enjoyed it. I thought it was extremely clear and well written, the pieces of interview are organised well and are described by the themes precisely. I found it extremely interesting (although not surprising) that all the participants stressed the prevalence of eating disorders in their schools. I also thought that the common "mixed messages" was an interesting aspect that you picked on. It is so true - I especially related to the example about a teacher saying "enjoy life" and "this doesn't matter" but then assigning loads of notes! The contradiction between the advice or the communicated priorities by staff and parents (like take care of yourself and be 'mindful') and the silent pressures of expectations and high competition, can be extremely hard to handle and confusing both mentally and emotionally. There is often a toxic environment which cannot be tackled by simple advice or comfort.'* (Gabriella)

*'I thought that the primacy of friendship as a support mechanism was an important conclusion (greatly confirmed by my own experiences). Overall I found your discussion and findings very interesting and well supported.'* (Lydia)

*'Privileged kids clearly are subject to a unique combination of stresses making them prone to several mental health struggles, but the nature of their privilege often causes them to be overlooked. I think it's great that you've done this project to try and focus in on them as a potentially vulnerable and neglected group in some aspects.'* (Tamsin)

*'I'm glad I could contribute. It was honestly very enjoyable to talk about it and to read others' experiences and your conclusions.'* (Frances)

## **Appendix Six: Lydia's emergent themes and grouped themes**

*This initial list gathers together all emergent themes from transcript #1. These themes have been grouped together by meaning, omitting any repetitions, and the groups have contributed to the final superordinate themes.*

### **Aspects of privileged culture**

Privilege is opportunities, wealth, small schools, and innate personality traits

High stress is the norm

Parents want value for money

Teachers can focus on individual students

Parents want safe success

Competition is high

No right to complain because privileged

Gratitude for privilege

High parental pressure on academics is the norm

University is the norm

Universities are chosen for elite status and recognisable brand

Emphasis on Oxbridge

Students are competitive for grades

Narrow definition of success

Acceptance at top university confers high social status

Connection between school, university, job and salary

Academic success in school confers high social status

Fathers away from home

Cultural norms make mothers blind to children's needs for sleep and support

Similar wealth means similar definition of success (no matter the culture)

Parents want professional careers and big salaries for children

Parents want return on financial investment

Parents are high achieving and expect this from kids

Private schools don't make mental health a priority

Private schools are in competition with each other

School craft their image carefully

International lifestyle separates young people from their extended family

International lifestyle is highly pressurized

### **Anxiety about mental health**

Feeling anxious about increasing mental health problems

Noticing others being overwhelmed

Many friends in university have poor mental health

Social media causes harm: stress and isolation

Symptoms start early

Early onset problems persist into later life

Everyone overwhelmed

Eating disorders are common in girls  
Personal experience of friends with eating disorders  
Limited knowledge of mental health problems  
No personal experience of mental health problems when in school  
No personal use of school counselling

### **Feeling vulnerable**

Disjoin between what adults say and what they do  
Feeling grateful but feeling damaged  
Notices conflicting values of school counselling and schools/parents  
Feeling continually judged and misunderstood  
Perfectionism  
Fear of failure  
Compliance required  
No time for rest, sleep, time off, reflection  
Too high expectations of parents and teachers  
Mixed messages  
Parents don't understand pressure  
Parents are controlling and over-involved  
Parents are demanding  
School offered the wrong kind of mental health education  
Fear of ostracism for non-compliance  
Teens lack adult abilities which are needed for school success

### **Trying to understand**

Self-motivation is created by internalising parental values  
Looking back to the past gives perspective  
Struggling with the complexity  
Compare themselves to parents and peers  
Comparison of school to others  
Comparison of family to others  
Gaining a perspective  
Comparisons of then and now  
Noticing own development over time  
Looking for clarity

### **Developing skills**

Development of self  
Learn to be more disciplined  
Wanting more organisational skills  
Want to learn to stop/rest  
Want to develop more self-care  
Want to learn to have better perspective  
Valuing resilience

Wanting to be 'good enough'  
Pride in accomplishments  
Wants to be known, accepted, and supported  
Learning to self soothe  
Need for fun  
Need to develop time management skills  
Need balance for achievement and self-care

### **Valuing community**

Talking as a way of processing stress  
Friendships are protective of mental health  
Friends as therapists  
Need for good social skills  
Teachers can support academically and emotionally  
Need for close personal relationship with teachers  
Diversity creates familiarity and ease of interaction  
Embraces multi-cultural experiences and values

## **Appendix Seven: France's emergent themes and grouped themes**

*This initial list gathers together all emergent themes from transcript #2. These themes have been grouped together by meaning, omitting any repetitions, and the groups have contributed to the final superordinate themes.*

### **Issues of privilege**

Privilege is having opportunities  
Privilege is having high status  
Increases in status are unhealthy because they create a false sense of self (entitlement)  
Gaining high status negates the value of lower status people  
Gratitude for innate personal traits which make learning easy  
Very grateful for privilege  
It is difficult to relate to young people from other cultures  
Acceptance at a top university confers high social status  
A status differential creates inequality  
Social status rises with increasing academic achievement  
Experiences of privilege within schools has good and bad effects  
Being chosen to study for entry to Oxbridge makes students into 'stars'  
Stars get more attention and care  
Stars have higher self-esteem  
Stars are more noticed and valued

### **The qualities of independent schools**

Schools are all in competition with each other for students  
Narrow definition of success (grades)  
Independent schools insist on strict compliance with 'the system'  
Have to comply with the wishes of adults  
Emphasis on Oxbridge  
Most parents manage their child's life carefully  
Parents manage their resources for their own advantage  
Universities are chosen only for their elite status and recognition of brand  
Many parents can be much too controlling and over-involved  
Other people's parents are often too demanding

### **The needs of young people**

Learning to fail  
Wishes to take advantage of more self-motivation (being guided from within)  
Develop discipline  
Increase flexibility  
Being adventurousness  
Having ambition  
Friendships are protective of mental health  
Friendships are important because they help to relax  
Wants joy  
Wants dedication to life-long learning  
Values fairness  
Need for freedom  
Need for close personal relationships with teachers



Parents should attempt influence without harsh control  
Parents are more helpful when they think creatively about the future  
Children need approval from their parents  
Children need their parents to trust them  
Students have need of the secure base/home when they are in transition  
Adults should value something other than grades  
Parents and schools should award good qualities  
Adolescents need time to develop over time  
Cares about the opinions of others  
School was demanding but interesting  
Has pride in her high level of accomplishments in school  
Embraces multi-cultural experience and values  
Personal friends had mental health problems  
Very limited knowledge about mental health  
School misinterpreted signs of poor mental health  
No support from school counsellor at her school  
Use of school counsellor

### **Things that go wrong**

Asks when are standards too high for students to cope?  
Kids worry about their future  
Inequality causes envy and anger  
Different levels of status make relationships difficult  
Achieving high status sets one up for public failure  
Fear of failure  
Some people crushed by failure  
Feeling personally damaged  
Mental health of teachers is important  
Feeling expose and shamed by teachers  
Feeling personally damaged by teacher's criticism  
Teachers are generally too strict  
Feeling anxious about increasing mental health problems in young people  
Rising levels of anxiety in all young people  
Boys find it hard to process their thoughts and feelings  
Eating disorders are common in girls  
Father died when F in school

### **Making comparisons and gaining perspective**

Noticing how things change over time gives valuable perspective  
Students always compare themselves with their peers  
Comparisons make people competitive  
Thinking about comparison of other schools to hers  
Compares her family/parents to other families/parents  
Compares the support she receives at her university to other universities  
A comparison of then and now gives valuable perspective

## **Appendix Eight: Tamsin's emergent themes and grouped themes**

*This initial list gathers together all emergent themes from transcript #3. These themes have been grouped together by meaning, omitting any repetitions, and the groups have contributed to the final superordinate themes.*

### **Privileged/elite education**

Not everyone has problems in independent schools  
Having more opportunities than others is privilege  
Wealth creates privilege  
Privilege is having access to things other people don't have  
Exclusivity is privilege  
Privilege is having above average facilities  
Parents in independent schools manage resources for their advantage  
Private schools are generally all alike  
Parents want return on financial investment  
Parents choose schools by looking at statistics  
School as a near stepping-stone, not a place to enjoy learning  
Mental health problems are different in independent schools (than in state schools)  
Schools are in competition with each other  
Universities are chosen for elite status and recognition of brand  
Emphasis on Oxbridge  
Acceptance at top university confers high social status  
Limited number of professional careers promoted  
Social status rises with academic achievement  
Limited mental health services available (through school's teachers and house parents)  
No school counselling: No personal experience of severe mental health problems

### **The value of relationships**

Young people need to fit in socially  
Being able to trust relationships is crucial  
Group identity formation important  
Young people use physical intimacy/sex in order to relieve stress  
Need support from young people the same age  
Creation of exclusive social groups/belonging  
Talking as a way of or easing emotions and coping with stress  
Teachers help when they focus on individual student needs  
Teachers help by sympathising  
Teachers help by listening  
Teachers help by understanding mental health  
Teachers help by being flexible  
Sense of self is a result of being mirrored by others

### **Pressure**

Not legitimate to complain because we are privileged  
Guilt for letting people/the school down  
Guilt for wasting resources  
Guilt for being privileged  
Having to be 'the best'

Having to construct an image  
Fear of failure  
Some people crushed by failure  
Shame for having problems  
Internalising criticism results in shame  
Mental health problems are stigmatised in private schools  
Adults think young people complain too much/'snowflake generation'  
Our mental health problems are real  
Wanting to reject prearranged path of parents  
Disjoin between what adults say and what they do  
Too much pressure is major reason for mental health problems in young people  
Teachers are too demanding  
Teachers are too strict  
Many different types of pressure  
Noticing other people being overwhelmed  
Parents put pressure on academics  
Extra tutoring uses valuable free time  
Too high expectations of parents and teachers  
Feeling continually judged and misunderstood  
Too much work  
Using free time to study  
Narrow definition of success/focus on grades alone  
Children are pushed from very early ages  
Parents are controlling and over-involved  
Parents are too demanding  
Parents overestimate their child's accomplishments  
Demanding parents live vicariously through their children  
Demanding parents raise the level of competition at home  
Absence/neglect of parents  
Cultural norms blind parents to their child's need for sleep  
Need for advanced time management skills in order to cope  
Not having a powerful voice/vocabulary  
Don't rely on power or status/ 'talk to kids as equals'  
Have to make difficult choices about priorities in order to cope  
Trying to cope by drinking and smoking  
A gamble: Admitting mental health problems gets either help or prejudice  
No talk of mental health in school  
People are surprised by the development of their mental health problems  
Not understanding own emotions  
No focus on prevention, only reaction  
Very little knowledge of how to access support  
Staff were not comfortable talking about mental health  
Having to comply with the system  
Having to comply with wishes of adults  
Anxiety  
Fear of not being normal  
Fear of being unfairly judged  
Feeling anxious about increase of mental health problems in young people  
Wondering why the world works the way it does  
It is difficult to define mental health  
Mental health problems make young people more vulnerable

Young people are not getting the right treatment for mental health problems  
Labelling someone mentally ill can damage them  
Fellow student (girl) had an eating disorder  
Personal friends had mental health problems

### **Goals and values**

Wanting to have 'good enough' academia aspirations  
Being well rounded and happy  
Self-acceptance  
Valuing diversity  
Ambition  
Finding ways to rest/learning to stop  
Learning self-care  
Learning to failure privilege position to help others  
'Listen to us!'  
Young people should create and control their own spaces  
Valuing something other than grades  
Build a support network of adults and young people  
Open discussion about mental health issues  
LGBTQ+ issues should be talked about  
Joy and dedication to learning  
Likes pressure/challenge  
Seeking a wider perspective to counter feeling of shame and failure  
Need for privacy  
Concerns about fairness of being privileged  
Gratitude for privilege  
Things are getting better  
Gaining a perspective from comparing then and now  
Wants more knowledge about mental health  
Young people learn about the world by comparing themselves to their peers, and their schools to other schools  
Gaining perspective makes young people powerful  
Good stress helps a person to achieve  
Enjoyed being pushed/challenged

## **Appendix Nine: Ulrike's emergent themes and grouped themes**

*This initial list gathers together all emergent themes from transcript #5. These themes have been grouped together by meaning, omitting any repetitions, and the groups have contributed to the final superordinate themes.*

### **Qualities of independent schools**

Need sophisticated time management skills and developing priorities  
Personal care and attention in small schools  
Gratitude for being gifted privilege  
Competition between teachers for the primacy of their subject  
Competition between different aspects of school  
Everyone is competing for the same recognition  
Schools are in competition with each other  
Not everyone has problems in independent schools  
Family knowledge as a valuable resource  
Privilege means having access to resources  
Privilege is having access to individual care and attention

### **Fulfilling basic needs**

Autonomy and freedoms to make decisions  
Need for privacy  
Need for close personal relationships with teachers  
Grateful for teacher's protection  
Need to balance achievement and self-care  
Being noticed  
Community: Receiving support from young people the same age  
Talking as a way of processing stress and emotions  
Adult mentoring: trying to find adults who can talk freely about mental health  
Friendships are protective of mental health  
The value of long-lasting friendships  
Pride in personal accomplishments  
Pressure can help young people to find the boundaries of their abilities  
Pressure helps to build resilience

### **Desires, goals and values**

Valuing open discussions about mental health  
LGBTQ+ issues should be more openly discussed  
Wanting to have 'good enough' academic aspirations  
Finding ways to rest and learning to stop  
Enjoyed being pushed/challenged  
Young people in university can try to help each other by coming together in communities  
Gaining a perspective from comparisons of then and now  
Looking for clarity by having discussions with other young people

### **Observations: gathering information**

Noticing other people being overwhelmed  
Individual reactions to stress  
Is ability to cope with high pressure taught or innate?

Breaking rules and transgressing boundaries as a way of relieving stress (Drinking and smoking, leaving the dorm at night, physical intimacy/sex)  
Boys are more likely to be more emotionally open with girls than with each other  
Teachers help by focusing on individual student needs  
Social media helps by allowing young people to share and become more aware  
Gender fluidity issues greatly affect mental health  
Young people have limited knowledge of mental health issues  
Adults do not approve of young people pushing boundaries  
Young people learn social rules from adults  
Recognising the internalising and externalising symptoms of poor mental health  
Girls are more relationally intimate and process feelings together  
Knew fellow students with eating disorders  
Rapid pace of social change makes young people vulnerable  
Cultural norms make mothers blind to their child's need for mental health support  
Boarding programmes are good for students who have parents who interfere too much  
International lifestyles separate young people from their extended families  
Boarding forces students to make friends with many different types of people  
Students always compare themselves to their peers  
Students try to compare their school to other types of schools  
Young people compare their parents to other parents  
Wondering why the world works as it does  
Noticing own development over time  
Easier to talk about mental health issues now than in the past  
Mixed messages: having to be totally dedicated while also being relaxed/naturally brilliant

### **Negative effects on mental health**

Boys didn't ask for help and hid vulnerabilities  
Living at school (boarding) causes intense psychological pressure  
Teachers are too demanding  
Teachers are too strict  
Many different types of pressure  
Feeling damaged by teachers who mock students  
Feeling unheard/Listen to us!  
Some parents were 'driven and very nasty'  
Pushing children from very early ages  
Parents were controlling and over-involved  
Some parents were too demanding  
Parental demands force teachers and admin to comply  
Constant pressure to better oneself  
Fear of failure  
Need to hide vulnerabilities  
Stress is norm so cannot talk about mental health  
Stress is norm so cannot ask for help  
No right to complain because of privilege  
Too much work and not enough time  
Long days  
Using valuable free time to study  
Need time off/rest/sleep  
Social norms demand extras as well as academics  
Guilt for letting people down  
Inequality creates envy and anger

Must create false image, which is dishonest  
Pressures to do too many extras  
Too high expectations of teacher and parents  
Very little support offered for mental health  
No focus on prevention, only reaction  
Mental health education was vague, useless and not relevant  
Little knowledge on how to access support  
School counselling used as a source of discipline  
Staff were not comfortable talking about mental health  
Social imperatives to 'push through' and ignore problems  
Fear of being punished for non-compliance  
No personal experiences of mental health problems in school  
No use of school counsellor  
Personal friends had mental health problems  
No discussion about mental health in school  
Socially unacceptable to seek help for mental health  
Talking with school counsellor made students uncomfortable  
Feeling anxious about the increase in mental health problems in young people today  
Demanding parents raise the level of competition at school

## **Appendix Ten: Gabriela's emergent themes and grouped themes**

*This initial list gathers together all emergent themes from transcript #6. These themes have been grouped together by meaning, omitting any repetitions, and the groups have contributed to the final superordinate themes.*

### **Gratitude**

Friendship is protective of mental health  
Value of long-lasting friendships  
Gratitude for privilege  
Gratitude for innate personal traits  
Small schools give personal care and attention  
Teachers help who recognise individual needs of students  
Gaining perspective from comparison of then and now  
School experiences mould character  
Embracing multi-cultural experiences and values  
Diversity creates familiarity and ease of interactions  
Parents manage resources for their advantage  
Seeking perspective: Young people compare themselves to their parents, themselves to their peers, their school to other schools, their family to other families, and own wealth level to others

### **Stress and pressure**

Parents worry about their children  
Competition is increasing  
Wealth disparity forces the individuation of values  
Parent want return on financial investment  
Social media causes harm: stress and isolation  
Too much parental pressure on academics  
Too high personal standards  
Feeling continually judged/misunderstood  
Using valuable free time to study instead of play  
Perfectionism  
Parents are high achieving, so they expect their kids to be  
Parents manage/control child's life carefully  
Absence/neglect of parents  
Fathers away from home on business  
Cultural norms make mothers blind to children's needs for sleep, mental health support, healthy eating, and good body image  
Not understanding own emotions  
Subject of mental health is too sensitive to share with parents  
Difficult to keep friends/broken attachments in international schools  
Young people don't use school counsellor in independent schools because of stigma



### **Adults 'getting it wrong'**

Having to be 'the best'

Too much work

Too high expectations

Not enough time for activities outside of school

'Because students can, they must'

No right to complain because of privilege

No time for rest/sleep

Boarding parents don't communicate with their children

Mental health speakers not relevant and useless

Competition over how many extra activities students do

Parents don't understand how much pressure students feel

Parents are too controlling/over involved

Parents are too demanding

Problems between parental couple hurt children

No matter the culture, similar wealth means similar definition of success

### **Symptoms of distress**

Parties and drinking help to relieve stress

Very protective of limited free time

Teens are vulnerable when they are developing

Technology is a source of stress

Rapid pace of social change

Mental health problems are socially contagious

Symptoms start early

Existing problems increase with age

Eating disorders are common in girls

Fellow students had eating disorders

Feeling anxious about increase in mental health problems in youths

Noticing other people being overwhelmed

Mental health problems are frequent and increasing

Boarders have more severe family problems

Boarding students are more effected by eating disorders than day school students

No personal experience of severe mental health problems

No personal use of school counselling

### **Suggestions of how to 'get it right'**

Talking 'with' young people instead of 'at' them

Collaboration

Kids talking together with each other

Let kids lead discussions

Choose general topics that are relevant

Discuss in small groups

Make sure young people are comfortable so they can be vulnerable

Divide boys and girls for privacy

Value informal settings/nature

Communal activities are vital

Pay attention to the timing of mental health activities (not during free time)  
Explore, don't tell.  
Open discussion about mental health issues  
Valuing more than wealth  
Find ways to rest/learning to stop  
Learning self-care  
Keeping things in perspective  
Careful management of school/life priorities  
Talking as a way of processing stress and emotions  
Need for freedom  
Developing time management skills and priorities

## **Appendix Eleven: Semi-structured interview questions with typical expansion questions**

**Question (a): Please tell me what you observed of the mental health of all young people in Britain.**

Why do you think things are generally as they are for young people?

How have your experiences been the same or different from young people in general?

**Question (b): I'm particularly interested in the MH of young people who have attended independent schools. Can you tell me anything about this?**

What type of school did you go to?

Why did you go to this school?

How are independent schools different from other schools? The same as other schools?

What do these schools **do for** their students?

What do these schools **ask of** their students?

**Question (c): Would you like to tell me about your experiences in school?**

What effect did your school experiences have on you?

What did you want from your school experience?

**Question (d): Please tell me about your own mental health when you were in school.**

What factors do you think affected your mental health?

How did your school support your mental health?

Did you ever access mental health services yourself? Why?

What did you notice about the mental health of other students?

What effect did your school's mental health services have on you or other students?

How did you (or they) cope with stress?

What did you observe about the parents in your school?

Please tell me about the teachers in your school.

How did the teachers and administrators relate to parents in general?

How did your own parents relate to your school?

What effect did your parents have on you when you were in school?

What did they want from you? (Describe father and mother independently)

**Question (e): Is there anything else you wish to tell be about before we end our interview?**

## **Appendix Twelve: Yardley's criteria (2000) for quality in qualitative research**

### ***Sensitivity to context***

I am highly sensitive to the sociocultural milieu in which my participants live, and I hope to have shown this by recounting some of my experiences with young people, their parents, teachers, and schools before and during the study. Negotiations with stakeholders for access to my participants has been a central aspect of this study [Chapter 3: My journey].

### ***Commitment and rigour***

My skills as a psychotherapist have helped me to be attentive to my participants during their interviews and to listen to, and explore, what they had to say. I have demonstrated rigour by choosing a relatively homogeneous group of participants who match the population of young people I wished to study. Finally, I have been dedicated to conducting a careful analysis of the participants' transcripts in order to illuminate the hidden depths of meaning they contained, and I hope my descriptions of the results do justice to their individual voices and explain the overall themes well.

### ***Transparency and coherence***

Yardley's third principle refers to how clearly the different stages of research are written-up. I have attempted to show my thinking and how I have constructed every aspect of this study so that the reader will understand and experience each step on the path to my final conclusions.

### ***Impact and importance***

Although I cannot predict the impact of my findings, I believe the results of this study will be important for considering the needs of students, as well as parents, schools, and our wider society.

## **Appendix Thirteen: Reflections on the interview process and analysis**

### ***How did participants view me?***

It is difficult to know how the participants felt about me or what they assumed about my background and motives. Several of them mentioned my therapeutic work with young people from independent schools although I had not initially introduced myself as a psychotherapist. They may have explored online to learn about me before the interviews, and this may have had a significant effect on both their willingness to be interviewed, and the nature of their comments.

It is interesting to consider why these young people agreed to participate in a study about mental health in the first place. Four out of six showed a great deal of enthusiasm for focusing on privilege and encouraged me to continue my research in independent schools as a matter of urgency. It felt as though they needed me to witness something important which they had not been able to communicate until then. In fact, the emotional intensity of their interviews was clearly an indication of their deep feelings about the topic.

I had much of the same 'cultural capital' as the participants: a social status, history, and value system similar to theirs. I dressed as I always do, in clothes which were similar to the participants. I spoke the same language, sometimes with the same accent, had the same vocabulary, was obviously a global citizen, and was highly educated, all traits which may have made it easier for them to speak and me to listen. Because I have spent my entire professional life working with young people from independent schools, a feeling of camaraderie developed between us very early in each interview, which may have influenced the insights they offered or made it more difficult for me to stay open to 'the unexpected'. As I read and reread the transcripts, I became aware that the rapport I felt had, at times, reduced my ability to meet the participants' statements phenomenologically and blinded me to their opinions when they were not my own. Unfortunately, some valuable opportunities were missed.

On the other hand, it is possible that my being North American had inadvertently helped them to express their opinions more clearly since they may have believed I was not familiar with their worlds. I was keenly aware of being 'foreign' and I believe this may have helped me to stay in the position of 'not knowing' that is central to IPA. Although I admit I was excited to hear the participants validate many of my experiences and opinions, I also marvelled at how little questioning or encouragement they needed when they commented on topics.

When the interviews were concluded and the tape recorder was switched off, all but one of the participants asked me my own views on the topics we had covered, and I took the opportunity to give my honest opinions, many of which validated much of

what they had said. I hope this went some way toward making the whole process a satisfying, and possibly healing, experience for these young people.

### ***Did the participants find self-disclosure difficult?***

When initially approached for the study, none of the participants admitted to having had mental health problems themselves, yet many, when interviewed, described a great deal of distress both in themselves and in others. Perhaps being asked to focus on mental health and their school experiences threatened to put them in touch with too many distressing memories. In locating the problems in others, they may have found a way to discuss themselves at a distance. All of the participants spoke easily about fellow students, but some described themselves only when asked direct questions and it became obvious that certain topics were particularly painful to recall. For example, although Tamsin was an obviously vibrant and capable young person who seemed to have sailed through much of what she experienced at school, she let her own vulnerability show when speaking of the pressure she had felt as a student who was singled out for Oxbridge.

Suki gave a particularly good example of this reticence when she was asked to describe her own experiences at school. She responded by recounting, to an astonishing degree, her entire weekly school schedule. Every class and its timing had been indelibly imprinted on her mind. However, reading between the lines, this extraordinary description conveyed a more visceral sense of the pressure she had experienced but, perhaps, did not feel able to acknowledge. Although she remained consistently positive about her school experiences and reported being able to cope well with the work load she was given, she reinterpreted, with hindsight, the difficulties she'd had, saying 'I thought school was the hardest thing in the world, but now I know it wasn't'.

Lydia, on the other hand, showed an impressive willingness to share her feelings, and her extraordinary honesty about herself was an unusual feature of the participants' interviews. Although I experienced her as the most personally distressed of all the participants, I was grateful to her for her obvious courage in disclosing her fears and personal struggles. I regret I am not able to determine whether her experiences were unusual or if she was simply more capable of expressing something which the others could not.

### ***What did I anticipate?***

My first interview was with a participant who was slightly more reluctant to engage than the others. She reported feeling very little personal distress, except for

'understandable' exam stress, so my initial reaction was surprise, but her slight detachment had the effect of making me aware of my underlying expectations. I was curious about her desire to participate in a study about mental health and I was excited at the prospect of using my phenomenological skills to expand my understanding of this attitude which was so unfamiliar to me. Fortunately, IPA is a process of depth analysis. I realised later that, although the interview seemed so different from the others, successive levels of the analysis revealed less obvious, but important, aspects of her responses, and there were signs of other, more nuanced, ideas lurking under the surface. She had touched on the important themes I had distilled from other transcripts, albeit from a much less personal position, and this provided a good measure of validation for the resultant thematic categories.

Although I had planned my interview questions to be general and open-ended, my worries about holding so many preconceived ideas sometimes made a deep phenomenological investigation of the participants' statements much more precarious than I would have liked and I was often too timid about opening up topics or delving deeper into the participants' experiences. Fortunately, this became a slightly more natural process as I conducted later interviews and I gained more confidence in my ability to ask appropriate questions, yet I am certain I missed many valuable opportunities to follow important leads.

As previously stated, I came to this project with years of experience helping clients, as well as a history of asking difficult questions about this topic, which must have coloured my perceptions before, during, and after these interviews. However, I hope my attempts to show my preconceived ideas and prejudices, as well as some of the important experiences I have had (Chapter 8), will go some way toward giving the reader an ability to better judge my contribution.

### ***What did I feel toward the participants?***

Although I was uncharacteristically nervous at finally beginning my interviews, I have always loved working with young people and felt an immediate connection with them. I was tremendously grateful for their participation and felt considerable empathy toward them when they shared so freely of their pasts. I was also aware of the frustration and sadness I was carrying as a result of working with so many young people like themselves and these feelings grew throughout the interviews when the participants described their own anger, fear, and confusion. I processed my feelings as I always do when seeing clients and held on to my hope that my study would eventually make a difference for other privileged, but pressured, young people within independent schools.

### ***What effect did the interviews have on me?***

Eventually uncovering the hidden layers of meaning in the narratives during analysis was wonderfully exciting for me, but the interviews themselves were also immediately gratifying since they validated so much of my previous learning, while they also pointed the way toward further investigations. Having said this, it was also an extremely difficult study for me to carry out for a variety of reasons both personally and practically. The risk that I might have pursued my own personal agenda at the expense of truth has preoccupied me throughout and tied me in knots at times. The difficulty of accessing my participants has been frustrating to say the least, so I was deeply grateful when I found my interviewees were equally invested in what I was trying to do. Their enthusiasm and willingness to share their observations has magnified my own desire to publish these results and encouraged me to initiate many more conversations about this important topic.

Throughout the research process I have been aware of being highly privileged myself. My personality traits and the skills I have developed over a lifetime have allowed me to compete well in my business and to feel confident about my abilities, but I must also admit I am grateful that I spent my youth in a much kinder and more relaxed world than do these participants. I have tremendous admiration for these young people: they have had to work extremely hard for their successes and, although I find myself being slightly envious of their family resources, especially the economic ones, I would not wish to live as they do. Could I cope with being in the participants' shoes? Maybe not. Although I loved my years in school, I was never one to be terribly compliant and I needed a lot of privacy and time to socialise when I was young. When I consider this, it is difficult for me to imagine how I would have survived in their world.



## **Appendix Fourteen: Excerpts from CYPPE conference discussions with pastoral care professionals**

Initially, when I conducted my phenomenological interviews with the participants in this study, and when I analysed their transcripts, it was necessary to put aside, or bracket, as much of my previous learning as I could in order to listen phenomenologically to their unique voices but, now that I am recording some of the general topics which were discussed during the CYPPE conferences here, I am reminded again of the enormous extent to which the delegates' comments have corroborated those of the research participants.

### **About 'privilege'**

*'I think what happens with privilege is it masks a lot of the experiences, so that their experiences can't be seen by others because they seem to be couched in these accoutrements of materialism.'*

*'Not having things makes it harder, but having things only means that you can pretend for longer sometimes.'*

### **About young people**

*I've worked with girls who say, "I know I'm really fortunate, I know I'm really lucky, I should be really grateful I'm at this great school".'*

*'When they're born, we give them little briefcases and say, "go off to work now!"'*

*'I also think that there's a sense of guilt, that [they're in] a privileged school and yet they're not enjoying it, and they feel very guilty about it. Because actually some of the parents have scraped and saved and borrowed and begged to send these children to this school, and actually they're struggling. And if they don't get the top grades then they feel that actually they're unworthy and they're failing their parents, so there's a huge sense of guilt.'*

*'I often think "is there a different set of [social] dynamics in a privileged environment, different from any other group of young adolescents growing up?" And it seems to me that it's hugely competitive, and that they have to look a certain way, they have to behave in a certain way, there are the ones that are popular, the ones that are liked by people, the ones that are funny, the ones that are rejected – it's a very brutal place to be, and there are those that have all the projections put into them, there [are] the ones that are bullied, and it's a ferocious environment, it really is. I think more so than in other schools, state schools, that I've worked in.'*

*'The problem is I find the students have their own pressures, when I ask them to come and see me at lunchtime they can't because of extra-curricular activities, then they say they've got too many but if I suggest they drop some they say they don't want to*

*drop any. The values of the parents and the schools get embedded in the children. Unfortunately, there's a tension there you can't really [deal with].'*

*'As someone who went to boarding school, you fought your own battles. You don't have that home support so by the time you do go home at the end of term you may have been going through something and dealt with issues with your friends and your parents weren't there, so you've dealt with it yourself. It's an attachment break and sometimes the child has to make a conscious decision that they will allow the parent to parent. The parents may actually want to do it but when you've had to muddle through stuff and built up your defences on your own, you're not going to let your parent in as by the next time something comes up you'll be back in school and they won't be there.'*

### **About parents**

*'Parents are under tremendous pressure from schools, particularly in International schools, with multiple emails and events most weeks and an expectation of responding and attending. This creates an unhealthy cycle where we as therapists are telling parents to let their children have space and their own real experiences, but they are under this huge pressure to conform. How can we break this cycle and help children be independent?'*

*'[The thing about] parenting is that you are basically detached from your child about ten hours, eight hours every day, where you can't influence them, where the school has the majority of the contact with the child. And I would love my son to have more mindfulness in school and all that kind of thing, but it's extremely difficult to go to [the] headmaster as a parent in those schools – even though you pay and you think you might have a say for that – it's like trying to break down a concrete wall, and it's not easy.'*

*'...thinking about empathy, that you cannot give empathy to others unless you've received it yourself. And I think that something about it is also to work with parents and give them empathy, and give them skills and whatever, because when they do that – well maybe some of them do it because they're plain mean or whatever – but a lot of them do it because they are not in touch with their own feelings, so I think we have to go a bit further.'*

*'Mothers who don't work are particularly susceptible to [being helicopter parents], looking to their children for emotional fulfilment and to achieve their own unfulfilled ambition.'*

*'There's a funny combination of intrusiveness and neglect of emotional needs.'*

*'Risk has been mentioned, taking risk and being risk averse and parents being risk averse for their children which makes them "hover". But perhaps schools are also risk averse because they are providing a product and don't want to get it wrong as they'll then get no money, it's a societal thing as well.'*

*'To contradict that, I think a lot of parents are frightened to parent now. They don't trust their gut instincts. Basic common sense has gone out of the window.'*

*'If they are away at boarding school, they want to be the good guys when they see their kids, they don't want to be the rule enforcer. I get quite agitated but it is basic parenting which we seem to have lost the art of and people are frightened of their own kids, so they swing between no pressure and too much pressure.'*

*'As a parent I can see both sides of it, if you have a child at an independent school spending six days a week at school, who's seeing the child the most? The school has a big responsibility, in loco parentis, they need to be looking much more at the whole child's development not just their academic development, they are responsible for their social development too, they're not looking at it nearly enough.'*

*'[I saw] it sort of evolved how rich he was and how affluent they were and – probably the wealthiest person I'll probably ever come across I should think. But that didn't stop his parents punishing him on Christmas day because he didn't get an A\*, so he had to go up on Christmas day and study for four hours, and you just think, "Oh my god!" Where is their – you know, their life is amazing on paper, but what they're doing to their children is something completely – making them study on Christmas day because they just got an A [instead of an A\*].'*

*'In terms of psychology we know that if parents themselves haven't been nurtured emotionally, if they don't feel their internal world as valuable then they can't see it in their children. So some of this is about the vulnerabilities of parents.'*

*'... when this person mentioned they might go to counselling, the mother seemingly had a nervous breakdown.'*

*'Parents are shamed if kids have counselling, even the top performers. All very cloak and dagger. Access is difficult. Educating parents is part of a solution.'*

*'Parents are desperate, but clueless. They say: "Why would you teach suicide prevention?" Parent education is essential because, when the kids go home after being taught mindfulness, the value is lost.'*

*'You talked about the entrepreneurs, a different type of personality: the mavericks. Malcom Gladwell went through [the employees of a consulting firm]. He looked at the age when their parents had died and around 90% of these people had lost a parent by the age of 20, and a very high percentage had lost a parent by the age of 5, so many entrepreneurs have never had parenting so they don't know how to be parents.'*

*'There must be a lot of fear, fear of falling, fear of not being good enough, outed, seen. That I would imagine just goes from grandparents, through parents to children through their psyches and just sits there. Fear of losing or not being able to maintain wealth as well. And it's just as easy to lose wealth, probably easier than trying to make it.'*

*'Boys have fathers who work huge hours, golf at weekends, and have very limited time with sons. So boarding may give other nurturing relationships with adults. Sons and mums may both be angry with the dad that he's absent.'*

*'It seems sometimes – there's a sense for me that these young people are an extension of the parents, in as much as it's really difficult for parents to allow them to have their own identity, or even find an identity of their own, because it's in their image: how they behave, their conduct, what they do reflects so much on their parents.'*

*'They ask parents to be supportive with things like homework, but they don't offer broader guidance on how to support the development of resilience in children.'*

*'There's also a fear of mental illness in society, a fear that if you actually look at it, it might get worse, so schools diminish it and hope that it will go away. A lot of these parents have had to deny their own emotional needs to achieve their own success and so can't handle that in their children.'*

*'There's also a stigma attached to anything being officially documented [in schools], that's a parental concern.'*

*'Some topics elicit fear of the unimaginable. Call it emotional wellbeing rather than mental health. Use positive psychology terms, like resilience.'*

*'I just wanted to speak up for some schools being fairly intelligent but not perfect. I think that there is recognition that the children have an inner world, and that they are distressed and that they are allowed to be distressed, and they can go and find somebody – us the counsellors, or the chaplain, or their housemaster who's always picked for having good pastoral skills, and they can talk about their distress, and it's not shaming, it's allowed, [but] the whole school has to live the existence of getting the highest academic grades in this part of the country and this, and – it has it's madness, but, running through it as well, there seems to be a maturity about accepting that children have their inner world.'*

*'... there are a lot of my colleagues that have been in the school for quite a long time that [think] Oxford and Cambridge are the be-all and end-all. Now that has changed over time, but parents don't see that that is what pressurises the parents and the pupils.'*

*'Well I was going to say that quite a few children do actually get the grades to go along for an interview at Oxford and Cambridge, and they're not selected, and they completely fall apart. So actually they do have the grades, and yet they're not chosen, and that's because there is a veneer, and they've actually spent most of their time to get those grades, their social life has gone out the window, and actually they are unable to converse and pass the interview. And they feel a bit robbed. There's an expectation, they've got the grades, they've done it, but actually they're not chosen at the last hurdle.'*

*'It's results though, look on the websites, 70% of our kids get A\*, that's what's important to them.'*

### **About being a counsellor**

*'I only found out after she started that [the school] had no time for creative arts, nothing messy, the only thing was paper weaving.'*

*'I was a play therapist and went into a school, they told me to take out the clay, the glue, and the glitter; they wanted to vet the play therapy kit for anything messy.'*

*'... what does a counsellor do? What does a therapist do, you know? Do we stay with the young person? Do we incorporate the family? Do we start to incorporate the school? Do we – you know? We only have so much energy in life, and we're talking about a huge responsibility.'*

*'And I said [to a parent] "Well how do you see yourself moving forward?" – "Well I'll just buy in people like you. I'll buy in people like you to help me as I go through my life... so you're a service."*

*'You can add a little bit of subversion if you're quite– you can say [to the young person] "this is the system, and this is what the system is buying into, but what do you want to use this space for, and how do you want to think about other ways of being?" And you can think, you know, that just because it's the school's ethos, that doesn't have to be your ethos.'*

*'Isn't the environment geared towards A\*s? So isn't the school actually saying "Send your kids to our school, pay the fees, we will definitely 90, 95% certainty will give your kid an A\*. So it's a two-way thing. It's not – we're focusing on the parents here, but they've been attracted to this deal. So the counsellor's stuck in the middle there, I think, between a rock and a hard place.'*

*'I was speaking at lunch with someone who said they were a counsellor in two different schools, and they were paid £25 an hour to see the kids who were, you know, very upset, really needy, and I wonder how that translates into our experience of being within privileged environments. I mean I saw lots of faces going "yes, yes, yes" when I said that.'*

*'That does sort of link in a bit with the sort of idea of privilege and these families that are in this position, that can fund for their children to go to these boarding schools – and somebody touched on envy as well, somebody said about envy as well – so, yeah, certainly I'm aware of my car and I'm aware of my clothes sometimes, you know, when I'm at school.'*

*'It is good to be creative when trying out possible solutions to these problems. We have to be creative or clever. Speak in a language they can tolerate or understand. These issues are very scary for parents. "Palatable" is the key.'*

*'Our school's recent shift to abolish homework for kids needed to be done very carefully. Parents reacted, but now working well. And it is still a high achieving school, but you need to show parents the research.'*

*'We need to spread the word that mental health makes people productive.'*

*'We therapists are privileged to see behind the curtains and have a responsibility to society, not just to the individual client. We seem to have lost the ability to influence society. Think about the wider life around our clients and discuss it in supervision groups.'*

*'How about demystifying what we do? Widen out and join up thinking. Schools will then move to acknowledge the MH differences between kids rather than saying we don't have kids like that. We sometimes have to take a risk. Stand up and take risks. Go into the Head, using appropriate language, and discuss a situation. Can we talk about this? How can we deal with this?'*

*'We all have relationships with authorities which can be scary. Acknowledging these problems involves risk. We might lose our jobs. Are we going to be emotionally blackmailed? [We have to make choices.] Do I want to work for an organisation like this?'*

*'This is the conversations we need to have with Heads: How would we know if this is an emotionally healthy school? Head needs to be able to hear reality.'*

## **Appendix Fifteen: Why might it be difficult to listen to the distress of young people?**

The participants in this study identified many of the parents in their schools as business executives and professionals. Careers such as these, which entail very long working hours and heavy responsibilities, can be wonderfully satisfying and invigorating but also highly stressful and time consuming. Under these conditions, the ability to cope with the many challenges involved, while also maintaining good mental health, is paramount.

Since the early 1970s, business management literature has focused on work related stress: how to define it, identify it, and handle it (Cooper & Marshall, 1978; McCormick & Cooper, 1988; Judge et al, 1994; Sutherland & Cooper, 1995). The need to balance work with the rest of life has been an especially popular topic with copious studies having explored how high-level executives balance their time with family, leisure pursuits and work responsibilities (Judge et al, 1994; Sutherland & Cooper, 1991). Most studies investigate the consequences of the 'hard driving' attitudes and the highly competitive practices in the international business world, and the performance of management-level executives are evaluated regularly since their jobs require an exceptional level of commitment.

A study by White et al (2003) focused on the high-performance practices of business managers and the pressures these practices exerted on their work-life balance. They commented that British workers typically engaged in many more hours, on average, than other workers in the European Union and, in general, the setting of working hours by employers tended to raise work demands above the optimum choice level for their employees, making it likely that employees would spend increasing time at work and less time at home. In addition, they noted three especially influential high-performance practices which generated the underlying pressure in these high work environments:

- Performance appraisal practices
- Organisational practices which emphasis group or team collaborations which create peer pressure, or 'concerted control'
- Incentive or performance-related pay practices

Although this study by White et al (2003) explored the work-life balance and stress levels of business managers, it is also interesting to consider how the equivalent types of stresses in time-pressured and performance-sensitive schools might have a similar effect on students.

- Students are appraised continually.
- They conform to powerful underlying pressures to work hard which are a result of their school cultures and peer attitudes.
- They work for the performance-related 'pay' of top grades.

Parents who are busy professionals therefore have the opportunity to become consciously aware of the similarity between their child's stress and their own, but for those who do not, a closer look at the experiences of the participants may still not be sufficient to encourage them to empathise with their child. Given the level of distress shown by my interviewees and the clarity and strength of their opinions, it has been difficult for me to understand why adults around them do not see what they see or fully respond to their needs, yet I must reflect on my own learning in this respect.

Tamara Bibby, in her book *The Creative Self* (2018) explores the psychoanalytic understanding of the internal reasons why young people may go unheard when they are communicating distress. She believes this has to do with the unconscious defensive structures which maintain an illusion that an individual or organisation is safe. At an individual level, a child becomes a receptacle - an 'other' - into which adults can project unwanted elements of ourselves which we hope to disavow: '*our stumblings, our irrationality, our anxiety and disappointments*' (p.7). At an institutional level, the psychological needs of the organisation are paramount.

*'The dominant primary tasks of the institution becomes its own survival. When policy and social contexts stress... value for money, those who identify with the administrative requirements to ensure survival of the institution may feel pressured to focus on the financial side of the balance: the imperative to make money/a profit, to attract students... and to cut costs. Those whose focus is on creative living are likely to feel shouted down in direct proportion to the real or imagined costs of failure or fears of annihilation'* (Bibby, 2018:152).

My experiences throughout this project have also repeatedly forced me to be aware of my own unconscious prejudices and defensiveness, areas of blindness which closed off new knowledge and valuable opportunities to grow or change. Striving to relax these defences and gathering the courage to embrace the painful anxiety and confusion that my growth required has been personally challenging, and I believe I would not have been capable of travelling this path had it not been for my intrinsic enjoyment of leaving my comfort zone, and the soothing support and guidance of tutors and colleagues who had faith in me and in the research process.



When I reflect on the fast pace of change in the world today, and what is happening to parents and schools, I see them becoming increasingly insecure and anxious. They hold tremendous amounts of responsibility for developing the potentials of the young people in their care and they are entirely dedicated to the systems which they have created in order to educate them. Change under these circumstances is hard.

Still, I hope that, by giving the participants a chance to share their experiences and voice their concerns, their parents and schools will finally hear them. The participants have proven themselves to be wise souls who, above all, desire to make their world a better place in which all young people may thrive, privileged or not. They have challenged us to bring psychology into the centre of parenting and school practices so we may support their emotional wellbeing whilst also training them for the rigours of their future lives.

## **Appendix Sixteen: Additional quotes from Chapter 6- IPA Results**

*The following quotes were removed from the main body of the thesis in order to allow for a reduced the word count.*

### **Add to Superordinate Theme #1 (section 6.8.3)**

#### *(iii) Needing conversations*

During their interviews, several participants said they now felt free to 'come out in the open' to collaborate with the world, and they emphasised the necessity for people to 'say their individual truths'. Several of the participants said they belonged to groups or forums which championed the rights of disempowered or marginalised people, and they hoped to engage with the difficult task of changing a number of societal norms in future, such as homelessness or homophobia.

*T: We have an LBGT+ society too which was a really important space for people in our community which hadn't existed before. If you don't acknowledge it, you know, people can feel not part of it. Like student run [spaces]. But then there was a lot of teacher involvement and that's what was really great. Often teachers came into the conversation. It's kind of saying we sympathise and we're listening, and I think that would be something that I would make more normal.*

It is difficult to discern whether Tamsin was only speaking about others or was including herself in 'not feeling part of it'. She remarked how important these collaborative conversations were for naming the reality of things; actions which validated the existence and identities of people who would otherwise have to stay hidden, or separate, from society. While in school, she wished that students had been trusted to have more control over the conversational agenda, but she also spoke of her teachers supporting student explorations this with their attentive presence and participation.

### **Add to Superordinate Theme #2 (Section 6.9.1)**

#### *(i) The mental health of all young people*

All the participants believed the mental health of all young people was getting worse.

Lydia had this to say about the state of the world:

*L: I think it is a time period of distress. It is quite a negative time in terms of mental health, but it is also a time period where we are talking about it a lot more. I have numerous friends that are on antidepressant medication or have had some sort of mental neuroses in the past, or breakdowns. Things like that are common in the vocabulary of young people.*

### **Add to Superordinate Theme #2 (section 6.9.2)**

#### *(i) parents*

In Tamsin's next quote, she gave a scathing opinion of the 'open gradebook' system which is becoming the norm in many independent schools.

*T: If they didn't have the type of opportunities that we had in school, they want their children to have those opportunities and to make the most out of them. A bit of vicarious living going on I think in some cases [said sarcastically]. But everything started to go online, and they created this thing where parents could track pupils' attendance, pupils' reports, which is wrong in my opinion. They could check the homework that you were getting, when it needed to be handed in, or whether you'd handed it in. It's terrifying! It's none of my mum's business! I think it's pretty negative to have such involved parents, because it can be very suffocating, I think it's just another pressure to feel like you have to do something because of your parents, and you never want to disappoint them.*

Tamsin seemed to believe that her mother was being invasive by over-identifying with her, and this external control might not allow her sufficient space to grow. She asked me to empathise with her by imagining how difficult this would be for me to deal with, and implied that I would feel as frustrated as she did. This resonates with Winnicott's belief (1965; 1971) that healthy relationships between children and their carers need to be sufficiently close, yet also sufficiently separate, for a child to thrive.

Tamsin's reference to 'making the most' out of opportunities is one with which I am particularly familiar, since so many of the parents of children in my therapy practice

say the same thing. My own impression is that parents are sometimes fearful that their children, if left to themselves, will be unmotivated to succeed, will succumb to lethargy and will neglect to push themselves forward in the world. However, Bibby (2018) describes Winnicott's belief that a mother's [or parent's] role is to lead a child...

*'...to new developmental challenges through both active actions and active no-actions; she is able to tolerate the frustration associated with watching faltering learning without either taking control over or walking away. For Winnicott, in health, holding and handling are concurrent.'* (Bibby: 151)

### **Add to Superordinate Theme #2 (Section 6.9.3)**

#### *(i) Too much work*

*L: At my school we have lunch, we have a break period also, but no one plays! Everyone is working at recess. I worked all the time. And so many kids worked all the time and it wasn't creative work either. It was very much just like 'put your head down and study and read and regurgitate all this information'.*

In Lydia's quote, she identified with her fellow students when she said they could not give themselves permission to rest or play, and with hindsight, she believed this resulted in a useless type of learning where rote reproduction was favoured over real understanding. She had had to 'regurgitate' her learning before it was properly digested so we get the sense that she had not experienced being sufficiently 'fed'.

### **Add to Superordinate Theme #2 (Section 6.9.4)**

#### *(ii) Competition*

In Ulrike's next statement, she looked at the consequences of a competitive environment where there have to be winners and losers, and she noticed the potential for envy which intense competition creates.

*U: Everyone is sort of aiming for the same things, so some people are gonna get it and some people aren't. It's sort of natural. So I think some people come away feeling like 'I didn't get enough from it. I wasn't given enough. Somebody always got more than me'.*

*(v) Conforming to an image*

Gabriela commented on what she considered unhealthy images of success which she and her friends had been encouraged to adopt; ways of being which she believed were associated with privileged status, but which were sometimes unhealthy. For example, she described the cultural pressure within wealthy families for women to be thin, and the subsequent unhealthy eating practices of privileged mothers which, she said, resulted in their daughters having poor body images.

*G: I think especially like if you look at the families, at the parents, a lot of the mums were very conscious about how they looked and would always be at the gym and would be on extreme diets. I know of specific cases where it was literally the mum saying comments to the daughter, and I do think that's linked to privilege because, in my experience, it tends to be the mums from privileged backgrounds that maybe don't work and focus a lot on their looks, being thin, and that [attitude] trickles down to the daughters.*

*(x) Resilience*

Gabriela showed her distress when the stress became too much for her and she lost the ability to cope. She was so disconnected with her own internal experiences that she had been surprised, and sometimes shocked, by her own emotional reactions to what were, to her, just the events of everyday life.

*G: I didn't even know what I was feeling. I just heard like crying and laughing at the same time, and it was just weird because I struggled to publicly cry, as most people do, I think. During the exams I would just cry, and it was very much stress crying for no reason. I feel like I have a more or less healthy outlook on exams and their importance, but it just was like a physical inability or a release. I don't know, but I saw that in other people as well.*

Given that Gabriela was such a perceptive and thoughtful young woman, her statement was quite striking for me. Her emotional release may have been a somewhat effective coping strategy so it may have done her some good at the time, but she appeared incapable of seeing that her crying was a sign of her accumulated stress. This blindness seemed to separate her from the reality of her internal being and compromise her ability to make sense of her own behaviour.

### **Add to Superordinate Theme #3 (Section 6.9.2)**

#### *(i) Mixed messages from adults*

Tamsin saw that even her Headmaster could be caught in this double bind, and the unclear guidelines given to students, and rapid shifts of priorities, seemed to create considerable frustration and confusion for her and her fellow students.

*T: We got this new Headmaster who is very driven, and he has a vision for the school. But it changed from a school about building people to a school about getting grades. I found it interesting because the Headmaster always wanted mental health to be at the forefront of our school, and yet there was this disjoin with the students because, I think, people didn't feel that was being translated into what the school was.*

Tamsin's statement provided a very good example of how she experienced her school having difficulty integrating and balancing the dual philosophies at the heart of any school community. In the following quote, Stokes (1994) comments on the unconscious motives of any organisation, but I believe the same could be said about schools.

*'While an organisation may have one publicly stated idea of its primary purpose or mission, there are often also hidden conceptions at work. Put simply, there is the level of "what we say we do" but there is also the level of "what we really believe we are doing" and "what is actually going on"; the members of an organisation may be quite unconscious of this third level' (Stokes, 1994, p. 121).*

#### *(ii) Feeling exposed*

In Suki's case, she saw that the emotional problems which signalled weakness might be made even worse by the neglect of important personal issues.

*S: [Students] definitely don't want to show vulnerability. People don't really want to be out of place either, I think. And I think if you admit - when people admit they have issues then I think people see that as a weakness, but necessarily obviously it isn't, which I think can sort of put people off wanting to sort of talk about it. But if your mental health is affecting you, like your*

*schoolwork or perhaps maybe your social skills, then I think that it just has an effect on everything. I guess it can be quite detrimental [because] people will sometimes try to put on a bit of a show.*

There seems to be a stark difference here between the outside falsity of 'putting on a show' and the tender emotions which 'have an effect on everything'. Suki again mentioned her two centrally important goals of academic success and maintaining good friendships in school as she talked about the power of mental health problems to destroy everything of value to her. If those two pillars of stability were to fall then what, she wondered, would happen?