Post-16 curriculum choice:

Processes, values and tensions at a dual-curriculum UK independent school

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Doctor of Education

I, Emma Mitchell, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This study explores the processes, values and tensions experienced by students when making post-compulsory curriculum choices at the independent boys' school in South London where I am International Baccalaureate Coordinator.

The research was conducted with Year 11 students as they chose what subjects to study in Year 12 and under which overarching curriculum (IB Diploma or A-levels). A purposive sample of 21 students (10 individuals and two groups), manifesting wide-ranging attributes, were interviewed in a coaching format on three occasions across a six-month period in the academic year 2020-21. Narrative and thematic analyses of the interview transcripts revealed that post-16 curriculum choice is guided by subject interests, ongoing progress in Key Stage 4 courses and assessments, aspirations, influential family members and friends, advice from teachers, perceived 'fit', extra-curricular interests and past experiences. The information on which decisions are based is often inaccurate or incomplete, and some students demonstrated negative self-talk. Each individual student selects their curriculum route and subjects in adherence with school requirements, but is influenced by the values they hold (and the relative importance of these values). Yet, five categories of choice process emerged: placidity, quiet assurance, borderline obsessional, performances of satisfaction and thriving. Combining a Bourdieusian lens with critical realism tools reveals the relevance of capital, habitus, field, reproduction, doxa and symbolic violence, and I have noted some of the tensions in my professional role through autoethnographic techniques.

The International Baccalaureate mission encourages educators to increase uptake. But efforts to do so without establishing how distinctive students in particular school settings make curriculum choices are futile. I argue that educators and researchers can connect to students through coaching to reveal more than could have been discovered otherwise. All 16-year-olds, when making curriculum choices, deserve to be informed about the short-term realities and awakened to the long-term implications.

Impact statement

The impact of my doctorate research spans policy, practice, theory and research itself.

Having selected the EdD route, it was important to me that my projects had professional relevance from design to dissemination. As a physics teacher with experience in co-educational and single-sex environments, I used my Master's research on girls and post-compulsory physics as a springboard to consider the subject's popularity in my (now) all-boys environment. I published what I learned through this comparison about the importance of understanding school context for girls' uptake in *Tes*, and about single-sex education and diversity of subject choices in *Private Schools*.

When Head of Higher Education at my school and conducting my Institution-Focused Study, I surveyed 3000 upper sixth students at independent schools nationwide, establishing school leavers' expectations of university and examining how their decisions are made. This resulted in the *Upper Sixths and Higher Education* research report and *Mind the Gap* presentation. It is heartening to meet school leaders who have, as a result, enriched their university readiness events and interventions. In April 2021, I provided training for practitioners in international schools about how to manage whole cohorts and individual students in their applications to UK universities.

As International Baccalaureate Coordinator during the EdD thesis stage, I explored the process of post-16 curriculum choice by interviewing a sample of 21 students at my dual-curriculum school and employing professional coaching skills. Curriculum choices are important for finding a good 'fit' in the next two years of education, striking a balance of breadth and depth and ensuring open doors at the higher education phase. My study illuminates how students at the context school choose post-16 curricula. Its findings have been (and will be) distributed to my colleagues, the leadership of similar schools and the IB Organisation – through meetings with the Headmaster and governors, a presentation at IBSCA Conference 2021 and in producing a Jeff Thompson Award report. In addition to the professional relevance of this work, there is an academic audience in the field of choice in education, and accordingly I have blogged about the methodological implications of trialling coaching as an interview format and entered UCL's *Three-Minute Thesis* competition (placing runner-up).

With this focus on professional impact, I have enjoyed supporting upcoming cohorts of researchers too. During Year 1, I presented at an MPhil conference at the Faculty of Education in Cambridge on the *Impact of Teacher Research on Practice and Policy*. I have since facilitated four MoE2 and IFS workshops for UCL EdD students to support effective research design and challenged them to imagine what their research could do for them. I have also presented two posters and two talks at the IOE and Cambridge Education Doctoral Conferences, before collating these ideas in an oral presentation entitled *A Doctorate and a Job?* for the Early Career Researchers in Science Education Conference 2021, which was the first group I prepared any talk (about, simply, the EdD journey ahead) for in 2017.

Acknowledgements

As Van Gogh once put it, “Close friends are truly life’s treasures. Sometimes they know us better than we know ourselves. With gentle honesty, they are there to guide and support us, to share our laughter and our tears.”.

There has been no shortage of guidance and support from my supervisors Michael Reiss and Alice Sullivan. Over the last five years, Michael has insisted that we meet regularly and has ably kept an eye on my progress – despite my work deviating from the science education topic that I arrived with. Alice has brought a criticality to this qualitative thesis and, with Michael, ensured that I have worked at doctorate level despite exploring everyday issues in education. Staying with UCL, I must thank Sue Taylor for her EdD leadership, Jennie Golding for steering the postgraduate research students in my department, Adam Unwin for the thesis gatherings, Meg Wiggins, Mary Sawtell and Shone Surendran for running RTP courses, all who have examined or ‘upgraded’ my work and my EdD friends for maintaining a community despite our distance. I am grateful to Michael Thier from the International Baccalaureate for championing my research and McKenzie Cerri and Quinn Simpson from Graydin for championing my professional life (and teaching me to coach). And, of course, this thesis would simply not exist without my colleagues and students at school.

I will conclude these acknowledgements with my family: Myles, Liz, Roy and Kiran. You have shown me that doctorates are possible and, most importantly, put up with me while I do this one. Thank you.

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A-level	Advanced Level
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council qualification
Core	Compulsory elements in IB Diploma
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease
DfE	Department for Education (formerly Department for Education and Skills)
DPA	Data Protection Act
EBacc	English Baccalaureate
EdD	Doctorate in Education
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
Euro 2020	Union of European Football Associations European Championship in 2021
GCSE	General Certificate in Secondary Education
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GSA	Girls' Schools Association
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HMC	Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference
IB	International Baccalaureate (IB Diploma refers to the IB Diploma Programme)
IBO	International Baccalaureate Organisation
IBSCA	International Baccalaureate Schools and Colleges Association
IFS	Institution-Focused Study
IOE	IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (formerly Institute of Education)
KS	Key Stage
MELD	Moment, Edge, Level and Dimension
MoE	Methods of Enquiry
MPhil	Master of Philosophy
MYP	Middle Years Programme
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
PE	Physical Education
Pic-A-Card	Pick-a-card coaching activity
POLAR4	Participation of Local Areas (in higher education)
RQ	Research Question
RTP	Research Training Programme
SAT	Standard Assessment Tests
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths
T-level	Technical Level
UCAS	The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UCL	University College London
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US or USA	United States of America

Reflective statement

Every aspect of my Doctorate in Education (EdD) research – whether with physics teachers, school leavers in the independent sector or Year 11 students – relates to the concept of choice. I have explored professional identity in the wake of assessment reform, post-compulsory subject uptake disparities, the expectations versus experience gap for university entrants and sixth form curriculum choice processes, with all of these themes prompted by my own professional choices.

My EdD Year 1 'portfolio' projects allowed me to reflect on what I was influenced *by* and influenc*ing* as a professional in 2017-18. Through writing my Foundations of Professionalism essay I realised that many of my frustrations, at that point as a physics teacher, were born out of a lack of autonomy; I quickly became enormously grateful for the vocabulary I learned that enabled me to realise that critical incidents in which rapid learning and development result from a challenging event (Cunningham, 2009) and the pressure to perform when faced with accountability measures like lesson observations and class progress grades (Ball, 2009) were far from exclusive to me. Armed with a renewed belief in the ability of teachers to know their students and school context, my Methods of Enquiry 2 (MoE2) work explored the factors affecting post-compulsory uptake of physics from a teacher perspective – and I produced a conceptual framework that brought together curriculum, society, school, relationships and the individual.

I found a voice that would see me become Head of Higher Education at my school and publish articles for *Tes* and *Private Schools* magazines on post-compulsory uptake of physics and the benefits of single-sex education for subject choice (Mitchell, 2018b, 2018c, 2019b). I also presented a poster on my findings at the Institute of Education doctoral conference (Mitchell, 2019a) and anticipated throughout this first year that I would continue to explore interactions between gender and the study of physics.

How wrong I was! After a series of very fortunate events, I instead found myself working on behalf of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) and Girls' Schools Association (GSA) university admissions committee to conduct a nationally representative survey of school leavers in the independent sector, which would match the comprehensiveness of those more regularly carried out for students as a whole but which

systematically under-represent the proportion of students educated in independent schools aged 17 or over. In this Institution-Focused Study I explored attitudes to and expectations of higher education. The project tied in perfectly with my senior professional role and was the first that I am aware of to have uncovered the misconceptions held by students in this sector, which in turn go some way to explaining why it is maintained sector alumni who are slightly more likely to succeed at university when school-leaving results are matched. In addition to the formalities of reporting this work in my IFS, I also co-authored a booklet for school leaders and university admissions tutors with student-focused recommendations and a plea for cooperation between the two sectors in a bid to more closely align students' expectations and undergraduates' experiences so that all university applicants might thrive during the transition and beyond (Mitchell & Ramsey, 2019). I was pleased to present this report at the HMC/GSA Universities Conference in 2019 and to have played my part in generating national news (Turner, 2019; Suen, 2019), but it has been an even greater privilege to speak to audiences of students at multiple schools.

In part because of the leadership skills and whole-school awareness that I developed through orchestrating this substantial research project, I was once again promoted at school during the timeframe of my EdD – this time to International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Coordinator. Now wholly convinced of the benefits of allowing my research and role to coincide and tasked with ensuring that the IB Diploma remained viable through increased numbers it was easier than ever to decide what to research next: post-16 curriculum choice. At my school, students have two curricula on offer, but it had always been quite clear that Advanced Levels (A-levels) were the default. Before embarking on a series of interventions to ensure that families were better informed about the two routes and, ultimately, to encourage more students to select the IB Diploma, I needed to understand *how* students made their choices, which is where my thesis planning commenced in February 2020.

As it turned out, this project would coincide with two other significant events: school closures brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and the publication of *Where Next?* in which a fifth of university applicants were revealed as being barred from their preferred university subject because of the choices they had made when aged just 15 or 16 – and it was noted that disadvantaged students commence their consideration of universities at too late a stage (UCAS, 2021). It is my experience as Head of Higher Education that makes me most

conscious of the importance of post-16 curriculum choice. In short, a whole career path can be disrupted or blocked entirely from the age of 15. Whether or not students at my school choose the IB (which, incidentally, reduces the likelihood of this subject effect because of the IB Diploma's breadth), I would hope that everyone could make a reasoned choice based on the available evidence and through application of a decision framework.

This thesis took things upstream – and brought me back to researching a single school but with a broadened focus on decisions between whole curricula. It establishes the processes by which students choose their subjects and curricula in a dual-curriculum setting. It exposes the values held by students and the challenges they face and has enabled me to articulate my own hopes and conflicts as I navigate my first years in this post. My participants were endlessly generous with their time and warmth; some expressed their gratitude for having something unusual in their diaries when one-to-one conversations were hard to come by and others wished me luck! And I'm delighted to reveal that, once more, I have been able to showcase the conclusions that have resulted from this generosity.

I blogged about coaching as a qualitative research instrument (Mitchell, 2021a), presented at the IOE doctoral poster conference (Mitchell, 2021b), placed runner-up in UCL's *Three Minute Thesis* final (Mitchell, 2021c) and won a Jeff Thompson Research Award. I have not ruled out the possibility of seeking a peer-reviewed publication based on this thesis research either, but the balancing act between making an impact on professionals and academics (whilst emerging as a victim of my own success in IB recruitment!) makes this tricky.

The confidence in my voice that I have gained from this doctoral experience has also resulted in impacts beyond my school network and my university. I entered *Famelab*, a science communication competition, with heat and London final entries on *Why is an Atom like a Bookcase?* and *Three Tricks of the Light*. I have written for my school's journal *The W* on *Lessons in Cooperation from the Nature of Science* and *The Physics of Peacocks* and also spoken at our interdisciplinary *Prism* seminars on *Space and the Social Sciences*. I have concurrently co-authored the *ThinkIB* and *StudyIB Physics* websites, accessed by over 850 schools and through which I was proud (most notably during pandemic-induced school site closures) to offer a free-of-charge online IB Diploma Programme Physics course. On a similar theme, I have given keynote addresses at IB 'hub' events on *Approaches to Teaching and Learning in Physics* and hosted webinars on *Distance Learning in Physics* (including tips for

practical work using household items). And, back to my school, I now also teach Theory of Knowledge and have played my part through education and leadership to steering our IB cohort through the academic challenges unique to international curricula during the Covid-19 pandemic. We have risen to the global top 12 for results and to a record cohort size (for the school) of 50 students.

Embarking on so many educational and professional endeavours whilst writing the five assignments, three proposals and ethics applications, four progress reviews and two reflective statements required for this EdD experience – and choosing to remain in full-time work – has perhaps slowed the completion of the thesis but (I hope) only strengthened it. I owe Professors Michael Reiss and Alice Sullivan immeasurable gratitude for their kindness, patience, acceptance and belief as my academic supervisors, particularly between March 2020 and April 2021 when I learned that my own health and the process of education at my school were more vulnerable to external influence than I had previously imagined; my workload increased due to the use of alternative assessment procedures when UK examinations were cancelled and my capacity to do work was restricted through illness.

I am relieved to say that today (in December 2021) I am all the stronger as a researcher, professional and person as a result of overcoming these challenges. I now understand the importance of establishing precisely what problem is to be solved, the question to be answered, the data that will be required to formulate a response and the methods by which the data will be collected and considered in research that has implications for entire schools (or sectors), which is not dissimilar to the advice I give to my own secondary school physicists when they embark on independent investigations. I have unashamedly used my research experiences to broaden my own skills, whether through tackling literature reviews, autoethnography, surveys and interviews over the course of the doctorate, and deepen my knowledge in the fields of science education, secondary to higher education transition and student curriculum choices. I have dabbled in introductory philosophy, economics and psychology, which has provided a few laughs for my teaching colleagues, and met some hugely impressive and helpful ‘mentors’ en route (who have been acknowledged in this or previous assignments). As I often say to students, conference audiences and new EdD cohorts, think not just of what research you can do for others, but what research can do for you.

When I was at school in Northern Ireland between 1994 and 2008, I loved (among other things) physics and the Tenniel illustration (1865) of Alice during her Adventures in Wonderland attempting to play croquet with a flamingo and a hedgehog. This EdD has not only expanded my ambitions by seeing what others make possible but also enabled me to start on the staircase to reaching them. Without the EdD, I would still have made it to my school where I get to teach physics – and which really does have flamingos (!). Because of it, I now have a rapidly growing understanding of my principles as an educator, and a sense of the international education that I might someday be able to offer to school children in Northern Ireland. No one in the United Kingdom deserves this expansive alternative more than those whose existence is restricted to certain streets and beliefs.

Alice and the Flamingo (Tenniel, 1865)

But as Alice herself said, “it’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then” (Carroll, 2015, p. 83). Instead, it is probably time that I read my own recommendations for practice from across these five years with a professional (rather than academic) lens, ensuring that I am as informed as possible about the career opportunities that lie ahead for me, considering the process through which I might make the next choices and aiming to thrive in the experiences that follow.

1 Introduction

In this thesis I explore the processes, values and tensions involved in post-compulsory curriculum choices at the fee-paying boys' school in South London where I am International Baccalaureate (IB) Coordinator. Year 11 students were interviewed on three occasions: before, during and after the period in which they made a choice between the IB Diploma Programme (IBO, 2020a) and Advanced Level qualifications (A-levels). I used a professional coaching model to prepare for and conduct the interviews. Coaching questions often resemble typical open-ended qualitative interview questions, but I believe this project may be one of the first instances of explicitly using strategies from coaching to simultaneously act as a data collection instrument and benefit research participants.

The emerging data were analysed by a combination of narrative and thematic approaches, resulting in five categories of processes by which I suggest students make curriculum choices. These choice process categories are likely to be most applicable to UK secondary school settings with international curriculum options, and there are no doubt other vocabularies that could have been used or others not captured in this thesis. However, I hope my recommendations are of direct use to all curriculum leaders in schools where an imbalance in student numbers exists or there is a broader curiosity about how students navigate their journeys through school and beyond. After all, "it is by knowing the laws of reproduction that we can have a chance, however small, of minimizing the reproductive effect of the educational institution" (Bourdieu, 2008, pp. 52–53).

In this introduction, I will present an argument for why I have selected the IB Diploma and A-levels as the curricula of interest and provide background information about the school in which I both work and conducted the research. I will discuss what I refer to throughout this thesis as 'coaching' and 'values' and begin to elaborate on some of the tensions that sparked my interest in exploring curriculum choice processes. It also seems the appropriate place to mention the Covid-19 pandemic, which enveloped the entirety of the data collection period for this study and, I believe (in addition to trialling coaching as a research method and categorising curriculum choice processes), means that this document makes a further real-world contribution to knowledge.

1.1 Post-16 curriculum choice in England

A-levels are the most common qualifications for 16- to 18-year-old school students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In general, students follow two to four A-level subject courses, the results from which are accepted for entry to jobs and higher education institutions in the UK and internationally. However, despite appearing to be a reasonable catch-all for both candidates and destinations, the UK's post-16 national curriculum has been criticised (Phillips & Pound, 2003). Serving the function of selection for and exclusion from elite universities, students specialise more than in other countries. In addition, there are hierarchies between 'academic' A-levels and 'vocational' alternatives such as BTECs and T-levels – as well as within A-levels themselves, based on what Russell Group universities used to refer to as 'facilitating' subjects. Whether opting for a bias towards arts, languages, humanities or sciences or seeking to bring together a range, the provision and selection of A-levels is often based on little more than university entrance requirements, fragmented, and lacking breadth, cohesion and internationalism. There have been many efforts but few successes in reform of A-levels with university principals, schools and Prime Ministers ultimately agreeing upon the importance of subject learning.

A possible alternative is a baccalaureate system, featuring an overarching upper secondary education, school-leaving assessments and qualifications recognised by employers and higher education institutions, broad and balanced experiences for development of knowledge, skills and attitudes and an inclusive and common experience for learners (Phillips & Pound, 2003). One of several baccalaureate qualifications offered in multiple countries, the IB Diploma is "an internationally recognized pre-university programme for students worldwide" (Wilkinson & Hayden, 2010, p. 85) comprising a compulsory core and subject groups with freedom of subject choice within these. The IB Diploma offers academic rigour because students are rewarded for analysis, interpretation, synthesis, problem-solving, creativity and making connections, even if the content in some subjects differs from the equivalent A-level and the format of assessment contains more variety than merely terminal examinations (Phillips & Pound, 2003).

Globally, IB Diploma candidate numbers have risen – from 141 828 in May 2015 to 170 335 in May 2020 (IBO, 2020b) – and the number of schools participating has increased from 2437 to 3020. But schools in the UK have not followed these trends. Over the same time

period, UK candidate numbers fell from 4891 (IBO, 2015) to 4503 (IBO, 2020b) and the number of UK IB Diploma schools is 96 (IBO, 2021a), a drop from the 144 noted by Bunnell (2015).

In his writing on the "fall" of the IB in the UK, Bunnell (2015, p. 395) identified the expense of running the IB, insufficiency of funding, the lack of grade inflation relative to A-levels and the emergence of "imitation" (p. 390) diploma and baccalaureate qualifications as potential causes. I would add that Government consultations about reducing the funding of IB students in England's state schools, as reported in the news (Hazell, 2018; Allen-Kinross, 2019; Smulian & Hazell, 2019), may have more bearing on families making curriculum decisions than more nuanced IB-specific publications on its relative advantages (e.g. HESA, 2014). My professional experience leads me to suggest too that UK families assume that the breadth of study necessitated by the IB results in a reduction in depth, which they worry might restrict access to elite higher education.

IB Diploma students are sometimes described collectively as an elite (e.g. Gardner-McTaggart, 2014; Outhwaite & Ferri, 2017) despite claims of the IB Organisation[1] (IBO) to being "motivated by a mission to create a better world through education" (IBO, 2021c). This could be because not all families are attracted to a curriculum with a reputation for challenging authoritarian modes of schooling, supporting students in developing reflexivity and enacting critical pedagogies (Tarc, 2009). Alternatively, it could be that there is a bias towards higher socioeconomic statuses for families who are prepared for their children to take on more subjects and more assessments. There are also added financial costs for schools running the IB Diploma rather than A-levels, which might be passed onto fee-paying parents in the independent sector or not be covered by Government funding in maintained sector schools. Whatever the reason for the perception of an IB elite, there is some resonance with Bourdieu's thinking of education as a "sorting institution" that divides students primarily according to their cultural differences (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013, p. 120).

[1] The International Baccalaureate (founded in 1968 and based in Geneva, Switzerland) is a not-for-profit provider of education and qualifications with four programmes available at over 5000 primary and secondary schools across Africa, Europe and the Middle East, Asia-Pacific and the Americas (IBO, 2020a). The phrase 'IB Organisation' is used throughout this thesis to distinguish the organisation from the Diploma Programme (which I have referred to as 'IB Diploma', 'International Baccalaureate' and 'IB').

UK law requires 16- to 18-year-olds to remain in education or training (UK Government, 2020), which has shifted public and research discourses from *whether* young adults should study post-16 to *what*, and which makes efforts to explore curriculum choice both timely and relevant. This thesis plays a role in examining the experiences of individual students at one dual-curriculum school as they make their post-16 curriculum choices.

1.2 School context

The post-16 curriculum 'Options' process was explored at a 10-18 fee-paying UK school for boys that offers both the IB Diploma and A-levels, and where I was appointed as IB Coordinator in January 2020. IB uptake at the school ranged from 12 to 24% in the five cohorts up to 2020-21, which means that the expense to the school because of the requirements for more teaching hours is higher per student than would be the case if the number of students studying on the IB was closer to the number studying A-levels. Given the school's independent status, parents choosing the school for their children would seem to have proactively accepted its age range, single-sex status, teaching approaches, disciplinary ethos, typical academic results and socioeconomic diversity. Families are also made aware during the admissions process that their son will have a choice of post-16 curriculum, unlike other schools in the geographical area that have no overarching curriculum choices at any point; this dual-curriculum opportunity is one of the school's most distinctive characteristics. I am curious, therefore, about why a relatively small number make use of the IB Diploma alternative to the national A-level curriculum when they reach the sixth form; finding out will assist me in working towards the whole-school aim to increase IB uptake.

Speaking anecdotally, families at the context school have a range of perceptions about education. Some students gain prestigious university places because of a combination of results and broad experiences while others prioritise the achievement of good grades at the cost of non-academic opportunities. The school's present 'academic focus' has not yet "knocked out the arts, sports and roundedness", but Seldon's UK-wide observations suggest that "the obsession with results has ...[2] put in a regime where people are afraid of mistakes ... [and where] all that matters is your success in an exam, rather than whether you're a

[2] ... indicates omitted material

decent human being" (Fox-Leonard, 2021). In my view, the IB offers an antidote. Because the IB Diploma requires study across literature, language acquisition, humanities, science and mathematics, curation of an exhibition in epistemology, writing of a 4000-word academic essay and engagement in 'Creativity, Activity and Service', an increased number of students taking the IB could generate a momentum for the school to return to a whole-learner focus while also increasing the number of qualifications achieved by each student.

But it is easier said than done to increase IB uptake. I, like Ball et al. (2013), argue that a child is not a wholly rational capitalist, seeking to optimise their own future with the fullest of resources and unlimited unbiased advice. Some plan ahead. Some avoid thinking about the future. Some act as though all is well. Some are unaided by their families. And with post-16 education being as much "a key period of social maturation and personal change" (p. 41) when I embarked on this professional role as it was when Ball et al. explored curriculum choice themes in 1996, it seemed high time to ask the students themselves about how they were negotiating these changes, which in turn partially explains the small IB cohorts. Knowing this, I felt I could increase and stabilise IB uptake so that the school could continue to offer the IB curriculum while providing information and inculcating an awareness of the long-term implications.

1.3 Coaching and values

Along with its academic focus for students, the school is concurrently developing coaching as a strategy for staff professional development and supporting students in reaching their potential. Its partner coaching organisation, Graydin, has provided beginners and advanced courses leading to four teachers (including me) becoming in-house coaching facilitators.

Coaching has a theoretical basis in psychology. Eccles (2009, p. 78) suggests that the following questions, which would be at home in any coaching session, relate to identity: "What am I about? What is important to me? What do I value? What do I want to do with my life?". When forming a response, we drive towards what makes us unique, which consists of our expectations of success and the importance we attach to involvement in various endeavours, and in turn emerges from the perceptions we hold about our skills, characteristics and competencies, and our personal values and goals. Our identity affects our choices, such as that of college major in the US. In selecting a major, a student is likely to have high personal efficacy (confidence in their ability to do well) and to hold the subject

area in high regard relative to others (perhaps because of the influences of enjoyment, parents, counsellors and alignment with goals). Humphreys (2018) suggests that values can change and that they are moulded by environmental factors and language. He criticises the pragmatic way in which coaching is considered successful if an individual who happens to have been coached achieves a goal and believes that values clarification exercises are improved when the terms suggested are interrogated (for example, 'family' might be better described as an 'easy life' or 'warmth in communications').

In their combined systematic and manual review on 'coaching' and 'education', Devine, Meyers and Houssemand (2013) found that coaching supports learning and development for students, teachers, leaders and establishments, with approaches to coaching including behavioural, solution-focused, cognitive, instructional, executive, peer and organisational scholarship. They concluded that coaching is a low-cost stress management technique and that recipients can be supported in identifying their values, optimising their strengths, seeking niches in which to flourish and developing skills for success. Improved examination performance, as well as enhanced student engagement in and experiences of learning, was observed among 14-year-olds in England (Ren & Crick, 2013). The reason suggested for this outcome was that learning is related to personal values, attitudes, aspirations and identities, all of which can be ascertained by students through coaching. In recognising the importance of the post-16 transition, Dulagil, Green and Ahern (2016) studied 25 female high school students who practised goal-setting, mindfulness, coaching and self-talk exercises. Before-and-after t-tests indicated that wellbeing, hope and cognitive hardiness increased, while depression, anxiety and stress decreased. In the same year, a randomised controlled design was employed to evaluate the impact of coaching in comparison with other interventions to reduce procrastination in a cohort of undergraduate psychology students (Losch et al., 2016). Both individual coaching and group training proved effective in reducing procrastination with individual coaching superior in facilitating goal attainment, perhaps because of gains in autonomy and intrinsic motivation. The coaching relationship is considered by Spaten (2020) to be one of the most important ingredients in coaching psychology.

As a coach, I believe that taking time to consider the values held by an individual might support them in gaining clarity about their wants, options and eventual decisions, rather

than unconsciously allowing their existing habits to prevail or succumbing to a fatalist mindset. Having already settled on the curriculum 'Options' experience as the topic to explore in this thesis on education, I thought it would be doubly beneficial for the school and the research participants themselves if I were to incorporate coaching techniques in the research.

1.4 Professional tensions

The United Nations state that "parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, sec. 26), and it is certainly parents (or guardians) who will ultimately make any decision regarding selection of a fee-paying school. However, this right of parents is slightly in tension with Articles 12 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN Human Rights, 1990). Article 12 advocates that "the views expressed by children may add relevant perspectives and experience and should be considered in decision-making". Article 29 on education "insists upon the need for education to be child-centred, child-friendly and empowering, and highlights the need for educational processes to be based upon the very principles it enunciates" where the "goal is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence" (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, para. 2).

If parents' and children's rights to be empowered to choose an education are already in some tension, then I fear the complexity is increased further still by my professional obligation to persuade students to consider the IB. Denying human rights to choices in education can reduce the quality of learning (Devonald et al., 2021). On the other hand, "informing and enabling children to challenge breaches of their rights in schools should be an essential part of a transformative human rights education" (Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018, p. 18). To my mind, this includes alerting children to their right to choose their own educational pathway in the first place, perhaps analogous to how medical practitioners can provide children with treatment or advice without parental consent, provided a Gillick competence assessment (NSPCC, 2020) has been carried out of mental capacity, understanding of risk and decision-making abilities.

I am not merely curious to learn about IB uptake. It is my job at school to attempt to increase it, which meant that the timing of this exploratory study coincided with

interventions that I hoped would increase awareness of the IB among students and enhance their recognition of the suitability of the curriculum. I will continue this thread on professional tensions in the Ethical Considerations, Results and Discussion sections of the thesis.

1.5 Covid-19 pandemic

This thesis shares stories of education transitions during the most globally significant sustained event of the students' lives; "The everyday practice of sending children to school ... has been disrupted in a manner unprecedented outside wartime, with consequences that are not likely to become fully apparent for a long time" (Leaton Gray et al., 2021, p. 3). This coincidence impacted my methods and findings but may also have made a fundamental difference to my participants' worldviews.

In their study on Year 6 to secondary school transition, Leaton Gray et al. (2021) sought to uncover the effects of the pandemic on educational progress, social relationships and mental health in a time that is already fraught because students are at the "cusp of adolescence" (p. 3). Their literature review revealed that successful transitions often follow from positive home and primary school experiences, management of children's expectations of secondary school and continuity of learning, all of which becomes harder when schools are closed. Their mixed-methods study including surveys and interviews in two phases in 2020 suggested that students had experienced increased fragmentation of learning (some children made more progress while others made less than they might have done in another year), and that deprivation played a part in explaining this divergence. Technological problems created barriers to learning, there was uncertainty about the process of assessment due to the cancellation of SAT examinations, events linked to transition were altered or reduced and anxiety about education and peer relationships increased in students and staff. On the other hand, there were some benefits for the vulnerable and key-worker children who continued to learn at school and the teaching profession as a whole experienced rapid modernisation. Based on professional experience I can confirm that all the above, or their equivalents, were also the case in secondary schools.

Year 11 is often referred to as an 'exam year'. But the reality is that the students' choices about where and what they study at sixth form are just as important as what grades they obtain in their General Certificate of Secondary Education qualifications (GCSEs). If the

GCSEs go well, it is important that students' curriculum and qualification choices do not become an unnecessary bottleneck to future careers or education. If GCSE results are disappointing, perhaps even reducing the quantity of post-compulsory choices available, students have limited support before the resumption of term time to optimise the emerging post-16 curriculum. Having a career-related goal that requires a certain level of attainment can increase a students' work ethic – or anxiety – depending on how it is managed, which affects examination preparation.

In the case of Year 6 students, "acceptance of the different contributions pupils bring to the classroom, rather than a deficit model emphasising 'loss', can support genuinely formative and creative learning opportunities" (Leaton Gray et al., 2021, p. 11). When GCSE examinations were cancelled in 2020 and 2021 with grades awarded based on centre assessments and teacher recommendations, I would argue that student choices became an even more important output of Year 11, because of the relative extent to which students were in control.

2 Literature review

2.1 Establishing key terms

Choice is a "fundamental process of human existence" (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001, p. 1). Each choice is important; our choices impact on others and the choices of others impact on us. There are two broad approaches for research on choice in education: quantitative work to identify influential factors and their relative importance; and qualitative work to ascertain the unique, eclectic and unpredictable experiences of individuals. With choice being "incremental" (2001, p. 28), Foskett and Hemsley-Brown recommend that studies be longitudinal to capture the dynamic, contingent and unstable nature of the decisions for post-16 educational choices. While longitudinal designs may counter their claim that quantitative research is typically *post hoc* (with participants' memories blurred or forgotten), they assert that qualitative approaches often provide richer insights into the *process* of choice. If education is to be successful in producing "reflective and socially critical young people" who are developed in "personal, social and intellectual terms" (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001, p. 8), then it follows that students need to be involved in decisions about their future curriculum. There are two opposing ways of viewing the process of post-16 curriculum choice (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997): socially-structured pathways in which students have no agency and, perhaps in the eyes of capitalist policy-makers, freedom to choose for individuals.

Graydin's 'Start With Heart' coaching model (Figure 2.1) seeks to establish what a coachee values (2019). Through coaching, I aim to widen the otherwise "limited" (Reay, 2004, p. 433) range of possible options and to promote "individual agency" (p. 433) in a choice experience bound within "constraints" (p. 435). By encouraging a discussion around aspirations I hoped to understand current choices, in a reversal of the relationship between "engaging in a particular lifestyle" influencing who individuals "want to be" described by Sweetman (2003, p. 529).

Figure 2.1 Graydin 'Start With Heart' imagery (2019)

'Risk' is another relevant concept. Leaton Gray (2017) suggests that risk is merely a social construction, and that – even accepting the existence of food hygiene problems, bullying, abuse, fire, terrorism and extreme weather – industrialised countries in the 21st century may offer a lower risk to children than has ever been seen previously. Schools have a challenging task in ensuring the safety of young people, and the challenges only continue to escalate in a modern society with increasing desires for individual agency but decreasing capacities for control. There can be failures to consider the complexity of feasible risk-inducing consequences that flow from a decision. Protecting children from one hazard can inadvertently lead them into another – such as selecting A-levels over IB to reduce workload but missing out a required subject for entry to university – and policy can be introduced due to a magnified consideration of a risk that is actually unchanged – such as parents veering away from the IB because of a compelling account of the difficulties experienced by another student.

2.2 A brief history of curriculum choice and post-16 transition

The efforts of Taylor (1992) to measure the awareness, attitudes, intentions and influences of young people during post-16 choice are the earliest that I will consider here. Questionnaires were administered at 10 schools (three of which were independent) with a sample of 1355 students. In the year of data collection (1990), post-16 education was not compulsory and only 60% of young people remained at school. There was low unemployment, an emphasis on work experience and a well-funded national careers service. Yet findings even then were of the "complex, interactive process" (p. 301) with students being "socialized into making particular choices" (p. 302). There was a strong association between the extent of a student's knowledge of an option and their attitude towards it, and families, friends and personal interests were more influential than careers

advisers or teachers. This ranking of influences did change, however, for those remaining at school, with course availability, distance from home, prior qualifications and reputation also important. While Furlong and Cartmel commented in 1997 that "the transition from school to work has become much more protracted ... increasingly fragmented and in some respects less predictable" (in Sweetman, 2003, p. 538), Taylor's conclusions are not dissimilar to those in my own Institution-Focused Study research on higher education choice 30 years later (Mitchell, 2020).

The Parental Attitudes to Independent Education Project conducted in 1999-2000 surveyed 900 parents by questionnaire and "a small sample" (p. 81) by interview (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). While not exploring curriculum choice, the factors that students took into consideration during post-16 school choice at that time were related to headline academic results, quality of teaching, small classes, provision of extra-curricular activities, development of self-confidence and rates of 'top' university entrance. However, curriculum choices today are made in a world that has experienced globalisation and neoliberalism (Mu & Doherty, 2010). As international connectivity affects methods of communication, Wilkinson and Hayden (2010) suggest that schools providing an international education (for example, the IB or the curriculum of another nation) can play a part in helping students to develop a new version of international mindedness in which they better understand their connections to others around the world. The marketisation of schools means that parents, rather than their children, are exercising choice and competing for places but without expertise in the "products" for sale (Mu & Doherty, 2010, p. 3). The IB for some represents better higher education prospects and international qualifications for future employment. For others, though, the choice of this "alternative" (p. 1) is perceived as increasing the risk of failure.

The academic differences between the IB and the national curriculum are marked in Australia. In 2008-9, Mu and Doherty (2010) conducted focus groups and an online survey with 184 parents, teachers and students at 26 dual-curriculum Australian schools. Statistical analysis of attitudinal scales and thematic analysis of focus group data sought to uncover the differences between IB and non-IB students. While the parents of IB students were collectively categorised as "market active parent-citizens" (p. 5) able to negotiate the "confounding complexity" (p. 13) of marketing and hearsay, the parents of national

curriculum students preferred to avoid the IB out of concern for its extent of examinations, requirement for second language learning and breadth. In the United States, debates around the IB emerge at its very conception within schools; Parker (2018) reports on a Utah legislator who voted against additional funding for the IB in schools because they considered it "anti-American philosophy" and "[promoting] the UN agenda" (p. 7).

Research conducted with school IB leaders has explored the transition between IB Programmes. Hallinger, Lee and Walker (2011) surveyed IB Coordinators in 2008 to add to the mere "handful" (p. 124) of related studies and to "contribute to the broader literatures on curriculum reform" (p. 124). Mixed methods were employed at 175 schools with 255 Coordinators. The researchers concluded that there was dissatisfaction with the transition from the IB's Middle Years Programme (MYP) to the Diploma Programme due to misaligned content, assessment styles and reward for learning attitudes. While the dominant pre-IB programme in the UK (even at IB schools) is GCSEs and not the MYP, my professional experience suggests that UK schools are unlikely to be immune from this challenge in supporting students during transition. With "history ... and reputation" (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001, p. 10) providing an inherent advantage, it is perhaps no surprise that A-levels are often considered the more "natural" (Bunnell, 2015, p. 389) progression route.

In short, little has changed since 1992 in the issues that schools must tackle with respect to post-16 choices: communication and relationships, the approachability of teachers, access to information, the role of careers staff and timing of careers provision, pre-and post-16 links and parental education (Taylor, 1992). Taylor suggests that continuity in education, impartial guidance and the credibility of student empowerment should be at the forefront of school policy decisions.

2.3 Post-compulsory choices in London

This thesis is not the first study of educational choice in the UK – and nor is it unique in exploring choice and transition in South London. Twenty-four young people in South London were interviewed on multiple occasions during the period 1995-9 (Ball et al., 2013). Their narratives were organised into eight themes (making and escaping identity, at risk of social exclusion, learning fatigue, in a class of their own, 'ordinary' young men, lost in time and space, futures on hold, and constructing new futures) and related to the wider context. For example, the Conservative politics of ownership under Thatcher brought a "celebration of

individual rights" (p. 4). However, "some families ... [were] better at choosing than others and [had] greater financial and cultural resources to support their children in the post-16 arena" (p. 4) and the young people saw themselves as "individuals in a meritocratic setting, not as classed or gendered members of an unequal society" (p. 4). The 'A-levellers' were diverse, some the first in their family to go to university while others were from more traditional backgrounds in which post-compulsory qualifications were seen as a sure route to the professional labour market. Some were information-rich while others relied on the school to "[know] best" (p. 96). In most cases the family played a significant role, with parents making pronouncements of what would be deemed "unacceptable decisions" (p. 144) to those with a "clear view of ... what was best" (p. 144). And although there were many variables not discussed in the book (at the authors' admission), London itself was thought to have played a part in these young people's choices and transitions because of its blending of old and new, and opportunity and constraint.

A study by Reay (1998) with 10 higher education applicants in 1996 was also centred on London. Despite following a 25-year shift from universities serving the elite to the masses, she was sceptical about whether social justice would emerge naturally through increased numbers or whether more concentrated widening participation initiatives would be required. Following interviews and analysis with a Bourdieusian lens, she concluded that the "messy reality" (p. 528) is that families, schools, peer groups, communities and availability of resources all play their part in the extent to which an individual can "decode ... [the] increasingly complex ... educational fields" (p. 520) in order to make a successful application to the optimal institution for the optimal course. She also made a plea for research to concentrate not only on the "macro aspects of student composition" (p. 528) but also on "understanding ... the underlying complexities of choice" (p. 528). Brooks (2003) made headway in answering this call. She sought to unpick within-class variations in higher education choices in a longitudinal study of 15 individuals at the same sixth form college in the south of England over two years. The spectrum of choice processes even within this same context school was broad. Some constructed their own personalised league tables to compare universities, while others were more vaguely aware that there were reputational differences. Two were highly focused on employment prospects when drawing up their shortlists while four had no understanding of how they might choose between the hundreds

of institutions and courses on offer. The advice from teachers differed considerably, and students drew either confidence or affirmation based on their perception of their academic ranking relative to friends.

These three studies were conducted at least 17 years prior to the planning of this thesis. The literature review that follows seeks to present a more contemporary picture of what is known about choices in education.

2.4 Search design

Through this review I sought to understand the theoretical perspectives of other curriculum choice researchers, to learn of the aims, study periods, populations, samples and data collection methods employed, to bring together the findings (on choice processes, values and tensions) that connected with my study and to get a sense of what scale of contribution I could make with this thesis beyond its professional relevance. I was also curious about how data collected in recent years have been analysed, and in particular whether qualitative data from small samples are generally presented as narrative accounts of individuals or themed collections of students.

I make no claim that this review was systematic in the formal sense, but I will endeavour here to describe the parameters by which studies were included and excluded, and the means by which I located them.

I restricted the scope to peer-reviewed articles, theses, books and professional literature on post-16 choices in education, that specifically refer to the IB Diploma curriculum – and I used a range of terms for 'choice'. Upon searching the British Education Index and ERIC databases, UCL Explore and Google Scholar for the term in Figure 2.2, all of the first 50 emerging studies related to macroscopic curricula or to science and mathematics. This term also succeeded in excluding articles that contained no empirical data (for example, essays in which the IB Diploma was compared with A-levels).

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( "international baccalaureate" OR "international baccalaureate diploma"
OR "IB diploma" OR curriculum OR subject ) AND ( choice OR decision OR
transition OR uptake OR participation OR choose OR outcome OR access
OR intention ) AND ( post-16 OR dual-curriculum OR post-compulsory )
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Figure 2.2 Literature database search term

Reading abstracts or executive summaries of the first 50 to appear, sometimes skimming whole papers, enabled me to develop a strong sense of what would warrant inclusion: studies published in 2006-21 (the most recent 15 years up to the completion of this literature review in July 2021) with contexts where the IB Diploma or different subjects were an option, where aims were similar to this thesis with qualitative analyses, and where sample sizes were small and data were collected through interviews with students or where details of the choice process were considered. On the other hand, because this thesis was driven by a secondary school professional concern (curriculum choice processes for Year 11 students) and an existing methodological preference (coaching as an interview strategy), studies were discounted if they included no qualitative analysis (such as quantitative analyses of birth cohort or National Pupil Database characteristics and destinations) or contained no school-level considerations. I also examined the titles of articles cited in all already-chosen studies and checked my own references library (my Master's thesis and 'Methods of Enquiry 1' EdD assignments were on post-compulsory science), to reach a point of relative saturation.

2.5 Search results

My consideration of at least 51 articles for this literature review resulted in 19 that I will discuss in depth (Blenkinsop et al., 2006; Lyons, 2006; Nagy et al., 2006; Bland & Woodworth, 2009; Doherty et al., 2009, 2012; Bennett et al., 2013; Sheldrake et al., 2014; Holmegaard, 2015; Archer et al., 2017a, 2017b; Asbury & Plomin, 2017; Jugovic, 2017; Shirazi, 2017; Moulton et al., 2018; DeWitt et al., 2019; Mathieson et al., 2020; Palmer, 2020; Papworth, 2020) and which are summarised in Appendix I. Both studies by Doherty et al. are based on the same dataset and all three of those by Archer et al. and DeWitt et al. are part of the Aspires2 project.

The authors of these studies had a variety of foci. Some focused specifically on the IB Diploma as a curriculum option (Bland & Woodworth, 2009; Doherty et al., 2009, 2012; Papworth, 2020). Others considered physics (Lyons, 2006; Bennett et al., 2013; Archer et al., 2017a; Jugovic, 2017; DeWitt et al., 2019), science more generally (Holmegaard, 2015; Archer et al., 2017b; Shirazi, 2017; Palmer, 2020) and mathematics (Sheldrake et al., 2014; Mathieson et al., 2020). Those exploring choice processes most broadly were Blenkinsop et al. (2006), Nagy et al. (2006), Asbury and Plomin (2017) and Moulton et al. (2018).

Although these articles and research reports have been published relatively recently (for example, since the internet became widely available as an information source) with the earliest in 2006 coincidentally being the year in which I made my own post-16 curriculum choices, these dates of publication mask a wider array of periods of data collection. Although not reported by all authors, the earliest derived its empirical basis from a longitudinal project in 1997 (Nagy et al., 2006) and the latest is likely to have been concluded in 2019 or 2020 (Papworth, 2020). Despite making no efforts to generate a UK-centric list of studies (except through my database selection and searching in the English language), 10 of the 19 were conducted in the UK (predominantly in England), four were based in Australia (Lyons, 2006; Doherty et al., 2009, 2012; Palmer, 2020) and the remainder were carried out in Germany (Nagy et al., 2006), the US (Bland & Woodworth, 2009), Denmark (Holmegaard, 2015), Croatia (Jugovic, 2017) and Guernsey (Papworth, 2020).

My curiosity regarding theoretical perspectives was to be rewarded. Blenkinsop et al. (2006) categorised students' reports of their educational choices alongside school contexts according to a mindsets model. Lyons (2006) considered the 'multiple worlds' of family, peers, school science and mass media which inform an individual as well as considering cultural and social capital. Drawing on Bourdieusian concepts were Archer et al. (2017a, 2017b) and DeWitt et al. (2019), with a broader consideration of class, transnationalism, neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism by Doherty et al. (2012) and social justice by Mathieson et al. (2020). Doherty et al. (2009) considered the reflexivity involved in individual students' strategies for curriculum choices, Sheldrake et al. (2014) self-beliefs and their accuracy, Holmegaard (2015) identity and performance of choices, and both Shirazi (2017) and Palmer (2020) intrinsic, social and cultural influences. Expectancy-value theories were explored by Nagy et al. (2006), who considered internal and external frames of reference, Jugovic (2017), who suspected that motivation would be the strongest predictor of intentions, and Papworth (2020). In their twins study, Asbury and Plomin (2017) hypothesised that some differences in outcomes could be attributed to genetics, whereas Bennett et al. (2013) aimed for a design rooted in grounded theory approaches.

Taking all of these publications together, 14 report on interview findings collected across 64 schools (Blenkinsop et al., 2006; Lyons, 2006; Nagy et al., 2006; Bland & Woodworth, 2009; Doherty et al., 2009; Bennett et al., 2013; Holmegaard, 2015; Shirazi, 2017; Mathieson et al.,

2020; Palmer, 2020; Papworth, 2020), with the Aspires2 studies also providing interview findings but from an unclear number of schools (Archer et al., 2017a, 2017b; DeWitt et al., 2019). The categories of the interviewees include (in English equivalents) Year 9 (Blenkinsop et al., 2006), Year 11 (Blenkinsop et al., 2006; Lyons, 2006; Archer et al., 2017a, 2017b; DeWitt et al., 2019; Palmer, 2020; Papworth, 2020), Year 12 (Bland & Woodworth, 2009; Doherty et al., 2009; Bennett et al., 2013; Asbury & Plomin, 2017; Shirazi, 2017; Mathieson et al., 2020) and Year 13 (Holmegaard, 2015) as well as teachers (Blenkinsop et al., 2006; Bland & Woodworth, 2009; Mathieson et al., 2020), senior curriculum staff (Bennett et al., 2013; Mathieson et al., 2020) and parents (Blenkinsop et al., 2006; Archer et al., 2017a). Five of the included studies exclusively collected data using questionnaires or secondary data, with Sheldrake et al. (2014) focused on Years 8 and 10, and Doherty et al. (2012), Asbury and Plomin (2017), Jugovic (2017) and Moulton et al. (2018) on Year 12.

Qualitative data were analysed using deductive and inductive methods. Given their mindsets model, Blenkinsop et al. (2006) specifically sought to categorise participants according to these mindsets and to capture a sense of their stability over time. Lyons (2006) performed a comparative analysis of students' depictions of their family, peer, school science and mass media 'worlds' and their post-compulsory enrolment decisions, with DeWitt et al. (2019) adopting a Bourdieusian lens while employing their constant comparative analysis. Bland and Woodworth (2009) broadly categorised the data from their interview transcripts in order to understand and compare their two case study schools, Doherty et al. (2009) descriptively analysed their interview data and Asbury and Plomin (2017) performed inferential analyses to test their hypotheses. Thematic analysis procedures were followed in eight studies with deductive-only coding in one (Palmer, 2020) and inductive or a combination in seven (Bennett et al., 2013; Holmegaard, 2015; Archer et al., 2017a; Shirazi, 2017; DeWitt et al., 2019; Mathieson et al., 2020; Papworth, 2020); in Archer et al. (2017a, 2017b), feminist poststructuralism perspectives informed discourse analysis. Narratives of individuals were presented in three (Holmegaard, 2015; Archer et al., 2017b; Papworth, 2020).

2.6 Literature findings

The findings of this literature review are related to the processes through which choices are made and the values and tensions involved, and occasionally include other sources where endorsements or contradictions are evident.

2.6.1 Processes

The research design most similar to my own in this thesis is that of Papworth (2020). Studying participants during and after post-compulsory curriculum choice at an IB Diploma and A-level dual-curriculum school, she concluded that choices are individual and, even within each individual, shift over time. While those with firm and achievable aspirations tended to be most stable in their sixth form plans, time and energy were expended by all. The participants in Holmegaard's (2015) study went further, describing the continuous process of adjusting and negotiating aspirations and interests through narratives as "difficult" and "frustrating" (p. 1464) with only "fragments of information" (p. 1465) on offer from the internet, families and the media, especially in less educated families where 'prestige' was sought in place of a well-researched choice process. Asbury and Plomin (2017) found many explanatory factors in their study on twins that might generate these individual choices over and above socioeconomic status: teachers and setting, a student's personality, ability, interest, effort, peer relationships, self-perception and perceptions of their teacher.

DeWitt et al. (2019) also found that individuals' aspirations, likes and associations with university progression play a role in subject choice. However, they recognised the wider patterns at play, for example where students choosing A-level physics were more likely to be male, Asian (or Middle Eastern) with higher levels of cultural capital, in the top set for science and have family members working in science. These concepts combine to form part of the science capital construct (Archer et al., 2017a). Perhaps these patterns emerge because of the role of curriculum content in subject selection, which Shirazi (2017) suggested might be more important than interest or motivation and dependent on teacher practice. Alternatively they might be a result of stereotypes, for example of physics as masculine and its study not always compatible with being a feminine female (Archer et al., 2017a). In her study, Jugovic (2017) sought to differentiate between subject results and subject selections as outcomes. Self-concept of physics ability was the strongest predictor of

physics school grades, whereas the utility value of physics was the key predictor of educational intentions. Girls generally had a lower self-concept of ability with lower expectations of success but attained better grades. Boys had stronger intentions of continuing in physics, which supports similar findings of higher perceptions and confidence in boys from Asbury and Plomin (2017). However, this disputes the conclusions of Sheldrake et al. (2014) in which boys' intentions for further study in mathematics corresponded instead to the *accuracy* of their self-evaluations of performance in tasks (in addition to self-concept) – and which prompts me to mention the tension between perceived ability and actual achievement that I witness in my own school. In Germany, boys have been shown to outstrip girls in both performance and self-concepts in mathematics, and have been found to be more likely than girls to choose post-compulsory mathematics (Nagy et al., 2006). Whatever the relationship between self-concept and intentions, the male/female divide masks other gaps in uptake of physics; Archer et al. (2017a) believe that increasing the participation of girls would not generate a proportionate quantity of, for example, working class women in STEM fields.

Some subjects or curriculum options are considered risky. Doherty et al. (2009) found that choosing the IB is seen as "high stakes" (p. 768) and, however much I personally might argue that *not* choosing the IB is equally important, for those who do choose the IB, a university destination is taken for granted and a more "savvy" (p. 769) operation was involved. One remedy for this particular choice process might be to increase awareness and interest in the IB Diploma from a younger age and by preparing a 'pipeline' of availability, early preparation, recruitment, selection, enrolment, persistence and successful completion (Bland & Woodworth, 2009). Lyons justified her work on the basis that there was "little in the literature giving students' perspectives on their subject deliberations" (2006, p. 294); I question whether curriculum choice is positive (in favour of A-levels) or negative (avoidance of IB) in my own setting.

Some of the literature suggests a more formulaic process exists with relatively fixed categories of students and stages. The proposed strategies from Bennett et al. (2013) were aspirational (linked to career or university choice), identity-based (type of person or confidence in abilities), tactical (reducing risk or keeping options open), experience-based (likes, learning experiences or academic strengths) or constrained (timetabling or

parent/teacher instruction). Palmer (2020) suggested that students first select subjects based on enjoyment, interest and need before using further information and advice to fulfil any remaining curriculum quotas. No relationship could be found between the time a student spent making their choice and their likelihood of satisfaction with their decision (Papworth, 2020).

The conclusions of Blenkinsop et al. (2006) and Lyons (2006) regarding the influence of schools might empower leaders to intervene more directly in curriculum choice processes. Although each individual may have a slightly different experience with a uniquely fluctuating mindset, there is a link between schools with effective curricula, support, expectations and leadership and rational, resilient student decisions, and the school is more influential than friends and family because of connecting careers advice and subject choices (Blenkinsop et al., 2006). Teachers' and family members' opinions about the relative difficulty of subjects and curricula can impact students, who benefit instead from pedagogies that engender confidence in abilities and motivation (Lyons, 2006). Any school-based interventions might benefit from school-based language about choice processes. I conducted 'Methods of Enquiry 2' research at my school in 2018 on the perspectives of physics teachers on the post-16 subject selection process (Mitchell, 2018a). Data analysis yielded 13 influences on students categorised within five themes (Figure 2.3): society, curriculum, school, relationships and individual.

Other authors present the limitations to the choice's very existence. Admittedly at age 13 or 14, when students may not yet be able to take responsibility, Archer et al. (2017b) found that students can be channelled into Double or Triple Award sciences and come to accept this experience as legitimate, despite the school having most say. This legitimisation might coincide with the performativity observed by Holmegaard (2015) of students presenting their choices as appropriate, natural, well-researched and individual when the opposite was often true. And the IB has been shown, whatever its mission statement may be, to attract students who are more likely to be from high income, varied citizenship, globally mobile, multi-language speaking, postgraduate families and to be interested in overseas universities as possible destinations (Doherty et al., 2012).

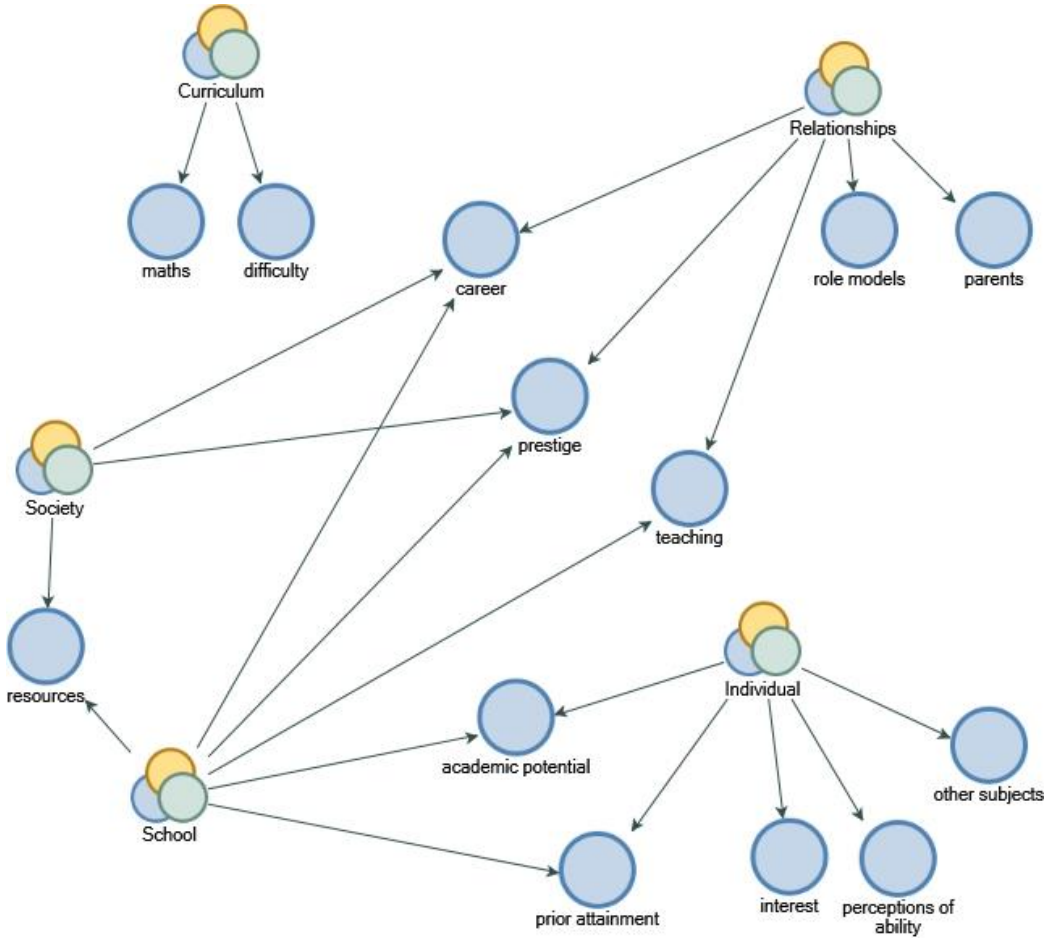

Figure 2.3 Themes and codes for post-16 subject selection (Mitchell, 2018a)

2.6.2 Values and tensions

It has been suggested that "how and why students choose and reject certain subjects ... is unclear" (Palmer et al., 2017, p. 645). A best-worst scaling survey of 21 factors suggested that enjoyment, interest and ability in a subject and perceived need in future study or career plans were most important, and that advice from teachers, parent and peers may be less so, leading to a recommendation that efforts be made to promote a positive perception of subjects with low uptake. However, Jaremus et al. (2020) might beg to differ. Their interviews with mathematics teachers revealed the student categories that were accepted into high level mathematics courses (gifted, dedicated and utilitarian) and how others were excluded. Parents too may offer little support to a more even distribution of the sexes because of stereotyping of their sons and daughters (Lloyd et al., 2018). STEM enthusiasts (male or female) were typically high-achieving and over 90% had parents aspiring for them to progress to university, but girls received less encouragement.

During the period of sixth form and the transition to higher education, students undergo transformations of identity. Some subjects (or curricula) are in alignment while others clash with this construction of a desired identity, and perceptions can play out in reality, as found by Holmegaard, Madsen and Ulriksen (2014) upon interviewing 38 Danish students at school and at university. STEM subjects were assumed to offer and confirmed as offering stability and rigidity (perhaps because of the experiences of the scientific method and fixed content at school). With this thesis in part being prompted because of concerns that some university applicants are blocked from their preferred courses because of their sixth form subjects, it is apt that some researchers identified similar issues at the post-16 choice point. Moulton et al. (2018) found that students pursuing an EBacc-eligible curriculum[3] at 14-16 had a greater probability of progression to all post-16 educational outcomes and that there was an increased likelihood of studying a 'facilitating' subject at A-level. Girls and white pupils particularly benefitted from taking a full spread of EBacc subjects at Key Stage (KS) 4.

The very fact that there are competing influences and targets at play perhaps leads to a forgone conclusion that values and tensions are relevant, but these were particularly evident in Holmegaard's (2015) participants choosing what to study at undergraduate level. A sense of 'fit', good career prospects, interest in subject matter, enjoyment of the culture of study at the chosen institution, an attractive campus, a high-profile university, a suitable location and access to family may not be attainable at once or by all. Physical scientists are more likely to seek post-school career opportunities, whereas biological scientists may look to optimise enjoyment and interest, with some students sometimes even actively avoiding physical science due to the unsatisfying culture of school science (Lyons, 2006). Nagy et al. (2006) found that positive choices can generally be explained by students' likelihood of having favourable expectations of future success, whereas negative avoidances are more associated with present-time abilities.

There is some debate about the relevance of prior experiences. In one study, physics students in high-uptake schools appeared to make a proactive choice in relation to aspirations, rather than a reactive choice on the basis of past experience (Bennett et al.,

[3] A student completes the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) if they pass Government-approved GCSEs in English language, English literature, mathematics, the sciences, geography or history and an ancient or foreign language (DfE, 2019). It is a performance measure for schools, not a qualification awarded to students.

2013). Shirazi (2017) concluded that students were more likely to retain physics in their curriculum following positive experiences, which I speculate might be a conclusion that could stretch to the decision between IB and A-levels depending on how students have experienced subjects across the five compulsory Diploma 'groups'. On the other hand, Asbury and Plomin (2017) found that non-shared environments (those in which individual experiences might have occurred) play very little role in differences in outcomes and future plans for twins, except for teacher quality and teacher-student relationships. Papworth (2020) found that a student's past experiences are of limited significance in the curriculum choice process unless they include traumatic or difficult events. However, a student's family circumstances do have an influence if the added cost to families associated with the IB coincide with parental fears of academic failure.

It is not only parents who must consider cost implications of curriculum and subject choices. Schools must make decisions about what curricula and subjects to provide within timetabling, staffing, funding and other logistical constraints whilst needing to ensure that students remain for the sixth form – and the guidance provided is not always impartial or accepting of students' KS4 qualifications taken at the same school (Blenkinsop et al., 2006). Students eligible to take mathematics at A-level may find this option unavailable in combination with their other subjects (Mathieson et al., 2020). There are also findings that not all students who are typically deemed eligible for Triple Science at GCSE are able to take these qualifications and that selective practices by schools have contributed to perpetuating social inequalities, producing patterns of student identity, aspiration and attainment (Archer et al., 2017b). As a result, Triple Science risks being considered as exclusively for the 'clever'. Rightly or wrongly, I suspect that few schools are strategic about providing and admitting students to post-compulsory studies that match ambitions, facilitating appropriate and targeted career advice with teacher contributions, and connecting students to career plan-related work placements, all as proposed by Bennett et al. (2013).

Liking or disliking individual subjects may not in-and-of-itself clinch their selection or avoidance. Palmer (2020) found that even though students may have misconceptions about science's utility or not enjoy it, its association with providing career opportunities meant that some students would persevere with it. DeWitt et al. (2019) found that the associations between physics and difficulty or masculinity could be enough to rule it out for some

students, irrespective of its utility. A subject's reputation may also play a part. Despite its creation as a means to maintain and build upon fluency from GCSE, Core Maths Advanced Subsidiary Level was avoided by some students because of its perceived inadequacy in comparison with Mathematics A-level (Mathieson et al., 2020). These perceptions may not have been held solely by students; teachers implied the courses' relative positioning when using phrases like 'drop down'. The IB Diploma has a reputation of being risky because of its workload, difficulty, exams and subject requirements (Doherty et al., 2009), and so students who might thrive academically on it can be needlessly put off.

Bland and Woodworth (2009) recommended that IB uptake can be increased when motivation (not prior achievement) is highlighted as key to success and the focus is on college opportunities (despite the workload). Although there is nothing intrinsically 'wrong' about Australian IB choosers seeking overseas university places, wider career opportunities, future mobility, continuation from MYP and a high-quality curriculum (Doherty et al., 2009), or parents valuing breadth, cultural heritage and traditions, assessment through exams, university entrance, independent (fee-paying) education, language-learning, internationally recognised qualifications and international cooperation (Doherty et al., 2012), I believe that there are also plenty of advantages to studying the IB for those who would like to progress to more local higher education institutions or who value depth; the IB is not just for an internationally-mobile elite.

Tarc (2009) has written perhaps most explicitly on the "enduring tensions" (in title) in the International Baccalaureate. The IB Organisation has "surpassed its wildest expectations" (p. 119) in terms of growth of candidates and schools, which have in turn benefitted from the growing ethnocentric transnational community following the world wars. The IB Organisation is, after all, a business and could do more to "[confront] the dominant agendas of transnational corporations" (p. 122). Tarc criticises the absence of engagement between the IBO and scholarship that might aid its own international understanding, such as ethnicity, difference, language and nationalism, and which may stand in the way of meaningful dialogues across difference and indeed dominate or cause damage due to ignorance of its partiality.

2.7 Literature discussion

Guided by professional concerns and methodology, I thought that my research design was likely to involve elements of qualitative research design, a relatively small sample of Year 11 students and exploration of processes, values and tensions even before this review was carried out. I was interested, however, in learning from published studies and identifying what might make mine distinctive.

While perhaps limiting the generalisability of findings, interviews combined with purposive sampling procedures have been used in this field (Shirazi, 2017), sometimes with the assistance of school staff (Blenkinsop et al., 2006), to provide a range of subject interests (Lyons, 2006), a particular curriculum emphasis (Doherty et al., 2009; Sheldrake et al., 2014) or a desired balance of other attributes (Asbury & Plomin, 2017), such as maintained sector (Blenkinsop et al., 2006) or single-sex (Archer et al., 2017a) schools. Even so, a dominating characteristic can still prevail, such as socioeconomic advantage (Sheldrake et al., 2014), and consequently perfect stratification across a number of variables is not achievable (Holmegaard, 2015). Focus groups can be used to good effect, both increasing the range of participants and giving a clearer sense of the scope and validity of the data collected because of the extent of agreement or disagreement (Bland & Woodworth, 2009; Doherty et al., 2009; Bennett et al., 2013). The literature also suggests that planned activities (Blenkinsop et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2013; Shirazi, 2017) in addition to clear, relevant questioning (Nagy et al., 2006) are commonplace.

In some studies, survey instruments with large sample size quantitative analysis may have succeeded in reducing researcher effects (Doherty et al., 2012; Sheldrake et al., 2014; Moulton et al., 2018). In others, the researcher as IB Coordinator was front-and-centre (Papworth, 2020) or the distinctiveness of the researched schools was actively sought (Bland & Woodworth, 2009).

One mechanism to check the validity of approach may be a pilot study (Doherty et al., 2009) or to include factual checking of student responses (Jugovic, 2017) to enable an assessment of accuracy (Sheldrake et al., 2014). Because of uncertainty over the extent to which students are truly responsible for their curriculum decisions (Doherty et al., 2009), the involvement of parents (Doherty et al., 2012) and teachers (Lyons, 2006) can be strategic for enabling triangulation.

In this thesis I present a case to support data collection during Year 11 to capture the choice process as it occurs. While a risk of this approach is potentially a reduced understanding of the eventual decisions made by the participants (some may change their mind or present their plans differently to their real intentions), it was one I was prepared to tackle in this exploratory study as it would give a stronger sense of the directionality of relationships between influences and choices, as others have in the past (Nagy et al., 2006; Papworth, 2020). The dominant mode of data collection has been *post hoc* with participants recalling their experiences (Lyons, 2006; Doherty et al., 2009; Jugovic, 2017; Shirazi, 2017), but many studies in the literature make strong recommendations on this basis. Palmer believed she might even have been "unique [in exploring] the subject decision-making process at the time students were making their choices" (2020, p. 607) so that "perceptions can be addressed at subject-selection time" (p. 591). Nagy et al. (2006) make a plea for internationally comparative, longitudinal studies to gain a deeper insight into students' educational decisions and the impact of school contexts on individual decisions. And some quantitative studies may themselves present a justification for a qualitative study: "it would be valuable to investigate the choice process more qualitatively through ... in-depth interviews ... [to] identify some of the complex pathways educational choices may follow. Longitudinal studies ... could help investigate how choices about participation in science develop over time" (Bøe, 2012, p. 15).

The literature is not blind to the relevance of choices in education. Citing the *Youth Matters* green paper published in 2005, Blenkinsop et al. (2006) ask "What kind of help and support is most important for young people? How can we ensure that information, advice and guidance provided to young people is comprehensive and impartial?" (p. 1), questions to which I do not believe schools have a definitive answer today. Given that "young people make decisions in different ways" (p. ix) and the "call for qualitative studies to explore how choices create a sense of fit for individual students" (Holmegaard, 2015, p. 1454), this thesis is timely and sufficiently context-bound to provide a model by which processes could be explored elsewhere. I do not feel it should remain forever "unclear whether and how we can influence pupils' choices and behaviour at this important developmental stage" (Asbury & Plomin, 2017, p. 31) with such "important and lasting consequences" (p. 1). This thesis

will enable me in future to present the curriculum choice “in a way that invites students to take active part in crafting their own education” (Holmegaard, 2015, p. 1473).

Bland and Woodworth (2009) suggest that case studies can be used to explore issues of uptake and achievement in low-income and minority students, so I might extrapolate from this that case studies can also be used to explore low uptake overall. Furthermore, “understanding the perennial issue of relative disadvantage in education requires a conceptualisation of relative advantage and how it is increasingly accomplished through choice behaviours and ‘strategies of closure’ in niche settings” (Doherty et al., 2012, p. 329, citing Ball). Bennett et al. (2013) continue in suggesting “it is desirable to gather additional data to illuminate the situation particularly in relation to school and individual factors affecting post-compulsory uptake” (p. 668) so “case studies [can be] specifically undertaken to explore in detail school-related reasons for post-compulsory uptake” (p. 685).

Making an analogy between disparities in IB selection with girls and reduced physics uptake, I find myself motivated by Archer et al. (2017a): “if the only women who can make it into post-compulsory physics are essentially clones of the current cultural arbitrary, then it seems unlikely that the culture of physics will change dramatically” (p. 33). They make the case that a “potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry may be to focus on what might be done to change the cultural arbitrary of physics and the conditions within which students make their subject choices, rather than attempting to change the attitudes and aspirations of girls themselves” (p. 34), because they “consider the exclusion of girls/women from physics to be a social injustice that needs to be challenged, both for the good of underrepresented groups but also in the interests of creating socially just science” (p. 34). Three years on, DeWitt et al. (2019) continued to regret the “limited work ... in this area” (p. 1072). Leaning on the comparison of under-representation in physics and the IB Diploma once more, some resonance in the “entrenched nature of the challenges facing efforts to increase equity in post-compulsory ... participation” (p. 1071) become clear, as does the value of “using the lens of Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction and especially the notion of the cultural arbitrary, [to] provide insights into subject choice and related equity issues surrounding [post-compulsory] participation” (p. 1083).

Because “fewer studies have used students’ reflections of their school science experiences in order to establish how school experiences shape future choice” (Shirazi, 2017, p. 1895), I

am heartened in my own initial research intentions, and the assertion that course selection is gendered (Nagy et al., 2006) endorses the selection of a school for this thesis that is single-sex. Interviews "provide the rich data that [demonstrate] that the cultural context influences many ... factors ... [and] trends are able to emerge that are not predicted by theory" (Papworth, 2020, p. 131); because post-compulsory chemistry and physics are associated with "a strategic positioning for desirable tertiary courses or desirable careers" (Bennett et al., 2013, p. 668), I will be able to explore the relevance to IB Diploma selection in my independent school where university progression is the norm. The number of studies prompted by subject disparities (Lyons, 2006; Nagy et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2013; Jugovic, 2017; Palmer, 2020), looking at individual subjects at KS4 or KS5 (e.g. Lyons, 2006; Nagy et al., 2006; Archer et al., 2017b; DeWitt et al., 2019) or studying already high-uptake IB schools (Bland & Woodworth, 2009; Doherty et al., 2009) implies a gap exists in research explicitly exploring uptake of whole post-16 curricula. Research at post-18 is too late: "start organising activities aimed at achieving gender balance in educational choices ... early ... and not at the end of primary or secondary school" (Jugovic, 2017, p. 90). I fear that, just as the very existence of Triple Science as a means to stretch the top students from KS3 may actually reduce the number of post-compulsory physicists as the existence of an elite pathway leads to an assumption of it being "not for me" (Archer et al., 2017b, p. 313), the offering of the IB to promote international mindedness may do likewise.

Many of these researchers offered closing remarks and recommendations that I hope this thesis goes some way to addressing. Shirazi (2017) questioned "whether researchers can directly and faithfully capture a fixed and final snapshot of lived experience" (p. 1909), which I attempt to do here through coaching and establishing students' "real interests and abilities" (Jugovic, 2017, p. 90). While "inequality still pervades the English system" (Mathieson et al., 2020, p. 718), "interrogation is needed of restrictions within the education system" (p 708), which selection of a dual-curriculum school offering the IB Diploma offers. Doherty et al. (2012) provide another reason: "There has been little rigorous empirical research on the IB. Published work tends to be practice- or advocacy-based, anecdotal, small scale survey with convenience samples or essayist critique" (p. 314). Archer et al. (2017b) "question whether young people (and society) are best served by being encouraged to take a relatively narrow, specialist set of A-levels" (p. 313) and propel me to

critically reflect on whether post-16 choices are any less “fictitious” (p. 312) than they are for KS4. Before falling into the same traps as the “policy makers [who] have experimented with the curriculum, often without evidence regarding the average effects, let alone the implications for particular groups of pupils” (Moulton et al., 2018, p. 114), it is essential to consider the “unforeseen and long-term influence on young people’s educational trajectories, with implications for inequalities in the life course” (p. 114) that might already be present or become the case.

2.8 Literature summary

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) propose that understanding the process of choice is “essential” (p. 26) if predictions are to be made about the effect of policy changes. They suggest that only by understanding how choices occur, what outcomes may emerge and what factors are influential can we understand the “interaction of choice and the socio-economic structures, systems and decisions in which choice is made” (p. 3). Through doing so, a curriculum leader would be better placed to “examine what works to influence choice, and how to encourage students to make better informed choices that lead to the best possible outcome for them” (Papworth, 2020, p. 135).

In 2001, choices within independent schools had “not been subjected to extensive public domain research” (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001, p. 76). In 2021, there still exists only a small body of literature that directly references the IB curriculum in connection with educational choice. Little has been published in peer-reviewed journals, with articles (not presented here) typically discussing IB experiences or outcomes rather than its uptake. The IB Organisation itself has not published research of this nature. Therefore, this study should be of interest to school leaders who might be in the process of introducing the IB and to educators in dual-curriculum contexts around the world who are battling with problems of uptake.

2.9 Theoretical perspectives

The literature reveals that many theories and approaches have been used to explain and support understandings of choice in education. More than ten (mindsets, multiple worlds, Bourdieusian terminology, reflexivity, self-belief, identity and performance, expectancy-value, intrinsic, social and cultural influences, motivation and genetics) were found in the 19 articles that I reviewed, and there are undoubtedly more not considered here. With my

research focused on the accounts of individual students, I will discuss two ways that students making curriculum choices can be considered on a loose spectrum from high to low personal agency: rational decision making, whereby students are armed to the fullest extent with all information that they could require and a clear focus on what they are striving to optimise; and a Bourdieusian framework comprising capital, habitus, field, reproduction, doxa and symbolic violence (in which students are constrained in the choices they can make).

2.9.1 Variations on rational decision making

One model of choice with relation to economics and psychology is economically-rational decision making (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). The criteria for this model to apply are utility maximisation, self-interest and rational processes. For some families, curriculum decisions aim to maximise the likelihood that a student will later succeed in the labour market. A family is likely to value meeting the physiological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualisation needs of their child (Maslow, 1943) and a school might aspire for its students to be vigilant in information collection (Janis & Mann, 1977).

However, this model is less likely to be satisfied in other ways; school students are not wholly rational (Tarc, 2009). Many students are unable to make a rational choice simply through lacking the information needed to be systematic. The students with least existing knowledge of the IB may suffer most from curriculum choice myopia. For the rationality criterion to be met, options must be ordered so that something can be maximised. But it is not possible to take account of all available information, to calculate the advantages and disadvantages, nor even to assume that students are not merely seeking what is "good enough" (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001, p. 35). A young person may consider their options in the order that they are presented until they reach the first that satisfies the conditions needed, bias may restrict the information that is obtained, and predispositions or inertia may mean that a choice is all but predestined. The impact on self-esteem, the introduction of dissonance and the risk of non-conforming under peer pressure may also reduce the scope of the decision process. Bourdieu too argued against the plausibility of economically rational decision making – "the human mind is generically bounded ... socially structured and determined and, as a consequence, limited" (2005, p. 211) – and Self (2021)

suggests that contemporary liberalism reliant on a competitive market is incompatible with equality in education provision.

In recognising that education is not a perfect marketplace, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) propose an alternative model for this “quasi market” (p. 16). This modified model for choices in education includes the emergence of choice over time, the roles of family, teachers and schools, the social context, the importance of failures, perceptions and self-image, defaulting and dissonance and tensions between stability and instability of outcomes.

2.9.2 Imposing structures

There is another, less student-centric, way in which choices in education may be regarded and the data from this study analysed, which is instead to consider the structures that restrict students’ manoeuvres. To do this I will employ a Bourdieusian lens, which Nash (2002) and Reay (2004) appeal to as a mechanism for considering data that emerge from qualitative studies. Bourdieu himself suggested that his tools be put to use in “puzzles encountered” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 160) but also that it is appropriate for researchers to be led by their “intuition" (p. 164). As Charlesworth (1999c, p. 23) put it when introducing his account of 43 interviews with working class people in Rotherham, there is a “primordial bond” between people and the world, with the sociology of Bourdieu enabling “the truth of ... lives [to] be captured” (Charlesworth, 1999a, p. 65). At my school, there may be no “dominant [group]” (Reay, 2004, p. 436) of individuals, but there is a dominant disposition towards selection of A-levels.

To take my Bourdieusian justification a step further, if “the education system is the chief institutional site through which [members of the working class] come to learn the dominant criteria of evaluation and realise their own competence as negatively valued” (Charlesworth, 1999b, p. 280), then it is equally important to make a contribution to knowledge for the students at a fee-paying school with an unusually socioeconomically diverse intake. I argue that the language of Bourdieu is an appropriate framework for exploring the bounds within which curriculum choices are made; in order to take the leap into the more culturally unusual IB curriculum, a student would have to decide against the dominant A-levels option. My job as IB Coordinator at the school is to ensure that the advanced landscape in which A-levels dominate does not “produce radicalized categories of

people" (p. 293) that perpetuates the same problem through exclusion from resources and closure of possibilities.

Habitus refers to "our overall orientation to or way of being in the world; our predisposed ways of thinking, acting and moving in and through the social environment that encompasses posture, demeanour, outlook, expectations and tastes" (Sweetman, 2003, p. 532). A given student might be predisposed to view the IB Diploma as high-risk because they fear the uncertainty associated with studying a larger number of subjects; another might be predisposed to view A-levels as high-risk because the smaller number of qualifications means that the result in each subject will be more exposed. But students, whether they realise it or not, have "freedom of movement" (p. 532) too, between an "infinite number of possible situations" (p. 535). The competitive realm (of curriculum choices) in which students practise these dispositions is the *field*, which as a physics teacher I see as analogous to a zero-sum closed thermodynamic system, not least because the most academically successful schools and competitive universities have very limited growth in the availability of places: "The total quantity of all the forces capable of work in the whole universe remains eternal and unchanged throughout all their changes" (von Helmholtz, 1863).

Capital – be it social, cultural, economic or symbolic (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013) – is the currency that can facilitate relative advances in, rather than *reproduction* of, position or status, just as in physics energies can be interconverted for the production of useful mechanical work. As my colleague put it in a lunchtime lecture for students (some of whom were participants in this study), "you can't survive in a capitalist world without capital" (Powell, 2021).

For some families, moments of choice present an opportunity to use knowledge about curricula through cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), the familiarity with the dominant culture in a society (Sullivan, 2001) which constitutes the "essential knowledge [needed] to prepare ... for future success" (Ofsted, 2019, p. 31) and which can innately provide a *feel for the game*, "the flow and logic of practice" (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013, p. 124). Both the IB Diploma and A-levels offer strategic pathways destined for overcoming the impending and inevitable competition of university entrance, but there are advantages and disadvantages inherent in both curricula and all subjects within them. Cultural capital is

transmitted within the home and, although not the sole determinant, significantly affects GCSE performance (Sullivan, 2001). Younger siblings of IB students may also want to preserve social capital, "which can only be reproduced through the reproduction of the primary social unit which is the family" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 107), and try to keep up with the language and terminology used by an older sibling: "it is the dominated who is obliged to adopt the language of the dominant" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 143). Teachers hold an asymmetric power position relative to students when providing information about curriculum choice processes: "every linguistic exchange contains the potentiality of an act of power ... however, even ... the refusal to wield domination can be part of a strategy of condescension" (p 145). Atkin (2000) considers education itself as a form of cultural capital in his study of lifelong learning through small group interviews.

Intentionally or otherwise, families may drive a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop of effective decisions, particularly if Nash's (1990) suggestion that cultural capital can be converted into social and economic capital holds. Some choice options may only be available to those of certain economic capital, and students' perceptions of their own abilities vary with socioeconomic status (Sullivan, 2006). Additionally, taking into account that tuition fee rises of some 400% at private schools (Killick & Co, 2019) have far outstripped wage increases between 1990 and 2015, it is no surprise that Nash argues "the school has become the most important agency for the reproduction of almost all social classes" (1990, p. 432). I would also suggest that the students who are least likely to choose the IB are also least likely to have access to role models who promote academic scholarship and international curricula, a particular representation of social capital (Sjaastad, 2012). It would perhaps require a reflexive identity transformation (McNay, 1999), with an interrogation of thinking, living and writing that far exceeds what could typically be expected of teenagers (Charlesworth, 1999c) – but which I'm hoping to tap into with questioning of a coaching nature.

On the other hand, Kleanthous (2013) argues that capital alone is insufficient to understand – rather than merely describe – choices in education. By purchasing additional tutoring (financial capital), organising visits to workplaces (social capital), facilitating a greater likelihood of strong educational credentials (cultural capital) and seeking advice on higher education entry not available at schools (informational capital), parents are gifting their

children a debt of familial capital (Reay, 1998) that can perhaps only be repaid by pursuing a university degree at an elite institution lest a "feeling of obligation or gratitude" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 109) prevail. This form of *symbolic violence* is "exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 167–168), perhaps through subtle persuasion, but *misrecognition* is when this violence is not perceived as such, like Kleanthous' middle class secondary school student interviewees who denied that their parents had influenced their decisions to participate in higher education (2013), despite sharing the familial *doxa* (Atkinson, 2011), or dispositions.

While there is precedent for employing a Bourdieusian perspective in explorations of choice, for example in KS4 science (Archer et al., 2017b), higher education institutions (Reay, 1998) and museum attendance (e.g. Dawson, 2014; Dicks, 2016; Hanquinet, 2016; Dawson, 2018), there are also critiques of this approach. For example, Sullivan (2001) expresses concerns about the circular relationship between educational level as a proxy for cultural capital and the impact of cultural capital on educational level, the lack of analogy for 'returns' in cultural capital as there is in economic capital and the assumption that highbrow cultural awareness is a prerequisite for success at secondary school while it remains unrewarded in the assessment components of the national curriculum. I must also bear in mind that the data collection for this thesis does not span several years and so reproduction and other long-term effects may not be directly observable. And Reay, while in favour of considering Bourdieusian terms in empirical analyses for their "ability to capture continuity and change" (2004, p. 431), cautions against the "contemporary fashion of overlaying research analyses with Bourdieu's concepts" (p. 431). However, I intend to use Bourdieusian terms only to support an examination of cultural factors (Sullivan, 2002) and their influences on curriculum choices.

2.9.3 Theoretical perspectives summary

Theoretical models can shed light on some of the deeper causes for curriculum choices. Whether placing students in the driving seat or acknowledging the influence of the field, both modified rational choice theory and a Bourdieusian framework contain interactions and effects that can be related to processes, values and tensions in school settings, and which have been borne out in the literature. I was interested to see which realms on this

agency and structure spectrum would emerge through an empirical study of post-16 curriculum choice at my school.

I recognise that students do not necessarily possess a knowledge of their own principles and so while their decisions may be reasonable, they cannot be entirely rational (McNay, 1999). As Nash puts it “what we choose to do must be what we have learned to do and want ..., what there is to do, what we have to do it with ... and on what others will let us do” (1990, p. 445). A-levels are the default qualifications at the case school, which I might hypothesise is a continuation of the structures of the past and the habitus. And those who choose IB by default have exerted a force against inertia and the *status quo* in order to demonstrate their agency (McNay, 1999). Through coaching I took care to guard against my pro-IB bias, whether interacting with students who were selecting either A-levels or IB, and with active or passive processes.

3 Design, methodology and methods

3.1 Aims and design intentions

The problem that inspired this research was the low proportion of students at my school choosing the IB Diploma as their post-16 curriculum, which I suspected was because of a lack of information, a lack of consideration of this possibility because of a family history or default awareness of A-levels or concerns about the risks associated with studying a greater number of subjects. Some are unknowingly forgoing their human right to have a say in their educational future, and, although the context is quite different to an ethnically diverse fee-paying school, the following words of advice recounted by a father to his son (incidentally portraying Leroy Logan) in Steve McQueen's *Small Axe: Red, White and Blue* leapt out as I watched the film in August 2021:

> Son, if I walk past a cemetery and I see you dig grave [sic] and that's all you can do cos [sic] you have no learning ... I will be upset. But if I pass by there and you digging graves [sic] with an education then that is what you choose to do and I must support that. (2020)

My professional view is that at least half of students across the UK would thrive in the IB more than they would in A-levels and be more competitive in applications to future destinations as a result. If my school were to increase IB uptake, it would be providing a more internationally-minded education overall to its South London community. There is also a practical downside in the current student balance as the per-student costs of running the IB Diploma bring into question its longevity and place constraints on subject availability.

The aims of this research are therefore:

1. To explore the post-16 curriculum choice process for students at a dual-curriculum UK independent school with consideration of when curriculum choices are made, who is involved, what factors are important, what information is used and the impact of the choice experience.
2. To uncover the values and tensions for students at the school and me (as IB Coordinator) and how they guide, influence and change the choice process.

As established from the literature, there are insufficient case studies of individual students, using qualitative data collection methods, to uncover the process of choice while it is taking

place. In Chapter 3 I will detail the guiding principles involved in this project, the methods adopted and their justification, the role of coaching as an interview strategy and some of the modifications required as a result of unanticipated school site closures.

3.1.1 Research questions

In this study I explored the post-16 curriculum decision process through three research questions.

1. In an independent, all-boys school that teaches both A-levels and the IB, how do students experience the process of post-16 curriculum choice?
2. What are the students' values and what, if any, tensions do they experience?
3. What are the tensions for the IB Coordinator?

3.1.2 Epistemology and theory

As a professional working in this school, I felt it vital to carry out an empirical study: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world. ... The point, however, is to change it." (Marx, 1932). Bourdieu considers matters of epistemology to comprise how we know something, how we are able to say we know something and the status of the claim (Jenkins, 2007). In an effort to meet Bourdieu's aspirations of researcher reflexivity, I will aim to describe my positionality in relation to data collection, acknowledge my role, define the focus of analysis, explain my theoretical stance and reflect upon the significance of this study to my identity.

I studied chemical engineering at university, I am a physics teacher and I seek to research individual students' perspectives with a wider educational lens. Because of the issue that I experience in my professional practice that has prompted this research, I am exploring the concept of choice, which arguably finds a more natural home in the realm of behavioural psychology. I felt it was beyond the scope of this thesis for me to become well-versed in another discipline and, even if successful, a psychological rather than educational approach might have weakened the relevance of the findings to my school and to other institutions offering important choices to their students. Instead, I sought to immerse myself in students' worlds as they navigated their 'Options' processes, to draw on my decade of teaching experience and to employ coaching techniques to get as close to student feelings, values and decisions (and in their own words) as possible. While interviews with a small number of 15- or 16-year-olds are unlikely to replicate the controls that would be found in a

natural sciences enquiry, coaching does have peer-reviewed underpinnings and also provides additional benefits to my school (through increasing the range of its use) and the qualitative research community (through trialling an interview strategy).

Because of working at the school for five years before the data for this study were collected, I hoped that my prior ideas would be "likely to contain truth value for at least some persons at some time" (Gergen cited in Mishler, 1986, p. 134). I was aware of the interactions between contexts, choice influencers and choosers that were predicted by Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), the cultural stereotypes, aptitudes, experiences, perceptions, expectations and valuations of options suggested by Eccles and Wigfield (2002), and the structural and procedural limitations visible through a Bourdieusian lens that are imposed by the school and the wider political context. I was conscious, however, that I wanted to approach this relatively uncharted research field for IB schools in an exploratory way. I set out to treat these theoretical perspectives as prompts for analysis so that I might better understand my observations, but not at the expense of deducing the choice processes for specific students as individuals: a pragmatic approach.

3.1.3 Paradigm

Pragmatism is "a logical method of inquiry that aims to arrive at an understanding of a concept ... in terms of its practical outcomes or effects" (Plowright, 2016, p. 13). Peirce believed that new knowledge originates from observations and that the meaning of terms lies in understanding their effects (Peirce et al., 1931). By measuring the effects in one situation, predictions with slightly increased confidence might be made about similar, future situations. Pragmatism has two areas of relevance in this enquiry. The first is that I conducted this study with the belief that understanding the curriculum choice processes for a small subset of students in one cohort might enable me to support entire cohorts in the next few years. The second is that students have beliefs that will produce a "disposition to behave in a certain manner" (Plowright, 2016, p. 19) and which may be clung to tenaciously. Because post-16 curriculum choices have, by definition, not been encountered by these students until this point, they might be concerned about the uncertainty and doubt that they experience; the resolution of these doubts for the students (and for me as their IB Coordinator and as a researcher through the analysis of my results) will forge new beliefs.

In planning this study, I had to acknowledge a conflict between observation as a researcher (exploring the process of post-16 curriculum choice) and intervention as a professional (hoping to increase IB curriculum uptake). By conducting real-world research I hoped to progress towards both – to learn "why the world is in the shape that it is" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 3) and how I may 'shape' it further. It was the individual students who were of most interest, not the whole-school population. Because "it is crucial to examine the motivations of student decision-makers directly [rather than] their actions" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 273), this study was intentionally small in scale but rich in detail. I employed a flexible design with qualitative methodological and analytical techniques to better understand my institution, its students' perceptions of reality and my role. As Bourdieu put it, "there is a practical knowledge that has its own logic, which cannot be reduced to that of theoretical knowledge; ... agents know the social world better than the theoreticians" (cited in Reay, 2004, p. 438). I wanted to consider all aspects of the social world while unifying theories around choices in education and the processes of post-16 curriculum choice for students and IB Coordinators so that practice might someday be transformed, with students able to make better-informed and longer-lasting choices. Therefore, I employed critical realist strategies (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016) before concluding this study, which prompted a reflection on the journey that I had undertaken with respect to understanding choice processes and intervening in IB uptake myself (Chapter 5.3).

3.2 Methodology

My enquiry into the experience of post-16 curriculum choice involved analysing the documentation that has been produced about A-level and IB curricula at the context school, interpreting the common and disparate themes that emerge from interviews with the students who are experiencing the choice and my own reflections as IB Coordinator. There are two-way relationships between Year 11 students and the 'Options' process and I aimed to identify the different processes through which post-16 curriculum choices are made and the extent to which students are conscious of these. In addition, I observed and generalised (Plowright, 2016) and reflected upon post-16 curriculum choice from the evidence collected before connecting with my own knowledge. Overall, there are elements of phenomenological research (Counsell, 2009); just as Charlesworth (1999a) asked "How could the truth of such lives be captured except through an existential hermeneutic

phenomenology that reclaims the objectivity of the subjective?" (p. 65), I understood that each Year 11 student at the context school would have a story to tell about their real-time experience of curriculum choice and that I would be interpreting these stories to find areas of common ground in their lives.

The methodology selected was an overarching case study of the dual-curriculum independent school at which I am IB Coordinator, with student cases selected from the Year 11 cohort. I sought to explain the contemporary circumstance of post-16 curriculum choice through in-depth descriptions of the processes involved (Yin, 2014). The rationale for a case study was that "one cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality" (Bourdieu cited in Reay, 2004, p. 442). I felt I could achieve this immersion by working closely with a small number of students to understand their experiences and, in turn, produce a broader thematic representation of processes, values and tensions.

Data collection for this study took place in September 2020 to April 2021, with the project as a whole following the timeline shown in Appendix II.

3.3 Documentary analysis

As information plays a part in decision-making (Rapley, 2007), new and existing post-16 'Options' documents within the school and elsewhere were reviewed, as was information that was conveyed formally in student assemblies and at parent events. The events were easier to review than in a typical year because of online facilitation with video recording due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of my professional role, I was a speaker at the 'Options' launch for students, the host of an *Education Update* panel discussion for parents and the organiser of question-and-answer opportunities with current IB students for each tutor group.

I also reviewed the IB Organisation website and less formal sources that appeared on internet searches under "International Baccalaureate" or similar. A typical IB student continues to university, so the balance with which university websites feature this route for admission in comparison with A-levels was of interest, as was emerging news coverage on the two curricula. To find out about perceptions of the IB, I conducted searches on the Student Room and Mumsnet websites. Coincidentally, at about this time the IB Organisation

launched *#WhyIB* and *#IB4all* campaigns (IBO, 2021d) to support leaders and coordinators in explaining the benefits of IB programmes in comparison with alternative curricula on offer at their schools, and to ensure that the entry criteria to IB programmes are inclusive.

3.4 Survey

I surveyed the population for the study (the school's Year 11) to inform interview participant selection and to enable a before-and-after comparison of initial curriculum intentions and ultimate choices. The survey took place in a tutor period with the agreement of the Head of Year. I explained to the tutors that "responses will help to inform the Options process this year" and requested that they reassure their tutees that responses would be non-binding. I created the online questionnaire on the school's *Microsoft Forms* platform and sent a weblink to all students in the cohort via the school's virtual learning environment. The questionnaire opened with a short letter and items included sixth form subject interests, curricula under consideration, an indication of the "most likely" curriculum, the degree of certainty and career aspirations beyond sixth form, as well as an invitation to comment (full text in Appendix III). Student names were collected automatically. The subjects came first on the questionnaire because it has been agreed by my colleagues that subject interests should drive the curriculum choice process. I also felt that this would be perceived by students as a reasonable warm-up question. My decision to place the curriculum options in alphabetical order was based on not wanting students to feel pressured by my professional role in the school.

3.5 Interviews

3.5.1 Rationale

An interview is an "occasion of two persons speaking to each other" and a "form of discourse" (Mishler, 1986, p. vii). Most of us have experienced interview-like experiences from childhood. We are asked questions by family members, educators, medical practitioners and employers, and we hear and watch interviews play out on the radio and television (Briggs, 1986). With practice comes familiarity (we know how to recognise questions and when to respond) but also misconceptions for the interviewee (for example, that the quality of responses is related to life success). This familiarity can also breed issues for interviewers; we might rely on routines, expect that communication might match day-to-

day norms (especially in education settings) or prepare inadequately for the gaps between the language and culture of the interviewer and interviewee.

The likelihood of good interview practice is improved and the interviewee's meaning can be better understood with intense and repeated study of recordings and accurate transcripts (Charlesworth, 1999c). There is an essential uniqueness in every speech encounter and no unequivocal truth that can be transmitted directly from thought into speech (Briggs, 1986). It is the interaction itself that allows meaning to emerge (Mishler, 1986). Brinkmann and Kvale suggest that an interviewer can learn how to conduct high quality interviews in the absence of general rules through "extensive practice" (2018, p. 52), which I had from hundreds of hours of coaching and coaching facilitation, and concentration on the subject and subject matter, which in my case were the Year 11 participants and curriculum choice. I was able, on the whole, to keep questions short and to use simple language when explaining the activities. I was decisive when determining whether I had a sufficient understanding of what the participant had meant and, although I intentionally chose not to use questions starting with 'can you' or 'when you say', I am confident that participants will have felt a sense that I was moving between introducing, following up, probing, specifying, structuring and interpreting (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). With some participants, silence was particularly effective in drawing out additional responses that might otherwise not have been articulated.

I conducted semi-structured interviews in anticipation that topics would be intentionally covered and yet also emerge. I asked thematic questions (to produce knowledge about curriculum choice), but also asked participants to join in other dynamic forms of interaction – visualisations, considering alternative perspectives and card selections – to demonstrate my openness to accepting the stories told and to establish an interpersonal relationship. Drawing loosely on Rogerian and Skinnerian approaches, I repeated words that the interviewee had introduced and sought to reinforce positive participant outlooks. Following the advice of both Graydin coaching facilitators and Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), I aimed to commence my questions with 'what' and 'how' to aid description and avoid the memories of blame and over-reflexivity that can emerge from use of 'why', similar to a doctor refraining from asking a patient why they are sick.

By offering formal coaching sessions I attempted to meet my participants as “collaborators” (Mishler, 1986, p. 123) in the data collection process; I hoped, through the use of discussion-based activities as well as more traditional questions, to form an honest relationship because of the overt way in which I was informing them about the research aims so that my students would not feel the need to manufacture responses because of my teacher status. In ‘starting with heart’, coaching also relates to how “the great majority of the time, people don’t have reasons for what they do – they have feelings” (Grayling, 2021).

3.5.2 Format

I conducted three interviews with each individual and group, following the ‘Options’ launch event (October 2020), the month before student decisions were submitted (January 2021) and the month following the submission (March 2021). As well as supporting responses to my research questions, holding more than one interview allowed time for familiarity to emerge and increased the likelihood that the participants would not present solely positive views (given my status as a teacher). It was important that the inconvenience of being a research participant would be ‘worth it’ for the individual, and not just because of the potential good for future cohorts or other school leaders. Rather than seeking simply to reduce the inevitable time burden, potential discomfort and “alienation” (Mishler, 1986, p. 120), I thought carefully about how I might answer my research questions and actively benefit my students at the same time. It struck me that coaching held the answer; it would “recover and strengthen the voice of ... individuals’ contextual understandings of their problems in their own terms” (Mishler, 1986, p. 143).

After I had introduced myself and provided a reminder of the research topic and logistical arrangements, we formed and agreed to an oral ‘partnership agreement’, in which I invited the participant to share how they wanted us to interact. In recognition that consent to participate is a constant negotiation of procedural, situational and relational ethics (Adams et al., 2015), I repeated this strategy at the beginning of all interviews, though the second and third briefings were more concise.

I attempted to ask only open questions to follow each student’s lead into topics, including subject interests, university aspirations and the resources they had consulted so far. I kept my questions short and avoided suggesting influences that the student had not already brought up. My opening session (Appendices IV and V) included the use of visualisations,

which asked students to close their eyes and imagine listening to their favourite song, what they would put on a billboard or how they might spend a billion pounds, and then to link the emerging values with their decision-making process. In my next session (Appendices VI and VII) I introduced lenses (in which I asked for a word or metaphor to describe current feelings about the 'Options' process before replacing with one or more others to consider the situation from other people's perspectives), the *Gremlin* (an informal reference to negative self-talk that may plight the student's desire to try something new or stretch beyond their comfort zone) and the *Champion* (a metaphorical radio station that plays motivational music and gives the recipient positive assurances). I hoped to provide an opportunity for immersion in the possible impacts of their curriculum choice, what was making it challenging for them and who they could ask for help or look to for inspiration.

In the concluding session (Appendix VIII) I asked what decisions had been made with respect to curriculum and subject choices and how the closing stages of the 'Options' process had gone. A *Pic-A-Card* sheet of 90 images, quotes and icons was presented to students to consider what they had been feeling at the start of the academic year, where they were at the present time and where they would like to be in the future, which gave students the opportunity to think beyond the words they would use most fluently in day-to-day interactions to more creative and open interpretations, including wide-ranging aspects of their lives. In the concluding moments I asked whether the decisions made regarding their sixth form curriculum could have been influenced by the very experience of participating in the research, what the experience of being a research participant had been like and the extent to which they would recommend coaching for supporting students in future cohorts.

Depending on the time remaining in each session, I offered a short summary of what I had understood the participant to have meant and checked that I had (to some extent) addressed the research questions. I also understood that participants may have experienced emotions ranging from anxiety to enthusiasm (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) and, in general, offered the chance for them to reflect on what I had said and on what else they would like to have been asked. After the participant had left the room or we had concluded the video call, I noted my immediate impressions of the context, emotional tone and content.

To increase sample size, I undertook workshop activities with two groups of participants. This provided an opportunity to consider and discuss the implications of the curriculum

choice with which they were faced. The timing of the three sessions with each of two groups coincided with the months during which the individual interviews took place. The workshops bore great resemblance to the individual interviews in terms of aims and themes, but I used fewer of the activities and encouraged more discussion.

The coaching sessions bore great similarity to more traditional qualitative interview techniques, both dialogic (with probing questions to stimulate interviewee reflections) and narrative (with interviewees encouraged to share their story of the choice process) (Holmegaard et al., 2015), the latter of which is considered by Mishler to be "appropriate for understanding the actions of others" (1986, p. 68) and to "express general cultural themes and values" (p. 106). I was aided in asking questions of an open nature without judgement or a disguised IB 'sales pitch'. Following my opening question that was directly related to post-16 curriculum choice, I allowed respondents to use their own vocabulary, avoided interrupting and encouraged elaboration (Mishler, 1986). I was open to my students setting the scene, introducing characters, describing their actions, specifying events and their relations over time, suggesting conflicts and resolutions and concluding with the point of the story, even if I did not analyse these from the perspective of a linguist through "syntax, semantics and pragmatics" (Mishler, 1986, p. 74).

Interviews ranged from 15 to 30 minutes in duration and were audio-recorded. Because my interview schedules provided only the initial questions, suggested activity scripts and reminders for concluding proceedings, I was alert to words, mannerisms and intuition in a bid to bring more conscious consideration to dispositions that might previously have been subconscious. I was also able to get a sense of each student's 'feel for the game' and the extent to which they were "[calculating] and strategizing" (Reay, 2004, p. 438) – because I suspected that students who more carefully consider their options are more likely to be satisfied with the outcome.

3.5.3 Sampling procedure

In selecting participants for interview, I wanted to achieve some variation in boarding status, number of years spent at the school, age (14 to 16), home location, socioeconomic status, family characteristics, subject specialism interests, curriculum intentions and certainty in career aspirations, even though no effort was made to stratify these variables according to the proportions in the full cohort. After drawing up a longlist, I shared my

participant strategy with the Head of Year. He anticipated that the individuals would express different influences, priorities and extents of knowledge about post-16 curriculum choice, and from this I was able to sample purposively in a bid to explore whether these differences in process would relate to their demographic characteristics (Stake, 1995). I invited 16 students from across Year 11 to my individual interviews; 10 agreed to take part. I also invited 36 students from two tutor groups who would form two focus groups; 12 agreed to take part, of whom 11 attended at least one session. While my total sample size is relatively small (5% of the population interviewed individually with a further 5% in two groups), my commitment to following the participants through the process, I hoped, fulfilled my research aims (Yin, 2014).

3.6 Autoethnographic journaling

Because of selecting the school where I work for data collection, I experienced the challenges of making unobtrusive observations as a social researcher while also adhering to my professional obligation to manage policy change. To negotiate this conflict, I employed self-study techniques. Keeping an autoethnographic journal comprising "study and writing culture from the perspective of the self" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 46) enabled me to track my school-based decisions and interventions alongside the progress of the research study so that I might be able to detect (with intent or hindsight) where changes in interviewee-reported influences or intentions coincided with landmarks in the 'Options' process. I also maintained a school diary in which I informally noted committee meeting minutes, conference presentations and professional development related to the IB. In maintaining this journal I sought to relate my personal experiences to the research, to illustrate my insider knowledge of the curriculum choice cultural phenomenon, to record my engagement with existing research and to make my own research accessible to a professional audience (Adams et al., 2015). Just as my coaching techniques in place of formal traditional interviews sought to capture data on emotions, values and knowledge through students' responses, this journaling aimed to force the same scrutiny of my own experience. I looked inward (at my identity, thoughts and feelings) and outward (at relationships with others), had the opportunity to consider the tensions involved in my role, and aimed to "read, write, research, do fieldwork, seek consent, be vulnerable and reflexive and [dedicate myself] to telling and listening to stories" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 115).

3.7 Pilot studies

The sequence, content and wording style of the questionnaire was similar to other surveys circulated to students at various points in their time at school to support curriculum design and my colleagues' planning of enrichment activities. I piloted the coaching technique as a mechanism to ascertain students' curriculum choice processes, values and tensions before embarking on interviews with my participants. A student from the Year 11 population volunteered himself for this pilot after requesting a conversation with me about his interests, and he agreed that audio recording could take place. I had no interview schedule for this conversation but commenced my questions with 'what' and 'how' terms, used his words to form questions and occasionally mentioned my observations of his body language during the interview. I was satisfied from this coaching session that it would indeed yield responses that, combined, would enable me to respond to my research questions. I practised the use of my first interview schedule with a fellow doctoral student at UCL – but on a topic other than post-16 curriculum choice. This included the formation of a partnership agreement, exploratory opening questions, a values visualisation and concluding summary questions related to the topic.

3.8 Analysis

3.8.1 Documentary compilation

To gather the documentary data, I read and observed documents, assemblies, presentations and websites and considered the quantity and accuracy of information presented about the IB relative to A-levels, and the extent to which comparisons are systematic and balanced. I explored the times at which students received communications on the curricula and tabulated the format, the lead contributor(s), the intended audience and any additional notes on how Year 11 students might interact with or understand the source. I made no use of the literature or theory in the analysis of the documentary data; instead, I chose to focus on simply bringing all of the students' sources of information together for the first time, which has a clear use in this study for understanding the complexity of the choice process and appreciating the scale of the task for the students, and which also has practical merit for practitioners at the context school. The results of the documentary analysis are presented in Chapter 4.1.

3.8.2 Interviews

After concluding each set of interviews (in which I had used coaching questions, values visualisations, lens shifting exercises, *Champion* and *Gremlin* discussions, Pic-A-Card images and conversation starters about the students' experience of participation), I listened back to the audio recordings and transcribed the interview data. I stored the transcriptions in NVivo. Although I have experience of formal thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and shared my MoE2 codebook map for understanding *subject* selection processes in Figure 2.3, the data collected in this study were too extensive for coding intimately throughout. I did, however, carry out Braun and Clarke's six recommended phases on a more global basis:

1. Reading the transcripts with the research questions in mind to search for the recurrent categories of choice processes and ideas about values and tensions
2. Noting all feasible process types and values
3. Refining the potential process categories and their working criteria
4. Re-examining and renaming the choice process categories to develop more distinct characterisations of each and combining values (still in the participants' vocabulary) from the list where I felt they were similar
5. Assigning the student cases to the process types in an iteration with Phase 4 so that each student would be placed in one process type only
6. Highlighting quotations that would exemplify the categories.

I looked for factors suggested in the theoretical frameworks as well as new ideas, given that this cohort has not previously been involved in research on post-16 curriculum choice (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013). Categories of choice process that I initially considered but did not keep included:

- 'Reversers' (those who changed their curriculum from our initial discussion for any reason)
- 'Never in doubt' (those who stuck with the curriculum that we had initially discussed)
- 'Hand forced' (those who had their choice effectively made for them by the school)
- 'Eyes open' (those who were active in making the decision)
- 'Head in the sand' (those who were passive in making the decision)

I decided that the 'reversers' and 'never in doubt' categories were too broad; they only took account of the 'before and after' and did not encapsulate any of the data that I had collected throughout the six-month journey and, in short, would not have been a true response to the research question about *processes*. The 'hand forced' category was one I contemplated at length because it hits upon one of the greatest tensions in all post-compulsory educational choices. However, re-examining the two participants who would have been assigned to this category revealed that there were two very different mechanisms for the school enacting the decision and, accordingly, two very different student perceptions; I felt these needed to be presented separately. 'Eyes open' and 'head in the sand' were phrases that were more effective in encapsulating the processes that students had gone through, but I believed that I would be honouring the input of my individual participants more by splitting these two categories into the nuances within. The five categories that I did decide upon (which even in-and-of-themselves required some rewording) are discussed in Chapter 4.5, where I have also included all the values that the students shared about themselves or that I deduced. I relate the choice processes to the literature in Chapter 5.1 and the values and tensions to the literature in Chapter 5.2.

3.8.3 Autoethnographic journal

As I was managing aspects of this process, I acknowledge that I was not able to observe it through the same lens as a student. I conducted the final component of analysis on my autoethnographic journal, which in turn provided me with evidence to use in response to my final research question on the tensions for an IB Coordinator. I started by reorganising the records I had compiled across both my workplace and research diaries to produce an overview of my responsibilities as an IB Coordinator throughout the post-16 curriculum choice process. I then reflected on my practice with an examination of my experiences, actions and the thoughts I might have held prior to working at the context school or carrying out this research. These reflections are presented in Chapter 4.7. As part of the discussion about IB Coordinator tensions (Chapter 5.3), I employed four-planar and MELD critical realist techniques to ensure that I had considered all relevant aspects from multiple perspectives over time (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016). In doing so, I aimed to connect my own perceptions of the 'Options' process with the reality of the process itself.

I present a visual representation of how the three data collection and analysis strategies provided responses to the three research questions in Appendix IX.

3.9 Ethical considerations

I adhered to the British Educational Research Association guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) and ethical approval (including issues related to data protection regulation procedures) was obtained from UCL before data collection commenced. Written permission for the study was attained from the Headmaster (Appendix X) and I discussed the progress of the research with critical colleagues throughout to ensure that I did not make undue demands on the school community because of my relative ease of access.

Two main ethical concerns emerged from the topic of the research. First, the potential existed that I could have used the data as they emerged to influence the post-16 choice process in my school. If, for example, several participants had inaccurate knowledge about the curricula or seemed to be making choices with a narrow focus, I might have felt encouraged to make a whole-cohort intervention such as giving a bulletin or assembly notice. While working towards a greater good and supporting students is not a professional concern, observations and changes of this nature are where my research journal was of greatest importance. Secondly, my findings may have commercial implications for the IB Organisation or other fee-paying dual-curriculum schools. This is because of the possibility that the recommendations presented in my future publications may help other schools to achieve a higher IB uptake. In reconciling this concern, I was reminded of the benefits of the IB Diploma curriculum to students, and also to students having a positive experience of educational choice. I believe it is for the professionals in other settings to make decisions on how to use my evidence (if at all) to inform their practice.

Other issues that merited ethical consideration prompted methodological decisions. After initial meetings with the proposed participants to introduce the study with full transparency, I provided a further information sheet (Appendix X) and required completion of an informed consent form (Appendix XII) from both the students and their parents. While the demographic and interview data made it possible to ‘paint a picture’ of each participant, no reference was made to any details that would identify the participants to anyone other than themselves or possibly close friends or family members of theirs. In all my publications related to this thesis, I have taken and will take care to ensure that the anonymity of

participants, the integrity of the research and the honesty with which I present it were and are not compromised. Withdrawal of consent and data was possible up to 2nd July 2021.

I am hopeful that participation was beneficial for the interviewees because of the opportunity for extended discussion of values, experiences and curriculum choice on three occasions. However, the interviews and surrounding reflection could also have resulted in dissonance or recollection of negative events as well as necessitating commitments to time and sharing of personal information. As an experienced teacher I drew on my understanding of how to detect stress in children and conducted an ongoing assessment of whether interviews should be paused, rescheduled or even stopped in the interest of participant wellbeing. Additionally, I invited students to signal if they wished to stop the interview. My offering of interviews to participants may, in relative terms, have resulted in disadvantage to non-participants. However, I and many colleagues in senior, pastoral and departmental teams were available for appointments of a similar nature, both informally and systematically as part of the 'Options' process.

The timing of this study coincided with a period in which UK secondary schools reopened and then reclosed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The UK Government, school and UCL advice was assessed at the point of each data collection activity. This determined whether the option was available for interviews to take place face-to-face and under what distancing measures. When face-to-face interviewing was not possible, I conducted interviews remotely via the Microsoft Teams platform used by the school for 'live' remote learning sessions and meetings. The October interviews took place in a well-lit and quiet classroom at the school with no others present, but one which had windows on the doors and teachers occasionally passing through. In January and March, the interviews instead took place via video call. As a teacher, I am assessed regularly for my suitability in safeguarding young people. The data collected in recordings and transcripts are confidential to me, my supervisors and the student; they will be stored securely on the UCL server and on my laptop, which is password-protected and kept on my person or behind lock and key, for five years following my EdD graduation.

3.10 Strengths and limitations

This qualitative case study research design had limitations. I make no claim that the purposive sample was stratified according to every relevant variable and so my selected

cases are (obviously) not representative of all students worldwide making choices between school curricula, nor even the school's Year 11 population. Of the individual participants invited, six did not consent to taking part and more than half of those in the tutor groups did not respond. It is possible that there was some bias away from masculinity in those who chose to accept, as my openness about the study's aims and the typical experience of a participant may have caused some boys to fear that they might be caused to question their 'fundamental' belief in taking a particular curriculum and therefore to decline as a form of protection (McNay, 1999). But I also recognised the balance to be struck; any efforts to interview a larger proportion of the year group might have jeopardised my capacity to transcribe and reflect upon every encounter, which would have been a significant ethical compromise given the demands on the time of Year 11 students in their first major examination year.

The nature of interviews meant that I was measuring perceptions and not reality, and I was not collecting data from validated questionnaire instruments for such things as self-efficacy or socioeconomic status. I selectively focused on words and phrases and did not seek to analyse pitch, stress, volume, rate, gestures, facial expressions or body movements (Mishler, 1986), any of which might be the principal data analysed in another research study. I aimed to "attend to the discursive nature of the interview process" (Mishler, 1986, p. 65) by reading each interviewee's transcriptions in full and without interruption; their responses constituted a "sustained account" (Mishler, 1986, p. 67). However, my presence undoubtedly influenced the answers (Mishler, 1986), so in place of "objectivity, reliability, validity and replicability" (Mishler, 1986, p. 142), I sought the "credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 169) that are associated with qualitative research designs "to arrive at a description of respondents' worlds of meaning that is adequate to the tasks of systematic analysis and theoretical interpretation" (Mishler, 1986, p. 7). In part this is because reliability, which I interpret here as the likelihood that the same interviewee would give identical responses to another interviewer at another time, and validity, the proximity of the interviewees responses to depicting the actual phenomena under exploration, are "incompatible" (Briggs, 1986, p. 25). With the participants being school children, a consideration of "global", "local" and "themal" coherence proved useful (Mishler, 1986, p. 89).

My choice to conduct semi-structured instead of structured interviews with fixed response categories meant that interview content and durations varied and that I did not systematically prompt participants to discuss previously unmentioned influences. But to use a standardised interview schedule would have been to suppress discourse and disregard the respondents' social and personal contexts of meaning (Mishler, 1986) and to survey the students would have been inadequate for the study of how these participants perceive and express their understandings of themselves and their experiences. I actively opted to avoid attempts at "exact questioning" as seen in the "stimulus-response paradigm" (Mishler, 1986, p. 18) because of the student-centred research questions and because even in traditional standard interview practice surveys are "unreliable and uncertain" (p. 19).

Instead, I recognised that my interviews were speech events and that I would construct qualitative data with my interviewees and contextually ground the meanings as I understood them. I recorded every interview because it is "only through knowing what they say that we can begin to address the question of what [interviewees] mean" (Mishler, 1986, p. 51), kept questions short to minimise the likelihood of ambiguity or a sensation of complexity for the student, focused on ascertaining meaning related to post-16 curriculum choice rather than repeating wording between interviewees and transcribed all interviews myself. My use of coaching techniques reminded me that I was present to attend to "the person, not the problem" (Graydin, 2019, p. 38), enabled the empowerment of my respondents and, because it was something already permeating school culture, meant that I was going some way to closing the "gap" (Mishler, 1986, p. 2) between students' prior experiences of being asked questions and these research interviews. I hoped to subvert any sense that I as interviewer would dominate and that the respondent would merely acquiesce (Mishler, 1986). Entering the frame of mind of a coach also ensured that I was attuned to the students' words and their nonverbal communication. I wanted rapport and a non-hierarchical relationship, at least to the extent that is possible between a student and teacher, and to be responsive and involved. The downside of this approach is that, with school site closed and significant limitations placed on the breadth of school activities, the interviews became something of a highlight in the calendar for both me and the participants; my coaching might perhaps have served only to "[confirm] and [reinforce] the model's assumptions" (Mishler, 1986, p. 140).

My analytical decisions to read the interview data while seeking the development of themes risked eroding the context in which the words were said. Use of NVivo software resolved part of this problem; it was possible to refer to the prior question as well as the participant's voice if needed. But nonetheless, different participants might have meant different things even if the same language was used and, in the words of the character Holden Caulfield whom one of my participants mentioned in a workshop, "How would you know you weren't being a phony? The trouble is you wouldn't." (Salinger, 2018). More broadly, the focus of this study on the choice of post-16 curriculum will not have revealed the wider interplay between other education choices at the school, and it was beyond the scope of this study to measure the impact of my professional interventions on IB uptake.

4 Results

4.1 Documentary analysis

I considered 28 documents, events, videos and websites in the documentary analysis for this thesis. Along with those that have been available for years prior to and throughout this study, the earliest timed publication was in September 2020 and the latest was in August 2021. Formats included letters and written information, committee discussions, articles, my own recollections of events and informal conversations, live talks, videos and internet search results. Contributors and authors ranged from me and my colleagues to the press and the IB Organisation, and intended audiences were as specific as students or families at my school or as general as 'the public'.

Although the selection and importance of the resources that students experiencing curriculum choice will vary between individuals, I categorised four as implying that A-levels were the default option, two that suggested A-levels were a preference, one that mentioned only A-levels, 14 that included both the IB Diploma and A-levels, four that mentioned only the IB Diploma and three that implied an IB preference. A table listing the 28 documents and summarising the analysis is presented in Appendix XIII.

4.2 Sample demographics

My initial survey of the Year 11 population in September 2020 to find out students' most likely curriculum choices was responded to by 142 out of 216 students (66%). I added to this over the following three months until December 2020 as I gathered additional information from tutor group presentations and meetings, which are a key aspect of the 'IB recruitment' phase of my professional role; by the end of December 2020, I had established the most likely curriculum choices of 178 students (82% of the population).

Table 4.1 shows the choices selected as 'most likely' up to the end of 2020. Of those for whom data had been gathered, four-fifths of students selected A-levels as their most likely route, with 18% in favour of IB Diploma and 2% selecting BTECs. This table also shows the totals following the conclusion of the Year 11 'Options' process. Of those who are remaining at the school, 72% had committed to A-levels as their curriculum choice in the sixth form, with an increase to 25% opting for the IB and 3% for BTEC. Although it is tricky to speculate given the relatively small number of students who not returning to the school and with no

consideration made of those joining the school from other institutions, a tentative conclusion might be drawn from these data that students wishing to take the IB are more likely to stick with the context school, perhaps as the school has a 'top 12' reputation for results globally or because its ethos and subjects offered are considered desirable. On the other hand, students who prefer A-levels could be more likely to see greater benefits in other schools, for example local grammar schools with similar headline outcomes but no fees for the education provided.

Table 4.1 Year 11 population initial intentions and final curriculum choices

Curriculum	Indicative intention	Percentage of respondents	Option chosen	Percentage of respondents who remained
A-level	143	80%	127	72%
IB	32	18%	44	25%
BTEC	3	2%	6	3%
Leavers			35	
[Blank]	38		4	
Total	216		216	

I invited 51 students from the population of 216 Year 11 students to take part in the study, either as one-on-one interviewees or in groups based on subsets of two tutor groups, A and B. Of these, 10 out of 16 accepted my invitation for one-to-one and 12 out of 36 accepted my invitation for the groups – with typically four students present at Group A sessions and seven at Group B sessions. One who consented to be in Group A attended no sessions. In addition, I had four students on a 'reserve' list for one-to-ones. None of these were invited as I had achieved the desired sample size of between eight and 12 for individual interviews.

As expressed in Chapter 3, I sought a variation in curriculum intentions, boarding status, number of years at the school, home location, socioeconomic status, family characteristics, subject specialism interests and career aspirations. All of these were achieved in the 10 one-to-one participants who consented to involvement in the study and I have presented these in Appendix XIV.

4.3 Curriculum intentions

To look in more detail at the survey responses for the whole cohort, I isolated the responses of those who had initially selected IB (Table 4.2) and A-levels, and those for whom I had no data.

Table 4.2 Curriculum destinations for initial IB preference

Curriculum	Option chosen	Percentage
A-level	3	9%
IB	25	78%
BTEC	0	0%
Leavers	4	13%
Total	32	

Of those initially in favour of IB, 78% formally selected this route, with 9% migrating to A-levels and 13% leaving. These proportions are similar for those initially in favour of A-levels (Table 4.3); 71% will take this route in the sixth form and 15% are leaving. Of the 12% migrating to alternative curricula, three-quarters have chosen the IB and the remainder BTEC.

Table 4.3 Curriculum destinations for initial A-level preference

Curriculum	Option chosen	Percentage
A-level	102	71%
IB	13	9%
BTEC	4	3%
Leavers	21	15%
[Blank]	3	2%
Total	143	

Of the 38 students who did not respond to the initial intentions survey, six selected the IB and twenty selected A-levels (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 Curriculum destinations for initial non-respondents

Curriculum	Option chosen	Percentage
A-level	20	53%
IB	6	16%
BTEC	1	3%
Leavers	10	26%
[Blank]	1	3%
Total	38	

Henceforth, I will discuss the study participants. Table 4.5 shows how the participants progressed from consideration of one or more curricula to an indicative intention and, lastly, to a concluding choice. The first letters of the pseudonyms selected correspond with

the category of choice process (for example, Quentin as 'quietly assured'). The letters 'A' and 'B' signify participants from the two groups (Brad is in Group B).

Table 4.5 Curriculum considerations, intentions and choices for participants – ordered by final choice

Name	Individual or Group	Considerations	Intention	Certainty	Final choice
Brad	G	AL	AL	Certain	AL
Benedict	G	AL	AL	Quite confident	AL
Albert	G	AL	AL	Quite confident	AL
Timothy	I	AL	AL	Quite confident	AL
Brendan	G	AL and IB	AL	Quite confident	AL
Adrian	G	AL	AL	Only a bit	AL
Quentin	I	AL and IB	AL	Only a bit	AL
Brodie	G	AL and IB	AL	Only a bit	AL
Bruce	G	AL	AL	Unsure	AL
Patrick	I	AL	AL	Unsure	AL
Spencer	I	AL and IB	IB	Quite confident	AL
Bryson	G	AL and IB	IB	Only a bit	AL
Tyler	I	AL	AL	Only a bit	BTEC
Oliver	I	AL and IB	IB	Quite confident	IB
Qasim	I	AL and IB	IB	Quite confident	IB
Omar	I	IB	IB	Quite confident	IB
Theo	I	AL and IB	IB	Only a bit	IB
Otto	I	AL and IB	IB	Unsure	IB
Amir	G	AL and IB	AL	Only a bit	IB
Bobby	G	AL and IB	AL	Only a bit	IB
Aaron	G	AL and IB	IB	Only a bit	Leaving

Looking first at those who selected A-levels, Brad was the most consistent – certain from October that he was going to choose this curriculum. Quentin, Brodie, Brendan, Bryson and Spencer weighed up two curricula, ultimately settling on A-levels, and, despite an initial lack of certainty, Bruce and Patrick only ever had one curriculum in the running and stayed with it.

The IB Diploma students were, in general, less sure from the off. Six out of the seven who ultimately selected the IB were on the fence in considering the IB alongside A-levels, and even Omar (with apparently only the IB up for consideration) was not certain. This suggests that there may be some relationship between having taken part in the study and openness to choosing the IB; Amir and Bobby settled on the IB despite initially intending to choose A-levels. While the same could be suggested for Bryson and Spencer in an opposite direction, I

will discuss later how Spencer chose the IB Diploma in the formal 'Options' process but later switched to A-levels.

Table 4.6 shows a numerical summary of the above descriptions but does not show the swaps between curricula that lie within.

Table 4.6 Participant initial intentions and final curriculum choices

Curriculum	Indicative intention	Percentage of respondents	Option chosen	Percentage of respondents who remained
A-level	13	62%	12	60%
IB	8	38%	7	35%
BTEC	0	0%	1	5%
Leavers			1	
Total	21		21	

4.4 Findings

It was not immediately obvious how best to present the students' curriculum choice processes for the purposes of this thesis. One option would have been participant-by-participant – 10 'pen portraits' of choosers and their curriculum choice experiences. Another consideration was by outcome because upping IB recruitment is the whole-school priority that prompted this project. However, the study's aims are ultimately to explore processes, and so it is by process type that I have categorised the students.

There is an uneven distribution of participants within these categories and, although I will focus predominantly on my individual interviewees, I will seek to bolster and contrast my ideas with a discussion about the group participants too. I make no claim that another researcher presented with the same data would analyse and present them identically, nor that they would select the same vocabulary, but I have voiced these categories informally with the Headmaster and three governors at the context school, with 200 students in an Assembly and with approximately 50 IB Coordinators in other UK settings; they appear to 'ring true'.

4.5 Choice processes

The five post-16 curriculum choice processes that I identified from my interview data are:

1. Placidity embodied
2. Quietly assured

3. Borderline obsessional
4. Performances of satisfaction
5. Thriving

In each of the sub-sections that follow I present a paragraph on the characteristics of the category of choice process. I then discuss the student cases that exemplify the category.

4.5.1 Placidity embodied

4.5.1.1 Characteristics of category

Students who experience a 'placidity embodied' choice process are characterised by having only the slightest awareness that the choice exists. In a dual-curriculum setting, like that at the context school, this could manifest in students being unaware that there is more than one overarching curriculum on offer. Alternatively, and more broadly, these students may know that there are choices to be made but give these little attention or time; they are content to 'do as they are told' and to select their curriculum choices 'on a whim' when required to do so.

Although placidity may be advantageous in certain cultures or situations, the field of subject and curriculum choices does not reward more relaxed or less tactical approaches because of the future career paths that will inadvertently be blocked as a result of careless or short-term selections.

4.5.1.2 Cases selection

Although perhaps a little unkindly, I will discuss this choice process in relation to the experience of just one student: Patrick.

Patrick was distinctive for being "unsure" of his curriculum choice. In mid-range sets for mathematics and science, he lives in a leafy borough on the outskirts of central London and is White. Part of my professional 'recruitment' remit is to encourage students with subject interests across disciplines to select the IB Diploma instead of A-levels. Patrick, with his interests in Latin, economics, mathematics and physics, and without any A-level-specific subjects (like further mathematics), fits this mould perfectly; he was a clear invitee from a research perspective.

4.5.1.3 Patrick

The transcript of our opening session could be misread as a ping-pong match of high intensity in which I as interviewer might have erred on the side of fast-paced questioning; Patrick stated that he "[wasn't] sure" on 26 occasions. But the reality was quite different: there were plenty of pauses and ample time between questions. Patrick sounded like he was internally questioning whether he ought to choose the IB, as his opening response to my question about unspecified curricula included "I have a ... basic idea I think ... but I'm not really sure what exactly I need to ... if I was going to do IB what I would do". He also volunteered some reluctance to take English, a second science and art (the latter two of which aren't required) when he continues "I don't really want to do art or English and then chemistry and biology I'm not very good at". On the other hand, he did express a desire to continue with mathematics, physics and Latin.

"Good grades" are clearly important to Patrick. He had a vague idea that these would help him to get into "better universities, better jobs". Yet, more than any other participant, Patrick left me with a sense that he was drifting. Although I know that a lack of urgency in our meeting did not necessarily mean there was a lack of awareness or effort in his day-to-day life, he seemed to lack zest for anything at all. For example, he suggested about his hopes for the sixth form experience "I'm not sure, probably the same as GCSEs and all the other years. I'm not really sure," and on success at the end of Year 11 "if I get grades that I'm happy with". Unlike some of the students whom I will discuss later, he did not express an awareness that teachers might be on hand to provide advice about subject options – only that "they have to teach something in order [for me] to learn it ... when I'm confused I go to clinics and ... homework if I don't get it right, I can get it corrected", but he does speak to parents and to friends, who also perform a role for Patrick of sparing him from loneliness at lunchtimes. Revision means that he does not go into exams not "know[ing] stuff". He appreciates being set academically in many lessons as it ensures that he feels on track and he did know that the 'Options' process meant he would make a choice about subjects, which it struck me he had very little concern about. On reflection I wonder if I could have pressed Patrick more firmly on his most strongly held views and the areas in his life that he would not be prepared to compromise on; his most extended response and that which suggested the importance of organisation to him in our opening session, which emerged

when I asked him about his experiences of preparing for examinations, was: “It’s quite satisfying writing notes, because you can do them super neat and ... skip out bits where you did questions. ... You have your whole book in a few pages. And you can go over that. It’s quite nice.”

In Session 2, it seemed that Patrick had been able to embed his previously expressed subject interests in the intervening months, although it was unclear whether he had given the IB full consideration as the proxy term for ‘curriculum’ used in Session 1 had been replaced by “A-level”. It struck a chord for me given my motivations in conducting this study when he shared how he felt about having limited information, both about when the information would come (“I feel like maybe we haven’t got enough information yet for, like, sixth form. I think I think we get some this week.”) and the content of the information (“I wanna know more about the subjects that we haven’t done in GCSE but could be doing in A-level. Maybe new subjects that we don’t know anything about.”). I am sure that Patrick could have commenced his research in these areas had he been slightly less placid in his approach, particularly when my question about whether there were any other difficulties about the ‘Options’ process was met with an endorsement of the previous response: “I think not knowing about what these subjects are like, even the ones I’ve kind of almost chosen because they could be a lot different to GCSEs”. But Patrick is possibly the sort of student whom few members of staff would actively reach out to, as I do not imagine that he has either a particularly noticeable flair for or weakness in any given subject. There was also the school site closure to contend with: “We don’t really know what’s gonna happen like ‘specially ’cause of coronavirus. We’re all at home.”

I was curious about what role this information might play and noticed a similarity with Session 1 in the comfort that Patrick appears to find from familiarity, such as when subjects are “anything like the GCSE”. When I enquired about his experiences of negative self-talk, he imagined that he might be liable to worry about “starting something new” that he could “potentially fail at”. I appreciate his patience, however. He had not been frantically Googling and risking accessing inaccurate information. He knew the choice was “important” and not to be one tackled without due care, but with some humour we realised that the same subject outcomes might emerge from a more “careless” approach in which he might “just go with the subjects I like and the ones that I enjoy”.

In our concluding session I was eager to probe Patrick about the specifics of his choice process. It emerged that he had been set on mathematics and Latin throughout the GCSE years, despite not enjoying them beforehand. I remain unclear about whether this change was a direct result of his experiences of lessons or perhaps the subject content, and we said nothing more about what it is that made him want to study these other than his perceived likelihood of good grades that emerged in an earlier interview. Despite Patrick's interest in Latin, timetabling constraints prevented him from taking classical civilisation along with his other preferences ("it was difficult to try and get all the subjects I wanted in the same, like, bands for A-level"), which is where physics won out and in turn where his choice of economics came from as "maths, physics and economics go well together". Despite his priority subjects being decided with time to spare, this predicament might have contributed to the concluding decisions being just "two days before I handed it in".

I must admit I am unconvinced about whether there were precisely four subjects remaining after his "process of elimination", given that this coincides with the number of A-levels to be taken, not least as he implied a sense of burden when he said "I'd have to do them for another two years. So, I wanted to do ones that I actually liked." While there may have been "quite a big gap between the subjects I like and don't", I imagine that he could have been persuaded quite easily to retain a fifth subject or for one more to have been removed. He did, though, present some analogies in response to the Pic-A-Card images (Figure 4.1): looking up and the tasks that lie ahead, the blur of revision and assessments and the need to keep going even when Year 11 is concluded.

Figure 4.1 Patrick's card selections

It would be inappropriate to take unwarranted credit for Patrick's overall optimism about his post-16 curriculum choice experience, but I am confident that his participation in this study had a positive impact on him: "I think the [sessions] have highlighted some of the issues that I needed to find out [and] ... showed me what I don't know", which led Patrick to "[find] out more about like A-levels and IB". I asked if he would recommend it for future Year 11 students to which to response was "Yeah, you can get a lot. Find out a lot."

4.5.2 Quietly assured

4.5.2.1 Characteristics of category

A student who is quietly assured has a clear sense of the choice that they are going to make in relation to post-16 curricula. They may associate their intentions to select, for example, A-levels with their family history, personality or career plans, and therefore be unshakeable in their plans. In extreme cases they might believe that their post-16 curriculum has been an inevitable part of their academic life from birth.

Saying this, my use of the word 'quietly' is intentional and significant. Students who pursue this choice process do so without dramatic retorts to contrary information or guidance. They are accepting of peers making different choices to them. And the approach (however unconscious it may be) allows them to be unflustered during what they know to be an important experience with long-term ramifications.

4.5.2.2 Cases selection

The next two students (Quentin and Qasim) have a lot in common. Both have attributes that are not stereotypically associated with elite higher education progression, both were close to the top of their cohort in all their 10 GCSE subjects, and both approached their post-16 curriculum choices in a calm way, each with consistent plans throughout Year 11 and quiet assurance that they had thought things through to a satisfactory extent.

Quentin has quite striking characteristics. He receives a substantial bursary that enables him to attend the school and he is the only participant in the sample to reside in a POLAR4 quintile 3 area, yet he is in the top sets for both science and mathematics and expressed confidently in the survey that he would want to study "engineering, science or economics at uni". Professionally, I have often wondered whether students with aspirations in quantitative subjects are deterred from choosing the IB because choosing the alternative, A-

levels, makes it possible to study both mathematics and further mathematics. Quentin was in my physics class during the period of this research – another reason that I invited him to participate. The oldest Year 11 participant in the sample, Qasim, also had quite a few other distinguishing characteristics that made me curious. He lives in a POLAR4 quintile 4 area and is Black Caribbean. Qasim had ambitions to study the IB followed by law at university, which he felt was "obviously very important to [start] a business". Apart from Qasim, there was just one other member of his tutor group expressing any interest in the IB at the survey stage, which made it seem unlikely that his aspirations emerged from his most immediate peers.

4.5.2.3 Quentin

Although presenting as coy or perhaps really not knowing about the 'Options' process in our first interview (he said he was "not sure" or "[didn't] know" on 20 occasions), Quentin did reveal some ideas, which is what sets him apart from (placid) Patrick. He explained that he was going to follow his sister and look first at high tariff universities such "Oxford or Cambridge or like Imperial?" (which, speaking from professional experience, I would say he is a strong contender for), then at subjects that he might like to study ("Like, maths or sciences. Yeah. Or economics maybe") and then confirm with family, although he felt he was responsible for "most of it". In his visualisation he shared the simple enjoyment he gets from sitting calmly in his living room, schoolwork and playing sports, and so I would suggest that he values focus, competition, success and flexibility. Quentin thought the IB Diploma a good fit for students who don't yet know what they want to study – those who are "a bit indecisive" – and I presume by implication that he perceived it as less academically stimulating than A-levels.

Months later, Quentin's subject preferences were unchanged with sciences, mathematics and economics definitely in the running and he had made only the slightest tentative steps to express a preference for A-levels as his overarching curriculum ("I haven't been giving it too much thought yet, but I think I'm leaning towards A-level, I think") as he stated that "don't know" was his current perspective on the 'Options' process with the dual relevance of his feeling about the decision and the choice itself. Unlike Quentin, some of his friends had already decided on the IB Diploma ("I think it's because he wants to study about … like a wide range of subjects and I think the IB appeals to him 'cause, like, universities. ... Like he

wants to go for like Oxford."), but this had neither convinced nor deterred him). As IB Coordinator I felt that his suggestion with respect to the pace of the curriculum choice process that "I don't really think anyone can make that type of decision very quickly" was quite profound and a view I would endorse. It did not seem that there were any tensions or challenges except perhaps the time needed to research universities in order to make a fully informed choice at this age. He was also quick to suggest that negative self-talk would make him feel "anxious, scared, nervous", so these emotions may have been relatively close to the surface.

Having not brought up literature, languages or arts to date, it was no great surprise that Quentin had his subject and curriculum decisions sewn up in time for the 'Options' deadline, admittedly with chemistry still hanging in the balance with physics. He said that he made the choice during online school (since the previous session) – perhaps in February or March – and that university websites confirmed that his A-levels would keep the options open. The sixth form serves the purposes for Quentin of furthering his disciplinary education and providing access to university, and this experience of curriculum choice has simply allowed things to slot into place, in his words from "unsure" via "confident" to "certain" (Figure 4.2). Although Quentin at no stage seemed to be at any risk of imbalance, I sensed that other students, in contrast, might have walked a tightrope between over-confidence and being incapacitated through worry.

Past	Present	Future
unsure	confident	certain

Figure 4.2 Quentin's word selections (Pic-A-Card was not available in this interview because of technical issues)

4.5.2.4 Qasim

In October, there were naturally reservations from a "slightly nervous" Qasim; after all, he was aware of the benefits of simultaneously optimising "a lot of factors" including career opportunities, enjoyment, a balance of essay-based and quantitative subjects, high grades in line with his academic potential, connections and friendships. And yet, I did not perceive any distress or unease about the situation. He had most confidence in Chinese, philosophy and English, and I can only assume that these correlated with his imagined billboard message to the world: "do the things that you enjoy". I asked him to share his thoughts on A-levels given that he cited just three subjects and he described the "variety" and the "ability to

keep your options open" that he felt the IB Diploma would provide. I also pondered how he would perceive his 'fit' as a "curious, probably intelligent and quite hardworking" person with each route, with wanting to take languages and to study ways of thinking whilst also not ruling out A-levels. Qasim alluded to his values when we spoke about his business-related ambitions. He confessed that he "[didn't] like ... [that] you're not really allowed to show individuality" due to school rules and that he looked forward to the "different perspective" that IB peers might bring.

I wondered how the apparent contradiction between citing just three significant subject interests whilst preferring the opportunities of the IB might be resolved. I did not have to wait long; Qasim jumped straight into Session 2 with "since I'll be doing IB" twice in his opening responses, almost as though he wanted to get it off his chest. He was also quick to make me aware that he understood the requirement to study mathematics and a science as well: "I think I probably got four or five out of the six IB subjects certain, which are Chinese, English, maths, and then either chemistry or biology I think for the science". Noticing that philosophy had departed from the list, I asked about the remaining two, to which Qasim informed me "if I was to do Chinese and something like economics or finance then I'd probably do economics at IB instead of history or philosophy, which would probably be the other options". Although Qasim still sees the experience as "complicated" (a lens which he feels "prepares you for life"), he does so with awareness that he would rather mull things over than rush into it with over-confidence or to be overly optimistic about the subjects he happens to enjoy most ("try and find the balance between keeping your options open and doing things that you enjoy"). He himself confessed that the lessons lined up in any given day affect his mood, but also that it is the teachers that affect how he feels about the lessons. I too was quietly reassured by his concluding words, where he suggested that post-16 curriculum choice ought not be dictated by others but instead be individual so that there is no cause for regret: "I would say don't let other people dictate your decision. Make your own personal choices."

In Session 3, Qasim brought another realisation to the discussion. To make informed sixth form choices one has to be prepared to make an implicit decision about university at the same time:

> I think deciding ... what kind of university courses you want to do. You might have to do that as part of deciding your sixth form courses, because if you had something that was completely different to the set of subjects you chose, you probably couldn't do it. So, you kind of have to work out the general direction you wanted to go in the university.

Qasim and I joked that that the 'Options' process was really "buy one get one free". Both he and Quentin understand and accept this premise – and they have quietly gone about deciding on provisional higher education plans with next-to-no requests for school resources or personal stress. Perhaps the breadth of the IB Diploma and the ability to take economics from scratch (now decided, based on "wanting to do something new") – not to mention the international connection and languages – resonated for Qasim, enabling him to remain settled on it. In making the choice to study the IB Diploma he felt that he taken a risk, but also believed he had been "creative" in doing so, and he "didn't find it too difficult". The metaphors of "going [round in] circles" to "trusting" himself to making a commitment and taking "a weight off the shoulders" (Figure 4.3) are a pleasing summary of what I hope the process might be like in a 'good' scenario. And it seems that coaching supported him throughout: "I think it's helped me to figure out all the different factors involved, that I needed to kind of involve in my decision making. And then weighing them up to find balance."

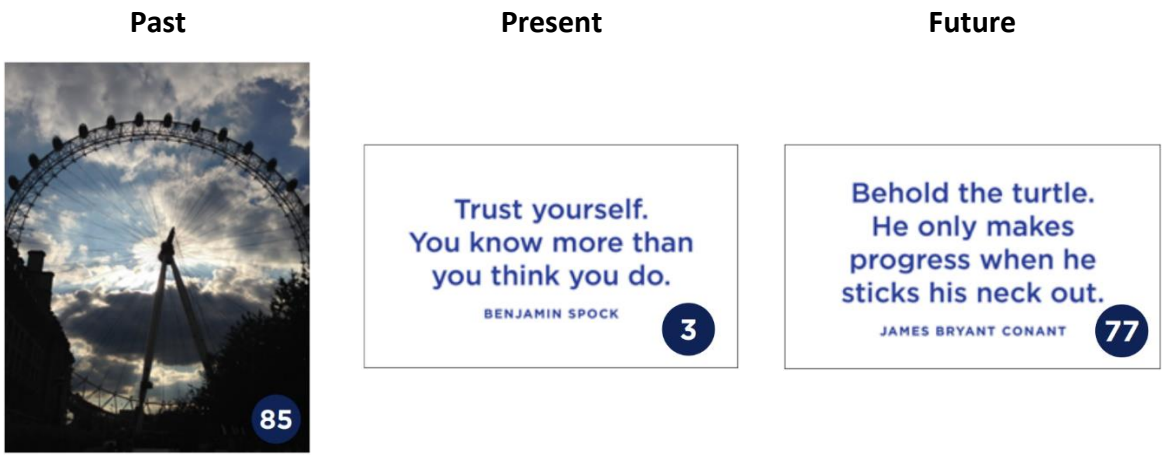

Figure 4.3 Qasim's card selections

4.5.3 Borderline obsessional

4.5.3.1 Characteristics of category

I ought to be careful what I wish for. As much as I want all students to play an active role in their curriculum choice experience, there are some who take it too far.

I use the word 'obsessional' relatively lightly (hence choosing to temper this with 'borderline'); it is not within the scope of an EdD thesis to ruminate on the psychological definitions of the term. But some students spend hours every week over a period of months or even years thinking, strategising or worrying about making post-16 curriculum choices. They recognise its importance to their future lives and the benefit of developing a sense of their priorities, but do not recognise the support on offer or the straightforward mechanisms by which they can postpone many of the meaningful aspects of the choice (such as by taking mathematics as a 'fourth' A-level or more than three IB subjects at 'Higher' Level). The effects of this degree of obsession are typically negative and might include neglecting other tasks of long-term importance (like preparing for examinations) or having an increased likelihood of mental health issues. I am also unconvinced that students following the 'borderline obsessional' choice process have a more valuable post-16 academic experience as a result.

4.5.3.2 Cases selection

In a participant sample of just 10 individuals (not counting the groups), three risked falling into the category of giving too much thought to the 'Options' process – and sacrificing other aspects of their lives as a result: Omar, Oliver and Otto.

Omar is among the top performers in his year for science and mathematics. He listed more than 10 subjects of interest in the initial questionnaire and so his inclination towards the IB Diploma (with no consideration of A-levels) set him apart from most students who were less broad in their subject options. Omar has a Pakistani family background and lives in an affluent residential suburb of London but had only been attending the school for two years before the period of this research.

Oliver is White and lives in central London but grew up in the US with US parents. In the questionnaire he expressed an aspiration to join the US Navy and to carry out undergraduate and postgraduate medicine study there too, making him one of only a

handful of students across the Year 11 population to have a clear intention to study or work outside of the UK. I know from my professional experiences at the context school that it is rare for an aspiring medic to desire to study the IB, so Oliver represented quite an unusual case. I was curious too about how confident he might be in his medical aspirations, given his mid-range academic setting for both science and mathematics.

Otto was in the top academic sets for science and mathematics and receives an 'all-round' scholarship because of his continued success in academic and co-curricular endeavours. Indian in ethnicity, he lives within a mile of the school, an area known for its ethnic diversity and range of socioeconomic backgrounds but also for having high rates of participation in higher education. Expressing an interest in subjects across multiple disciplinary areas (languages, humanities, mathematics and natural sciences), Otto seemed an ideal candidate for the IB Diploma but expressed that he was "unsure" about curriculum in the indicative survey and wrote only that he would like "to go to university" when asked about career ambitions. It is this type of student who, in previous years, has often chosen A-levels despite having broad interests, in turn leading to low IB uptake.

Omar, Oliver and Otto have come through the 'Options' process during the life and times of Covid-19. We cannot know whether they would have thought just as long and hard about their curriculum choices in the absence of a pandemic, but it seems quite reasonable that inclinations towards anxiety and years of misguided research might befall others in their wake. I only hope that the return to school site will enable my colleagues and I to spot these behaviours, to intervene to simplify matters and to reassure students when of benefit.

4.5.3.3 Omar

I sensed from our visualisation exercise that Omar might value (in the most general sense) success, prosperity, contributing, invention, inheritance and teamwork as he spoke about his desire to set up a tech company that would make a positive impact on the world, "helping to further humans" but which would also be "financially sound" and have everyone "approve of". He also wishes that he could "explore the universe" and, despite recognising that "human nature is naturally self-centred", "understand what's around us and also just help humanity as a whole".

It struck me that Omar might in some ways have needed this choice, and that he would have been inclined to invent one if it did not exist; he had been thinking about it "for a couple of years" in a bid to "feel more sort of secure knowing like where I'm heading" and, although to me he seemed far from clear in Session 1 with two subjects still to choose from four options ("either chemistry or computer science ... and either philosophy or economics"), he spoke at length with minimal prompting. Omar had coined his own conceptual framework "triangle" between his "geek" interests (sci-fi and fantasy), his "outside" interests (mathematics, physics and philosophy) and his subject choices. While one might wonder about the extent to which his description was performative and how often a teenager may really consider the exact subjects that are available in the sixth form to be his motivations, there was a fit between his aspirations today and traditions in his family; his "Dad works in computer science" and his "great grandfather ... was a doctor at Cambridge of nuclear physics". I sensed no burden from this adherence to tradition, but Omar was conscious of the investments that have been made in his education in the form of "hundreds of thousands of pounds" from his parents, support in decisions and interests from family, "so much [help]" from teachers and his friends simply "being there", so it was no surprise that he admitted later "it's just hard to make a decision when you enjoy two things, so much", not to mention while "keeping my schedule consistent", "not leaving it all 'til the last minute" and not "[having] to rush to get it done". Despite this moderate concern about revision strategies, he had confidence that he would be eligible for the sixth form and whichever subjects he chose – there was no active subject avoidance – and concluded "I feel pretty good. I feel like I've looked into more depth about what I want to do in life and ... how everything's affecting my life that I've made choices on so far, and how choices I make in the future might affect me" – precisely what I'm aiming to help all students to achieve in future cohorts at my school and further afield.

Omar perhaps did not notice it, but to my mind he had made quite a lot of progress in the couple of months between Sessions 1 and 2, narrowing down from eight possibilities to a final six. And although disappointed at the IB's cap on sciences (which resurfaced in an informal conversation on GCSE Results Day in August), I am hopeful that this constraint will perhaps be a positive for Omar overall. I was unconvinced that he would have anything practical to gain from studying a fourth STEM subject were he to take A-levels, and he might

discover interests in literature, language and humanities that shape his future. When we discussed his lens on his curriculum choices, “on track” and “stressed” were Omar’s two conceptions of how the ‘Options’ process could be viewed, with the latter being something he would rather avoid because of the possibility that he may not fulfil his academic potential as a result. Prompted by his background image of a nebula on Microsoft Teams, we chatted about a third way of seeing things, with the “bright, cheerful [fascination]” of Professor Brian Cox, which he felt he could draw upon when wanting more security in his choices or when needing to “work smarter, not harder”, a sense that became more prominent because of Covid-19 restrictions: “I’m a lot less focused when at home rather than in the classroom ... I procrastinate quite a lot”. I did not detect this Covid-19 link in our first session; being away from school site seemed to make it harder for Omar to “[engage] in [his] work”.

It was in our final interview that I sensed that all was not quite right. Omar shared his tendency to “double-check myself ridiculous amounts and then run out of time”. Despite being able to name all six subjects several weeks previously, the choice of foreign language was now up in the air even after the deadline; he was planning to learn some Japanese during the vacation, even though this was not expected nor advised, to ascertain whether he would be likely to achieve as strong an eventual result as in German years later. I wonder for how many this indecision is a reality, especially as Omar accepted that his peers might have made last-minute curriculum choices. The Pic-A-Card exercise (Figure 4.4) revealed that in January he had “[felt] like everything ... especially when the lockdown was announced ... was starting to become a little bit repetitive”, that the mock exams for which he had prepared served as another “wake-up call”, and that he longed for “relaxation” after the concurrency of the ‘Options’ process with mocks and final exams preparation, despite not attributing any blame to the school. Omar admitted that his parents were quite involved, particularly in the decisions between computer science and chemistry and philosophy and economics, through “a lot” of conversations. The family’s perceived utility of each subject seemed to be given higher priority than Omar’s enjoyment or making full use of the IB Diploma to generate variety.

Figure 4.4 Omar's card selections

4.5.3.4 Oliver

In our first interview, Oliver cited his English teacher (a former Deputy IB Coordinator) as an influence who "sparked the interest" in IB, which I took to be a positive from a whole-school professional perspective, but nonetheless there were some serious misconceptions in what Oliver had understood. He inaccurately believed that the quantity of subjects in the IB resulted in reduced depth of content in the Higher Levels and, while correct that there is more harmony between the IB Diploma and the US college model than A-levels, he was unaware that the IB is appropriate for university entrance in the UK and that A-levels are accepted in the US. I suspect that Oliver's "extensive ... in-depth research" taking place "outside of school regarding what the IB is, what subjects you can do" may be the cause. This is a case where Covid-19 and resulting school site closures seem to have had a detrimental effect; Oliver explained that his motivation was a weakness and that he "[hates] uncertainty", and his plans "to talk to admissions groups in the UK and the US" might not have yielded information of the same relevance (or concision) that I or my colleagues could have provided. I was sorry to learn that in a bid to "do anything in my power to ensure I find the answer" when "I don't know something" he opts to consult "websites or ... newspaper articles" rather than asking a teacher, although he does take pride in "noticing things". I suspected in this "largest challenge [of] deciding on what I do choose" he might be valuing impact, energy, honesty, endeavour, education, global citizenship, freedom, comfort and preparedness.

It was in our second session that some of Oliver's perceived tensions really came through: concerns about workload during the "curveball" lockdown that "came out of nowhere" and

with “not knowing how I’m going to be assessed” (because at the time some but not all GCSE examinations had been cancelled), a steadfast commitment to the IB especially after “President Joseph Biden was inaugurated” meaning that “the future does not look as bleak as it once was”. He had serious concerns about duplicating his efforts by doing the IB when suspecting that A-levels and SATs would be easier (“Am I sacrificing quality over quantity? Will it really help me?”) and “excitement” coupled with “nerves” about how he was approaching things (he felt he was capable of “being analytical” but that he found “doing research ... very tedious and very boring”). Although Oliver is capable of dedicating even “more time to look into the IB”, “workload that’s, you know, quite heavy and ... moving too fast in a pace where I end up ... knowing the content but not understanding ... and deadlines and procrastination which has become much worse due to the lockdown ... scare me”.

From reading all three transcripts again I sense that Oliver remains emotionally in the US, as though England is still the ‘other’ place where he happens to be ‘now’, despite having had his entire secondary education at the context school. To take this significant presumption further still, perhaps this ‘temporary’ feeling has added to his concerns about getting his curriculum choice right. I am personally pleased that the “pretty neat” experience “of [participating] in a science, or research, project” has reminded Oliver that he is “special” and helped to ease him across the preliminary deadline in the ‘Options’ process through coming to the realisation that errors in judgement are not permanent. Since being “at the start [when] it was intimidating” and “terrified” as he “hit a bit of a brick wall” to not stopping when “the world was kind of at a standstill”, he now realises that he has “acted as a perfectionist” (Figure 4.5) and that:

> I can mess up. I can make a mistake. And then that’s OK because, you know, I can correct that mistake. I can learn from it, and, you know, I can do more to find out how I made that mistake and what I can do to not make that same mistake in the future.

His pleasure at being a “science” research participant resonates with his selection of the “no-brainers” (biology and chemistry at Higher Level). He also chose Latin and his “favourite subject” history. Recognition seems quite important to Oliver from what he said about Latin and only recently finding his “stride” with it.

Figure 4.5 Oliver's card selections

4.5.3.5 Otto

Enjoyment, depth, aspiration, variety, learning, friendship and happiness are important to Otto and so I was pleased to find in Session 1 that, despite being "a bit torn between A-level and IB" because of wanting to study "a lot of subjects I love", that he had found a curriculum option that he believed would continue to fulfil these in the IB – although he admitted only moments later that he was only "fifty-five [percent]" sure. It was gratifying to learn that my professional efforts had been successful in helping students to understand that IB study is not a greater burden than A-levels; indeed, Otto felt he would continue to enjoy a "balanced mixture of learning and ... and also just having fun", that through the IB his "happiness would probably increase" and that "the content is going to be about the same". On the other hand, he associated "intelligence" with IB students and felt that mathematics is something he's always loved, so I was unconvinced that Otto had a 'growth' mindset. He believed that the people he was around (parents, friends, teachers) were his biggest influences in this choice and in others, and he mulled over the curriculum choice for "longer than a year" including "quite a bit" of conversation, but with recently increased intensity following the distribution of 'Options' information. Like for Omar, Otto had a dilemma in his choices "because I have love for other subjects more" and he makes a plea to others to "just try as many things you can, things you might enjoy, things you might not enjoy, but you will never until you've done it". Based on his visualisation he appears to value variety, exploration and academic risk-taking, and we also discussed love, subject content and kindness. As Otto says, "everything just influences each other" and "[coaching] can help

me to choose what I think is right for me" but "at the end of the day, you're still going to do what you love".

A few months down the line, Otto's first word to describe his lens was "challenged". The next was "struggle". He told me that "I really wanted to do as much as I could", that he "worked quite hard during the holiday with 11 … subjects that I needed to revise", that "if I go along with the IB course I'll be able to do it ... although that will be difficult" and that "the A-levels are also something that are quite appealing". I noted that the mock examinations gave him the confidence to know that he could manage continuing with six subjects, but equally the sense that four might be more straightforward. He did not know what career he would like in the future or was perhaps not prepared to accept that it would definitely be in business (after "insight" from his parents) and realised that this would make it more difficult to make the "right" decision in comparison with a "specialist". The importance of family, open-mindedness and love were reiterated in this conversation:

> Do what you love because at the end of day, if you do what you love, you're not gonna feel obliged to do it. You're gonna enjoy it and then you're gonna have fun with it. And a life is really long. So, if you do something you love, you won't be in resentment after.

It seemed as though Otto had the ability to move from negativity to positivity with relative ease, although the closure of the school site meant that his parents have become more involved in the choice process than they might have done, and that he "obviously" felt less able to speak to members of school staff.

To accompany his continued mix of being "anxious and excited" in anticipation of transitioning to the sixth form, Otto felt by our third interview that the experience of curriculum choice had been a roller coaster – filled with "scary" points, the "thrill" of submitting the form and, predominantly, "joy". He chose the IB Diploma over A-levels, in line with his previous explanations, because it enabled him to drop fewer subjects (particularly as it would have taken two subjects to study mathematics and further maths at A-level) and the fact that he could commence with four at Higher Level. I was enlivened by this positive choice, even if the process had been challenging. Otto selected quotes in the Pic-A-Card for all three points in the year (Figure 4.6), from beginning to think ("I cannot

teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.") to being taught ("Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I learn.") to tossing away notions of perfectionism ("Don't let perfection stand in the way of excellence."). He also concluded the process as a whole as being about preparation for the future ("It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." and "We may not be able to prepare the future for our children, but we can at least prepare our children for the future.").

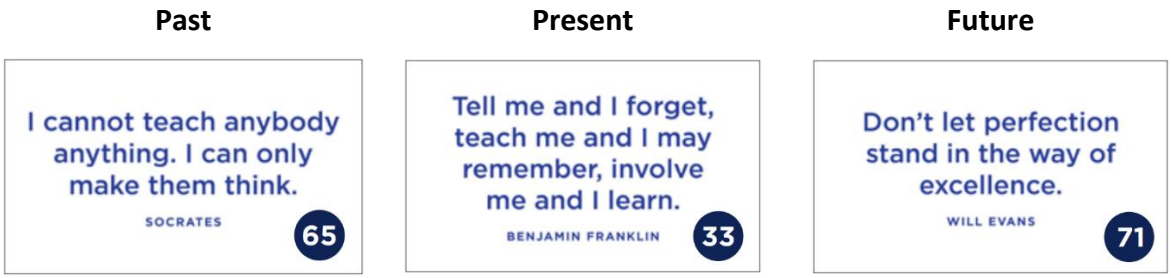

Figure 4.6 Otto's card selections

4.5.4 Performances of satisfaction

4.5.4.1 Characteristics of category

There are students who get the balance right. They play an active part in making post-16 curriculum choices, they have some sort of framework through which to select the overarching curriculum and the subjects within, they value the insights of experts (perhaps choosing different paths because of this advice) and they spend an appropriate proportion of their time over a period of a few months to make sure that they have thought things through. Unfortunately, however, all of this may for nothing if school-level constraints stand in their way.

Ironically, the more upfront the constraint, often the more accepting a student and their family will be. An example of this is simply not offering a subject (like a particular modern foreign language) or curriculum route (like T-levels) from the outset. But many schools aim to be flexible and need to make curriculum availabilities and constraints at a later stage, for example when finding out how many students would be interested in a small-cohort subject to see if it is financially viable for the following year.

Either way, when a student finds out that their school cannot accommodate their preferences, they will ultimately have to decide whether to remain at the school for their post-compulsory years – and the emotions to adopt when doing so. I argue that students

who are disappointed but who act as though satisfied with the school's decision are putting on a performance. If they later come to present the decision as though it was their own or a positive in their career overall, I suggest that there are underlying performative behaviours (just as constructions of narratives have been viewed as performative in the professionalism literature).

4.5.4.2 Cases selection

This is the second 'category' of students to include just one participant: Spencer.

Already 16-years-old when interviews commenced, Spencer had a keen interest in Latin and Greek and, unusually for someone so specific in subject interests, had a preference for the IB Diploma. Spencer received a sports scholarship and was in mid-range science and mathematics sets. He is White and his family live outside of London in Surrey in a location in the top quintile for likelihood of participation in higher education. I taught Spencer physics in the junior school, so we had a prior rapport.

4.5.4.3 Spencer

Spencer had a clear idea of taking Latin and Greek in the future ("I've always thought I wanted to do Greek and Latin") because he "[likes] the differences in cultures from now and back then" and "all the language aspects of it". He was already content to be studying subjects with small cohorts despite having a limited number of classmates, and lessons sometimes taking place at lunch and after school and has maintained these subject interests for some time ("when I was younger, I used to do a lot of reading Greek mythology stories and yeah, I did Latin in my old school"), leading now to interests in metaphysics:

> Do you know how they say that you're born into different bodies but the soul stays the same? ... I think it's quite cool to think that I might be someone who lived in the Greek times or the Roman times. ... I always wanted to know what went on in those days, and ... what happens after you die.

I noticed some emerging resonance with the mathematics and physics education literature in the need to be "good at" maths because of its "difficulty", whereas other subjects like English can be practised, attempted or perhaps even faked: "you can always find a way to get a good grade or write things that make you sound good or something". Enjoyment of the classical languages was a positive reason to be taking them, and, although he offered

only a brief mention of his interest in continuation at university (with "econ" another option), there seemed to be family approval for languages ("We go skiing in France and I think they think it would be a good idea ... to do that. And it's my dad who is quite forward on it, who wants me to do it. All my siblings did French as well.)", the IB ("all three of my siblings did IB") and competitive universities ("I think my parents suggested something about Oxbridge and the classics"). On the other hand, he seemed to have some negative recollections of teachers in French lessons. From this explorative interview, I would suggest that Spencer values curiosity, success, spirituality, open-mindedness, global citizenship, criticality, connections, scholarship, responsibility, discovery and contentment.

Spencer was so expressive (and therefore, perhaps, reflective) that I thought his greatest challenge or tension might be his own awareness of the conflicting influences. He knew that his experiences of teachers affected his enjoyment of their subjects ("If they understand the student and understand the class then ... the relationship's always better and … you get along with them more. ... Last year in ... one science I didn't really enjoy it 'cause I just didn't really get on with the teacher."), that the constraints created by the IB to restrict subject choices makes him less likely to choose it ("with doing IB, I wouldn't be able to do all the subjects I wanted to do"), that it is unlikely that he was destined to fall in love with the classics ("I think it comes naturally. I'm quite good at it. ... I wouldn't say [from] birth, but ... when I actually got the chance to actually study it ... that was brilliant to be honest.") and that his desire to go to university is less rational or self-induced ("I haven't really got a clue") than the means by which he will check his selections of English, French or economics:

> I really do just have to look deeper into the remaining subjects that I want to take and then weigh it up and see what will I enjoy most and what will benefit me the most and then ... what do I actually want to do and then how will it affect me later in life.

He felt he had made little progress from October and as though he was not as clever or as organised as his older siblings, but he does have positive mottos that he aims to live by: "You should take every opportunity whilst you can ... always have a positive mindset and make sure you're doing what's best for you and what's gonna benefit you the most and make sure you enjoy that."

By March, Spencer was working at "full speed" to “to set myself up nicely”, which struck me as being quite a difficult way to live and, on top of the disappointment at having been away from school, he had a challenging Year 11 experience overall (“I think with Covid and how everything played out, I think there have been obstacles”). The “end goal which is the mountain” remained unclimbed and he saw “maximum effort” as inevitable as he concluded the year whilst “being happy and making sure I’ve attained everything that I wanted and making sure that I’ve done the best I can” (Figure 4.7). Saying this, I do not think the process of choosing a sixth form curriculum was negative for Spencer and I sensed no turmoil. If anything, it provided an antidote to what would otherwise be a year entirely focused on exams: “it was nice to just have got something else to do, and it was nice to take part ... it’s quite nice to dedicate yourself and talk about yourself”.

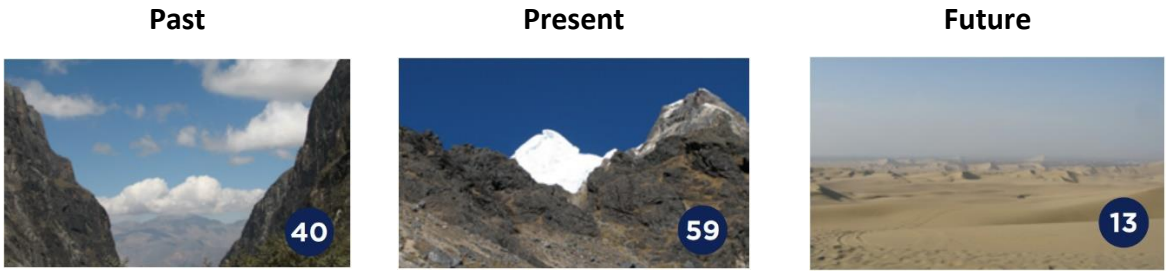

Figure 4.7 Spencer's card selections

Spencer is from a pro-IB family, with his siblings IB alumni, and he ultimately wanted to select the IB because it “offers a broader sort of path to the future”. Although his subject interests were quite specialist, including both Latin and Greek, he was excited about the other IB subjects on offer, was positive overall about this curriculum and was someone I had expected (with my professional hat on) to select it. All was going to plan for Spencer until the conclusion of the ‘Options’ process when the student tallies for each subject were counted up. The resulting two for Greek with one hoping to study the IB Diploma and one A-levels, meant that only one class could be formed. Spencer was presented with an additional choice: A-levels including Greek or IB without it. He chose the A-level route. We caught up at school after the formal data collection phase of this study and he confirmed that he was “fine”, but I felt strongly that he might merely be styling it out and offering a performance of satisfaction.

4.5.5 Thriving

4.5.5.1 Characteristics of category

With adolescence being a period of identity formation, and, so far, having reported on the students who give too little or too much thought to the curriculum choice process, those who pay little attention to school resources and the information available and those who are unable to choose what they want, I am pleased to say that there also are some students who thrive.

The distinctive characteristics of students in this category are gratitude for the post-16 curriculum choice experience as an opportunity to make a choice that will express something of who they believe they are and who they want to be, and appreciation of the implied respect of their school leaders and families for them because of the extent to which the choice is theirs to make. It is not always easy for them, but they relish the challenges of exploring subjects that they may not have studied previously, negotiating the differences in the advice received from different people and finding the compromise that works for them. They are excited about commencing their sixth form studies, not because of urgency or inevitability, but because of the contribution that they have made and the responsibility that they are prepared to take.

4.5.5.2 Cases selection

Theo had the school's psychology teacher (a keen IB advocate) as his form tutor. The youngest of the participants in this study, he had a strong academic record in mathematics but less so in science. Residing in an urban suburb in the top quintile for likelihood of participation in higher education, he expressed an interest in taking drama, English literature, history, Japanese, mathematics, physics and politics in the September questionnaire, which is quite an uncommon mix. He wrote at length in the free-text boxes for both career aspirations ("I genuinely have no idea where I want my future to end up ...") and comments ("Will we be given more details on A-levels and IB ...?") and so it seemed he might have more to say in an interview setting.

Tyler was selected because, within a fee-paying school environment, he represents quite an extreme end of the socioeconomic spectrum. His family receives a means-tested bursary, he is Black Caribbean, and he is in the lowest academic set for mathematics and a 'double

award' set for science. I was interested in Tyler because he expressed an interest in going to university but indicated no consideration of the IB as a possible curriculum route, perhaps because he was aware that the IB would not accommodate his interests in sports science and, ultimately, physiotherapy.

Timothy is Chinese. He boards at the school, having attended for just one year prior to Year 11. These features alone made Timothy distinctive and someone I wished to invite for interview. In addition, he stated an ambition to become a "banker", which is a career most often pursued at the school via A-levels. From professional experience as Head of Higher Education, I know that further mathematics in addition to mathematics can offer a significant advantage in applications to economics (or similar) degrees at high-tariff UK universities, so I was curious to find out why Timothy had omitted further mathematics from his subject interests list.

4.5.5.3 Theo

Although I hesitate to suggest quite so many words, I gathered from our first interview that Theo values people, culture, the world, community, prosperity, equality, passion, activity, joy, openness, communication, variety and completion. Theo revealed that he had only the slightest tendency towards the IB at that stage ("I'm at a bit of a stalemate"), and I wondered whether this was driven by inconsistent messages from his teachers. His subject interests seem to have come from "the subject [content] itself" experiences, the "excitement" that comes from "really passionate" teachers, "happy" impressions of lessons ("Physics didn't start until Year 8 when we started separating sciences ... I actually thought I was going to like physics the least. But instantly it was just so much more enjoyable and interesting to me than all the other sciences."), his experiences of acting ("I really, really enjoy ... being out there, being different characters, pretending to be something that you're not ... being able to talk to people ... [engaging] in a lot of conversations and ... other kind of big crowd-based situations") and his Japanese teacher's tales of travel in Japan:

> I think I like how they've been able to modernise ... evolve and develop yet still stay true to a lot of their, you know, ancient, old practices. And being able to keep a lot of their tradition as well at the same time, which is something I think a lot of the other, other countries in the world are kind of losing. So, all the festivals they do throughout the year and stuff, I think that is just really cool.

Speaking as IB Coordinator, I was pleased that Theo saw the positive aspects of the IB Diploma rather than simplistically associating it only with hard work, given that "I know how little of my friends like the IB course". His family sounded supportive; Theo imagined them urging him to "just do what you want" and "make sure you pick what makes you happy".

With Theo being a generous interviewee, I imagined that he might also be quite malleable to his immediate context, but in the months between October and January it emerged that the IB had moved up in his intentions as a result of his Japanese interests ("I do really enjoy Japanese, but it's not one of my like strongest subjects, so A-level is basically out of reach") and despite continued concerns that IB "is just incredibly hard". I wondered about whether his imagined Champion's words of encouragement ("Do it! You clearly want to do it more. Just do it!") often run through his mind and whether he might feel any infuriation with his more risk-averse minded friends or weary of his father's ceaseless enthusiasm to take on the world ("he's always telling me all the things he would do"). At this point we were not yet there on his curriculum choice, but I sensed that the IB Diploma might be an unspoken inevitability that only his "nerves" stood in the way of.

So "happy" and disbelieving was Theo that he was "allowed to take a complete random variety of subjects", he consciously left the 'Options' form submission until deadline day despite having made up his mind "a week, a week or two, in advance" to "make sure [he] was 100 percent certain about everything"; I imagined internally that he would have waited until 31st August if it had been a possibility. The Covid-19 pandemic seemed to have a role despite its "massive negatives" but in a relatively positive light. Theo understood his values and goals better than he might have done otherwise: "I'm happy and I feel like, you know, a bright spring flower" (Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8 Theo's card selections

This third interview was also the first occasion in which there was any mention of the "completely new" psychology in Theo's concluding array of subjects, and he seemed to be

feeling relatively secure in mathematics ("I feel like I'm just progressively learning more and more stuff and applying old stuff to slightly more complicated things") and Japanese ("I'm definitely going to have to go back to make sure I know it, make sure I'm fine about it, which will make my life in sixth form easier, I feel, and a lot more relaxed"). Given Theo's moments of thinking deeply about the process, I was unsure if he was best-suited to this 'thriving' category. His concluding words about coaching and the curriculum choice experience confirmed it:

> It's allowed people, especially me, I feel, to find our real values, or find our real goals as well, and without the whole distraction of the outside world. You kinda just get to focus on yourself for a bit and reflect and I feel like, at least for me and probably for a lot of other students you choose to interview, they're gonna give probably more accurate or more truth *per se* answers or just talks about what they're feeling because ... [of] being able to self-reflect and just think about life and not worrying about anything going on. It allowed me to see what I want to be, where I am now and ... everything that I've had in my life and see what I truly value and where that will take me in the future, and I feel like that might apply for a lot of other people. ... I think for me personally, for Japanese especially, I've been able to read some books about Japanese culture, being able to already just get focus on my Japanese in general, which was a big deciding factor for me in ... my sixth form choice. ... I got to see ... even in my first interview ... how importantly I value people and I think that that definitely hasn't left me. ... Regardless of school or not ... being able to learn more about myself through an interview is actually really helpful ... because I start to realise who I am and what I want to be. ... I think it was really good and has helped me make all sorts of decisions better.

When asked about negatives, Theo responded only that "not everyone got the same experience".

4.5.5.4 Tyler

Caring about football, people and remaining at school, Tyler struck me as quite rational. He had come to a realisation that he would not become a professional footballer and so was actively looking at related careers: "playing sport ... that's my passion ... so if I could do the scientific side of sport, sports science side of football, that would be amazing". He knew

what these careers were ("probably my passion for sport is making it an easier decision to choose something along the lines of physiotherapy or, um, sports psychology") and the sorts of subjects in the sixth form of most relevance: "what's making it hard would probably be attaining the grades in biology, because I find biology is one of the hardest subjects and it's needed to carry on the course". Tyler had probably the weakest academic record of all my participants and an abundance of humility ("quite frankly, um, my ability wasn't there ... but my understanding of the game was quite good") and self-awareness ("I can understand how a player or a person feels because I've been there. I've, like, been on a losing side, I've been on the winning side, I understand how a player feels and what the right step for them would be."). Although there have been disappointments in his past (for example, not rising to the same semi-professional standards in sport as his brother), Tyler's curriculum choice process seemed happy and carefree ("trying new things out is literally, like, my best way to improve"), only diminished temporarily by his fears about the academic hurdle that the school requires students to meet or exceed in order to take A-levels or the IB: "linking back to the football match, if I lose confidence, if I lose perseverance, I could slip back and lose grades or lose marks and perhaps not even get into sixth form if I let myself slip". To my delight, he announced three of his own personal aims:

> Confidence, believing in yourself, is definitely the first point that anyone needs to have. Without confidence in yourself, how can you have confidence in the team? So that's definitely the first one, confidence. Passion, if you're in love with the game, if you're not in love with what you're doing, there's no way you can commit 100% to it. And perseverance ... down three nil, they persevered and turned us on our heads and won the game. If any team applies those three principles, I feel they could do well in any sport, even if they are the B team.

I surmised his values as being expertise, generosity, talent, sport, wisdom, seeing the best in other and positivity, and chuckled months later when it appeared that he had predicted perhaps the crucial moment of the Euro 2020 final:

> If, say, a player just lost the biggest final, they'd missed the penalty ... you definitely wouldn't say, 'oh, it's your fault'. You'd try and help them improve and say 'oh, next time you could take these steps to score the penalty' or 'take this step to avoid a penalty shootout and win the game right out from the start'.

Tyler claimed to have chosen his curriculum “a few months ago”, although I noticed some subjects that did not match the timetabling blocks. He also claimed to be making his own decision, and I did not doubt that he was telling me the truth from his perspective, but he also mentioned “talking to my parents” and the school’s Head of Football (in making Tyler aware that a professional football position might not be feasible). Unlike the other students I interviewed, he was applying to other sixth forms and making scholarship videos as well as worrying about grades (“My GCSE PE has yet to be cancelled, so definitely that’s playing in the back of my mind with getting my revision done, doing my interviews on my sixth form and filling out things … like recently I’ve had to do a scholarship video.”). I also thought it interesting that he had not yet considered BTEC Sport, which has a lower academic entry requirement than A-levels, but enjoyment seemed to be his first priority, followed by grades. His lenses were “interesting” and “life-changing”, with “professional footballer”, “practising what you preach”, “spending time with people” and “I’m the man” also used to view the situation. He even gave some advice to the imagined footballer:

> You could get injured in a matter of seconds. Your career could be over. Having made poor decisions in your sixth form life you really have nothing to fall back on, so it’s really putting all your eggs in one basket. But if you can really see it going somewhere, [if] you really believe in it, then I guess it’s worth taking the risk for the big pay-out at the end.

In our concluding interview, I was struck by Tyler’s use of the words “quota” and “robotic”. Despite the setback of being coerced into finding subjects that fit (with the help of his Head of Year (“I had a few meetings with Sir and I chose my choices which are psychology and BTEC PE”), Tyler remained upbeat (“school’s done amazing at putting me in the right positions, allowing me to pick what I’d like to pick and not pressuring me”). He was so excited about moving beyond his “daunting” impressions of sixth form study that he was eager to start his coursework “straight away” and “[speak] to people like you who are very knowledgeable about things regarding the A-Levels”. It seemed that his involvement in this study might have had a small part to play in his selection of psychology: “I’m quite a perceptive person. I can show empathy and things like that. [Psychology] would be a great thing to … add to myself, ... learning how the brain works, how other people work, and how I work myself, like we’ve done in these interviews”. From the comfort of a group of friends

in a tunnel of trepidation ("I kind of started this year with my group of friends in this big tunnel, which is a big event which is joining the GCSE course") to "the middle of the journey" to the sky ("I'd like to look up to the sky and try to reach that limit") and the potential for individual happiness (Figure 4.9), I sensed that Tyler had enjoyed his time throughout the 'Options' process and that he did not warrant placement in the 'performances of satisfaction' category. He summarised things generously:

> Speaking to people, like what I've just learned … they would learn things they might not know about their choices or how they'd like to progress and how they've got to that stage, even just talking due to their Covid restrictions. People might think, oh, I've got no one to talk to. But just having a chat with you about vital things could brighten their day, even if it's not for something academic.

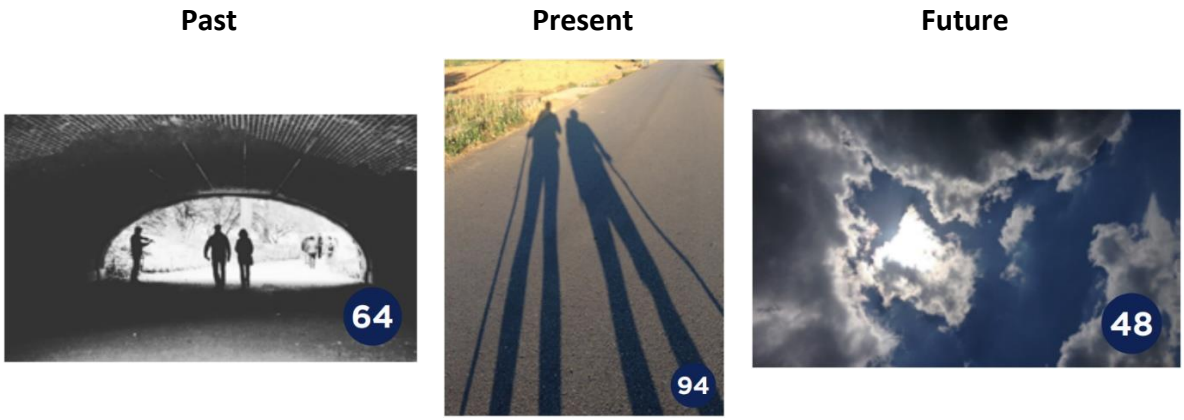

Figure 4.9 Tyler's card selections

4.5.5.5 Timothy

Timothy made his subject choices based on interest ("I read the news every day in Hong Kong and all about the investments and ... economics-related stuff") and likelihood of achieving good grades ("I'm actually pretty good at math"), which he recognises go hand in hand. However, this combination can cause him some concerns when he compares himself with his peers ("I don't like ... showing off or, like, telling other students how bad I am"). Timothy informed me that that he worked hard for "self-satisfaction" and "not just for exams", and also brought up the role of his parents as having high expectations ("of course, maybe to impress my parents"), providing for him and as advice-givers, and it sounded as though a teacher's ability could be enough to result in a change of mind ("If the teacher is pretty boring then I'm probably just going to watch some videos. ... I find my interest in the

subject is similar to playing a game. If you don't like the game ... you're not going to find interest in it."). He also mentioned his peers, but not what role they were playing. It was clear that A-levels were his chosen route and that he was selecting consciously via his "method" which he described as:

> Most importantly I think is the interest and the grades ... If you're choosing something that you're just interested in, but you're getting bad grades, it's not gonna work out for the future. So, like, for university [if] you're applying and you want to study this one that you are really interested in, but you're getting bad grades, they're not gonna accept you.

I also noted Timothy's suggestion that money precedes happiness: when we discussed his ambition to become a banker he explained "If you have no money, you got… you're not going to have anything. You're not gonna own anything. I wouldn't say money is happiness, but if you don't have money, you wouldn't be happy, that's definite.". I felt that Timothy valued acceptance, awareness, understanding, financial security, health and fairness.

Timothy's favourite subject (economics) emerged as being his "worst subject overall" in the January mock exams. However, in our second interview he had remained enthusiastic about taking economics in the sixth form, which suggested that interest or the connection with his preferred career of banking were more important than academic grades. He also said that he planned to "find some peers and talk to them" and to "Google" when researching each A-level subject's content, rather than expressing any awareness of the more informed school-based experts on hand. The lenses explored were "blurry", "firm" and "confident", the last based on his childhood self in contrast with today's uncertainty, and he wanted to avoid rushing into a decision that would become an irreversible source of regret: "[If] I make my mind soon ... there's going to be trouble for choosing them and ... it might result in choosing really bad subjects or some subjects that I'm actually not interested in." I left in no doubt that he realised the importance of the decision: "I think yeah, I'm going to think more deeply about it".

Timothy wanted a secure and fulfilling future, and he perceived that a career in the financial sector would provide this. He did consider the IB Diploma in February (a month before the

deadline) but ruled it out based on his likelihood of attending university in the UK and his concerns about studying more than the four subjects he had selected:

> I was [considering the IB Diploma] at the end of February ... after I did some research on IB and I knew the IB is like mainly for foreign countries like USA ... but right now I've decided I will be studying in the UK still for university as well, and it seems that IB has lots of subjects which I might not be able to keep track with ... and sometimes, especially in one year of school ... it's a bit tough. But yeah, the subjects I chose for A-level are perfectly suited for me.

He recognised that economics, despite being selected to assist his "future career and earning some money", might not bring him the grades he desired and saw physics as an "alternative career path" to maintain, with mathematics for enjoyment and further maths to "assist" the study of physics. He went from being in a "routine" at the beginning of the academic year ("I really didn't think of what I should do [in] the future") to experiencing the journey through exams ("studying hard is the main thing I should do") with this curriculum choice alongside to wishing for a "bright future" and "sustainable life" (Figure 4.10). I was pleased for Timothy that the blurriness of the past transitioned into clarity.

Figure 4.10 Timothy's card selections

4.6 The groups

In addition to the 10 participants who accepted my invitations for the individual interviews, I also invited the entirety of two tutor groups to take part and form two groups. One of these, Group A, had exceptionally high participation in the intentions survey with 15 respondents and a majority interested in the IB. The other, Group B, was selected because a very small number of students were interested in the IB and because the smaller number of returned

responses to the survey (11 in total) were generally concise. I was surprised, therefore, to find that just three or four students attended each Group A session while seven attended those arranged for Group B.

4.6.1 Group A

The students in Group A were Adrian, Amir, Albert and Aaron. Amir and Albert live in Surrey suburbs while Adrian and Aaron live in more urban South London. Amir and Aaron expressed interest in eight subjects each and a consideration of both A-levels and the IB. Albert is an academic scholar and in the second-from-top set in both science and mathematics. He expressed an interest in four quite traditional subjects: biology, economics, mathematics and psychology. Adrian, on the other hand, reached out through the survey for help about accessing the sixth form and had concerns about academic entry requirements. He was interested in business studies and physical education, with their more practical leanings. Group A's tutor is a classics teacher with some experience of teaching both A-levels and IB.

The Group A students unanimously reported that they were "a bit nervous ... because a lot lies on our curriculum choices". Aaron in particular was unsure about IB and A-levels because of valuing a "bigger breadth of subjects" but resented the fact that if he chose the IB he would have to do some that he didn't "really want to do". Even so, Adrian and Aaron claimed to have given the matter "five, ten minutes" of thought with Adrian wanting the ability to "drop" a fourth subject, whereas Amir who had initially joked about his excitement at the prospect of getting free lessons from the reductions, felt he had already spent "more [time] than I probably should have" and wanted to wait until the outcomes of his GCSE mock and final examinations. Upon pressing Adrian further about the influence of the subjects in each route, he initially claimed that he was "not really too bothered" but admitted moments later that "probably one of the main factors ... [was] more work in the long run" if he chose the IB. The students indicated in their conversation that they had some strong preconceptions about their suitability for the two curriculum options. In response to my questions about the attributes of IB and A-level students, both were considered as having the potential to be "intelligent" or "smart" and there was ambiguity about the term "focused", which for IB students indicated the need to dedicate oneself to study "the whole way through" but for A-level students the decision to reduce to three or four subjects (albeit

with “less effort”). I also asked about perceptions of school staff; Amir had already identified “different opinions” amongst his teachers, Aaron hoped that they would “explain what’s going to be done in that subject in either A-level or IB” and Adrian believed they would “push you to do whatever is better for you”. However, none felt able to speak to unfamiliar sixth form students, nor said that curriculum choice was a typical topic of conversation among those they did already know. With regards to parents, Adrian’s “trust the school”, Amir’s accept that he will “choose the best thing” and Aaron’s are “not forcing me to pick any subject”. Looking ahead to concluding school, all three wanted to have “enjoyed the perks” with Aaron hoping to have maintained “sports and things” and Adrian targeting university entrance and being “a good role model”. The group setting seemed to provide more opportunity for students to make suggestions for school improvements around the ‘Options’ process with opportunities to “hear from a sixth former ... about how they found the experience” and “assemblies ... going in-depth” on their wish lists, but also with agreement that they too could “[ask] for the information that we need to make the choice”.

In January, with the school site closed and mock examinations having concluded, Albert (who joined this interview) felt his results indicated what he “should be aiming towards” and even in his worse subjects that “if I’m getting like, worse scores at [school name], it could be just that I’m getting good nationally”. However, Amir felt more uncertain of his initial impulse to study the IB because of a new preference for reducing his subjects and a fear of future lockdowns and Adrian was now aware of more subjects that he would be eligible for after better-than-expected grades had “broadened my horizon”. On considering subjects that they had no experience in, Albert felt he would like to take an aptitude test “to gauge whether you’d be good at it” and Adrian saw them as useful alternatives to GCSE subjects that might provide more “insight” (like business studies instead of economics). The lenses through which the boys reported they were viewing the ‘Options’ process included “settled” (Aaron, who had been certain of his “main three” for many months), “refreshing” (Amir, who enjoyed his newfound ability to continue reducing subjects from six), “confused” (Albert, who had not yet “properly had a, like, sit down” about his preferences) and “undecided” (Adrian, who was weighing up whether to choose existing or new subjects). To continue the process, the boys were planning to “keep working hard ... to get the best grades possible in each test”, “see what teachers say about what I should do”, “keep

enjoying the subjects" and attend 'Options' Evenings to look "at the subjects I'm thinking of doing in more detail". The latter comment stood out to me as presenting yet another means by which choices cannot be considered informed – if prior interest is needed to access relevant information, then it seems unlikely that a student will locate the subject in which their skills or aspirations are best matched. Aaron offered a part-solution, perhaps from his perspective of having more potential subjects alongside his chosen mathematics, physics and chemistry:

> One of the big things to understand about ... picking your subjects is you don't have to totally get rid of a subject. ... You can still, like, look at stuff about it. ... Not picking a subject doesn't mean I have to totally lose all interest in it and not learn anything about it.

In our October interview Aaron suggested that "the coronavirus thing has kind of made everyone think of ['Options'] a bit earlier than may be normal" because "everyone's thinking about when the exams are going to happen, and that sort of leads to everyone thinking about what they're going to do next year". He also suggested that school closures and at-school zoning had weakened the joins between sixth form and the rest of the school. Covid-19 entered the discussion in January; as Adrian explained, "I think everyone is just sticking to what they know and just doing the right thing. I think if you take too many opportunities and you gamble too much during these times, it could be costly". Amir elaborated further still:

> It's just put strain on everyone's life ... I think especially people who are disadvantaged, vulnerable children ... they're really struggling to just gain access to education and that is definitely going to prevent them from even considering taking new subjects. … They're just going to take what they know.

For Aaron, "studying at home can sort of exaggerate the bits you don't like and it can make them quite hard to … to focus on". These group workshops seem to have offered some respite; the boys reported that they were "enjoyable", enabled "seeing other people's opinions", provided "good conversation" and allowed contemplation not just about the curriculum itself but also "how other people made their decisions". They suggested that

running these workshops with future cohort sessions would be best done “in form ... so they’re forced to ... engage”.

I joked with Adrian that perhaps the experience made no difference for him and instead that he was an “A-level person from birth”, to which he agreed that my summation was “fair” and claimed that there have “always been ... just four subjects I want to do”. Aaron too felt he had “always” had a disposition (towards “the logical science and maths sort of side of the subjects”) and that it was his applications to other schools that offered no curriculum choice that had ultimately made him opt for A-levels. I will confess to a moment of internal humour when Albert claimed that IB would cause him to study “too many subjects” (given that he has spent the previous five years studying at least 10); only in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and British international schools would this “appealing” option of “three or four subjects” be a possibility. He did at least appreciate the school because of “the fact that IB is even an option”. There was widespread gratitude for the “interview thing” in which my colleagues met with individual students to check that their provisional choices were sensible, but Aaron (perhaps with an eye on his next school) admitted that he felt it “a shame that the school’s stopped sort of, like, teaching the rest of the syllabus”, leaving the course “incomplete”. The Pic-A-Card exercise (Figure 4.11) revealed some optimism. Adrian, who had commenced the year feeling that “GCSEs, choices, Options, basically the start of moving into sixth form and then university after” were “a big challenge”, already had “more belief” in himself and felt that in the future he would be like an “airplane ... flying over the world, just conquering different challenges”. Amir too perceived that the “restrictions” made it “quite tough” to even consider the future and felt that as a best-case scenario he would “cruise through” his upcoming exams. Aaron instead saw his journey as commencing at the end of Year 11 like a road stretching out ahead and aspired to a “bright ending to the A-levels”. Albert has moved from a state of “seeing what everyone around me was doing and just doing that” to feeling “calm” and “content”. He likened his future aspirations to the diamond symbol, stating that he wanted to “make money”.

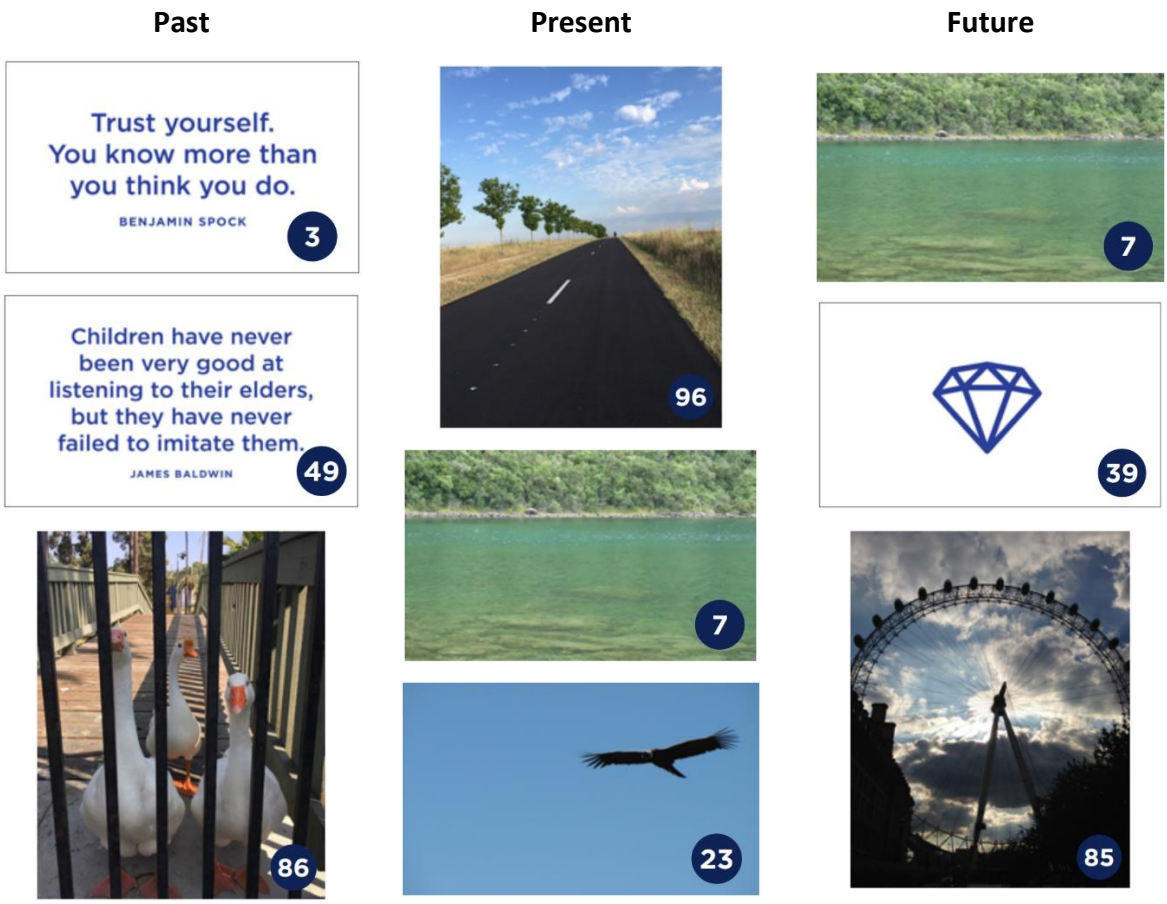

Figure 4.11 Group A's card selections (top to bottom: Aaron, Albert, Amir)

4.6.2 Group B

Benedict, Brad, Bruce, Bryson, Bobby, Brodie and Brendan were in Group B, which has a bilingual French-English tutor who is enthusiastic about the breadth of the IB curriculum. These students have a range of characteristics. Benedict, Brad and Brodie are White British, Bruce is mixed-race (White British and Black African), Bryson is Black, Bobby is Serbian and Brendan is Indian. Brad, Bruce, Bryson and Brendan hold scholarships, with Bruce and Brendan also receiving means-tested bursaries and Bruce boarding on weekdays. Home postcodes indicate household locations spread throughout South London and Surrey. All these participants except Bryson expressed an initial preference for A-levels. Longer-term career aspirations were varied, with Benedict keen on IT at university, Brad, Bryson, Bobby and Brodie all hoping for a competitive top university place, and Bruce and Brendan hoping for professional sporting roles.

The students who attended Group B also seemed to appreciate the opportunity to talk about their experiences. All seven who joined the first session continued in Sessions 2 and 3 and, despite participating in the introductory survey in a limited manner, clearly had plenty

to say. “Nervous” was once again the first emotion to be described – in this case by Bryson who was seeking the approval of US universities, by Bruce who wanted to maintain a considerable quantity of extra-curricular sport in the sixth form alongside his studies and Brendan who felt the pressures of thinking about what was “best for my future rather than, like, something that’s going to benefit me in the short term”. Brad, on the other hand, felt “fine” (“I know what I want to do for A-levels. I know what I’m good at and I know what I like.”). In between those with nerves and those with certainty, Benedict planned to “take a few subjects that give me lots of pathways into different courses for university”, Brodie was eager to take subjects “where they go together” and yet was puzzled about the notion of a “fourth A-level” and whether this would best serve him if it were “separate” or “equal to the other ones” and Bobby who knew how he would choose – “I want to pick, like, a subject that I enjoy and that I’m good at” – but not what.

There was a lively debate on the nature of the IB Diploma. Some considered it “daunting” and a route that would “cloud” them in the work required: “Will I still have enough time to do the things I love doing?”. In spite of its breadth, the subject choices within the IB were cited as adhering to “restrictions”, ultimately leading (in their eyes) to “better grades” through the A-level curriculum. On the other hand, Brad (an unmoving A-level chooser) admitted that the IB was “really, really highly regarded among ... most universities” and others chipped in that it was advantageous for “all-rounder” students who are “good at all the different things”. When one asked a summarising question (“Is it really worth, you know, doing?”), a misconception was revealed: A-levels are for “someone who knows what they’re doing and knows where they’re going with it” and “what they want to do in the future” and that IB students “aren’t dedicated to one certain field”. There was agreement with the previous group on the role of teachers with Bryson highlighting the “different perspectives” and Brendan suggesting that “they would look at you as a person, see your characteristics and then maybe [advise on] what you’d be better suited to”. Bobby felt “the quantity of work that is produced” would be the basis of teachers’ opinions about each student, whereas others imagined the advice would be to simply do “whatever you’re passionate about”. Brodie admitted that his parents may have attempted to “funnel me into a certain career” and Bobby cited the “stories” that “didn’t really quite turn out [well]” from

relatives who had experiences of studying certain subjects; however, all agreed that they could go against any parental recommendations if they wanted to.

The role of the sixth form experience itself was considered functional (for optimising university course selection and acting as a "next step" without the "annoying and restrictive" GCSEs) and social ("I probably won't see [my friends] for quite some time ... so I'd want sixth form to provide a fun and memorable ... conclusion to my school life ... so that I can ... retell a couple of stories to my children in the future"). Brodie believes now that Years 10 and 11 "were the first stage of you basically progressing into becoming a young adult", that his A-levels would be based on "what you would want to do in university" and that he and others would "value the choice more than the GCSE"; the "gravity of the GCSEs" when they "were two years younger" had not been made clear. The long-term importance of post-16 curriculum choice was hinted at in Bryson's "frustration" that "you can never really get the same story from parents, tutors, friends". But Benedict was prepared to be "quite silly" in deciding what subjects to reject: "if I'm constantly looking at the time, then I'm obviously not enjoying the lesson". Others were relying on January mock examination results to determine which subjects they were "better at" and which to "change your mind" about. Bryson's concluding advice was "to dream big, dream even bigger and then just get to that end point".

With the three-month gap after Session 1, I was curious about how the students' thinking had progressed by Session 2. Bryson "[hadn't] really given it that much thought" whereas for Brad "sixth form 'Options' is ... one of the main things I think about". Brodie believed it was "good to focus on the GCSEs" but felt the grades "shouldn't have a big impact on what you choose" as a post-results decision would be "rushed" and influenced by "outside sources". While Bryson suggested that "different backgrounds, different heritages" between families enshrined the role of parents as "very important", Benedict asserted more strongly this time that even parents should remain out of things: "If you're not happy and you're just trying to please your parents you're not really … doing that subject for the right reasons." Bobby appreciated the value of picking based on "gut feeling or, like, what you prefer" but revealed some concerns too: "without passing [the GCSEs] you will have no future". Brendan seemed to be feeling a sense of permanence in his decision: "You're the one who's going to be doing that ... profession for the rest of your life." The lenses put forth were

“scared” (Bryson), “relaxed” (Brodie), “labyrinth” (Bobby), “nervous” (Benedict), “tough” (Bruce), “a bit confused” (Brendan) and “pretty excited” (Brad). When I asked them to explore a new lens, Brodie raised the experiences of his mother who had attended a Catholic school and was restricted in her choices, Benedict temporarily replaced his nerves with his father’s enjoyment of data, ratings and analytics, Bobby imagined being more “hasty”, Bryson compared his own “textbook-finished way to get to the end goal” with his cousin’s approach of doing “whatever he feels is right” and Brad opted for the fictional character of Holden Caulfield who would “be up for choosing anything” or perhaps “just leave school”. They also demonstrated flexibility in their use and control of emotions. Brendan liked to get “hyped up” before sports fixtures, Benedict felt he was able to “boost”, “believe” and “drive” just as often as he feels a “pounding” sense of being “useless”, Bruce used “visualising success” as a strategy to overcome a given “mental barrier” and Bryson appreciated the benefits of being upbeat with those around him: “what you sow, you shall reap”.

Our final session was reflective. Benedict said that making choices was not a quick process. For Bryson, “when it comes to the sixth form choices, unlike GCSEs, you’re almost working backwards from the career, which you would probably see a future in”. He has the burden of “university decisions” that will support an eventual postgraduate application to law school. For Brodie, his mind was made up when the IB “caused blocks in the subjects I wanted to do” (in particular, finding it “strange that you can only do ... two sciences”) whereas Brad’s decision in favour of A-levels was a “no-brainer”. Brendan “went through all the different [school-produced] videos” about the “benefits each subject has”. Benedict appeared to be bracing himself for continued hard work: “Take my foot off the gas? I think you sort of need to do the opposite. If there’s one subject where you’re really keen you should just carry on working on it.” There are doubtless ways that the school could improve its ‘Options’ provision – “as students making such a big decision, a lot more support from the school would be greatly appreciated” (Bryson) – although Bobby “really appreciate[d]” the efforts, given “all that’s been going on”, only wishing for more “personal” meeting time. Benedict was not a fan of the coaching-style interview he received: “They just asked you what you really wanted to do ... and then they just basically leave you. It’s like being in a dark room and they just leave you until I find the light. It’s very difficult.” Our closing activity

was Pic-A-Card (Figure 4.12) and identifying representations of the start of the academic year (uncertainty, fears about making sixth form curriculum choices alone), the present (forked pathways, being helped while progressing through the year) and the future (providing for others, pushing perfectionism to one side, a “really long journey”).

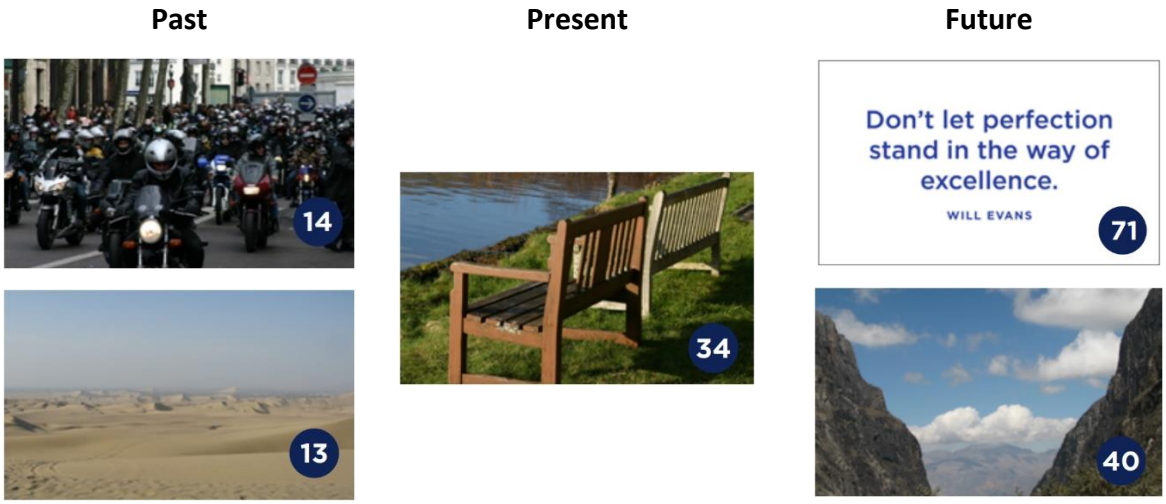

Figure 4.12 Group B's card selections (Past: Brodie, Bryson; Present: Brendan & Bruce; Future: Benedict, Bryson)

The group members were positive about their experiences of research participation. Benedict reported getting “out of [his] comfort zone” and focusing “on what’s happening with, like, your future”. With the second session taking place online, Brodie felt “in a group, having the opportunity to speak may be very valuable normally, but ... now even more valuable”. For Bruce, my aspirations for coaching as a research method and potential future practice were met in one:

> It allows you to make more of a clear decision ’cause ... other people have made their decision and it can kind of help you to guide you where you wanna go. I think, especially if you’re not sure what you wanted to do. It’s quite interesting knowing how other people found out what they want to do.

I proposed a hypothesis following my other group session that perhaps the closure of schools was “more likely to make people stick to A-levels, and less likely to branch out in adventurous academic ways” and received a range of feedback. Brodie was most in agreement:

> I think what people want after the pandemic is security and possibly ... people might see IB as more of a second GCSE where you don’t have any security in what you’re

> going to do. People may choose A-level since it's a clear path. ... Our education will be marked by this, so you could say that the whole of the learning with those subjects has been impacted. So, we would rather go into a thing that we are completely stable in rather than going into a more broad ... education for two years.

Bobby saw Brodie's perspective but believed that the IB "allows, like, a wider range of things", which is its own "security". Brendan felt his personal leaning towards A-levels was not "100% ... due to the pandemic". Brad may have given the most accurate response, which coincides with being a limitation of this study: "I think it's extremely difficult to know whether the pandemic has actually influenced us, and I think we will have to look from hindsight whether ... it has actually affected us."

4.7 IB Coordinator

Having already acknowledged my responsibility for IB Diploma curriculum management and its uptake in Chapter 1, as part of this research I reflected on what contributions I made to the broader 'Options' process throughout the academic year 2020-21.

4.7.1 Overview of responsibilities as part of 'Options' process

My broad aims throughout the 'Options' process (from a professional responsibilities perspective) are to inform, inspire and retain.

I worked with students (in Year 10, Year 11 and at the beginning of Year 12), families, colleagues, university admissions tutors and the IB Organisation in settings that included one-to-one meetings, assemblies and staff training events across the entirety of the academic year. I led on some aspects of policy, including development of a choice framework document for colleagues that acts as a script when advising students (Appendix XV). I believe in a 'pipeline' approach (perhaps because of my Chemical Engineering degree or because of the 'girls in physics' retention literature) with as many students and their families as possible becoming aware of the IB, timely focus points to support students in seeing its relevance and possibilities to them as individuals and conversations throughout (whether instigated by school or by families) to tighten up any A-level 'leaks'. But just as the students experience complexity in keeping abreast of their academic studies, co-curricular endeavours, social lives and post-16 curriculum choices, I too noticed the extent to which I

was balancing my aspirations to increase IB uptake along with leading the academic experience for those already studying the IB Diploma and teaching.

I present a comprehensive list of these activities in Appendix XVI.

4.7.2 Reflections on practice

> Critical reflection is the conscious examination of past experiences, thoughts and ways of doing things. Its goal is to surface learning about oneself and a situation, and to bring meaning to it in order to inform the present and the future. Reflection challenges the status quo of practice, thoughts and assumptions and may therefore inform our decisions, actions, attitudes, beliefs and understanding about ourselves. (McCabe & Thejll-Madsen, 2020, p. 2)

I will use the sentences contained within this definition of critical reflection to provide prompts for in-depth reflection on my own practice as an IB Coordinator with the unique insights that emerge from being responsible for increasing IB uptake at my school whilst also seeking to research the processes, values and tensions experienced by students and myself as part of post-16 curriculum uptake.

Having commenced in Section 4.7.1 with the "conscious examination of past experiences, thoughts and ways of doing things" (2020, p. 2), I now recognise the importance I ascribe to students having future career destinations in mind when making any impactful choices as part of their education. I aim to assume that students' families and teachers are doing their best to support each individual student but understand my professional responsibility to optimise the route that students are on in aiming towards their respective destinations or, for more uncertain students, keeping university and job opportunities open. It can be difficult to accept that I cannot force students' hands nor remove all curriculum constraints that emerge from school timetabling and the IB Diploma subject groupings. But I do aim for all Year 11 students to be given individual meetings, expert advice and coaching opportunities to make them aware of precisely what they value and to help them to decide what goals to set and what choices to make as a result.

In a bid to bring to the "surface learning about [my]self and a situation" (2020, p. 2), I identified many tensions during this research, starting with its very existence. As a teacher I have always wanted what is best for individual students and I recognise that they are

capable of taking some responsibility in their choices. As IB Coordinator, my professional success is judged on the extent to which I increase IB Diploma uptake through project management. If I were a full-time researcher who was external to my school, I would have aimed to make unobtrusive observations. In all three roles there is a duty of care. I was prompted at times to consider the circumstances in which it might be appropriate to allow students to make mistakes or act upon misconceptions, particularly as interviewing my participants made the spotting of these issues more likely than in non-research cohorts. While it is the culture of the school to try to inform students of the subjects they might need to consider, it is difficult to accomplish this for more than 200 students per year because of the time and sensitivity needed to explain the issues. I believe it is more disappointing for a student to fail in their academic aims because of the absence of a subject rather than achieving a lower grade than was necessary, but it is more difficult for a school to measure any improvement in the effectiveness of its guidance than its results, and absences of guidance may go undetected.

Looking ahead to "inform[ing] the present and the future" (2020, p. 2), I acknowledge that the IB Diploma itself is in tension with the national A-level curriculum. I, personally and professionally, am an advocate for the IB. However, my school continues to offer A-levels, and so it would be inappropriate for me to dismiss them altogether when informing students and families. Upon glancing at university websites or in events with university admissions tutors, both the IB and A-levels would appear to be equally acceptable, which leads some students to assume that they would receive no university-based reward for tackling the additional academic demands of the IB Diploma. However, what families may not know is that UK universities need to present both as apparent equals (because most schools do not offer the IB Diploma) and because they list the entry requirements that will become applicable *if* the student is successful in being given an offer. At my school, IB students tend to work for more hours each week than A-level students, but they are more successful in receiving offers from their first-choice destinations. Communicating these technical nuances can be tricky, not least following the 2020 IB results in which some families were disappointed about the absence of examinations. I suspect that many parents attending whole-cohort events appreciate the benefits of the IB but imagine that I am speaking mainly to others. Experience suggests that it takes individual communications to

convince parents of their child's suitability for the IB Diploma and the ways in which it might provide a net advantage. The Headmaster is leaning towards an 'IB by default' sixth form model but it will take time for all members of staff to agree; while teachers are hugely influential and by no means unanimously pro-IB, school culture is also influenced by support staff, catering staff, sports coaches and older students.

My seven years working at the context school whilst conducting research at doctorate level have allowed me to "[challenge] the status quo of practice, thoughts and assumptions" (2020, p. 2) that I myself might once have held. A social mobility advocate might suggest that, through this study, I am aiming to advance the already advantaged by seeking to improve the choice processes for fee-paying school students who (in general) are more likely to have professional careers and already have university-educated parents and financial security. When growing up in Northern Ireland (where high-cost independent education was not available) or whilst teaching for four years in the maintained sector, I might have felt that a study of this nature was counter-productive to improving opportunities for all. However, working at an independent school has taught me that an 11-year-old child has very little say in the type of secondary school that they attend, and that it is difficult to argue in favour of knowingly suppressing the quality of education that those in the independent sector receive. My "decisions, actions, attitudes, beliefs and understanding" (2020, p. 2) are now more informed: all students benefit from support when making curriculum choices and from research in education that seeks to represent them.

4.7.3 Connections to professionalism literature

Reflecting on my own practice while conducting this study reveals links to the broader education professionalism literature. Some students may be misinformed about the IB because information presented online is accessible to those beyond the education profession (Barnett, 2009) but not checked for accuracy, which may give them a false sense of confidence in the early stages of decision-making. The IB may potentially represent a risk to students. I am mindful of this risk (Lunt, 2009) and aspire for my students to be agents, rather than victims, of change (Whitty, 2009). And while one whole-school priority is to increase IB uptake by any measure of students, I have aimed in this study to be mindful of underrepresentation within those choosing the IB, perhaps analogous to Widening Participation in higher education (Burke, 2009).

5 Discussion

This study was prompted by my professional responsibility to increase IB Diploma uptake at the school where I am IB Coordinator and my belief that, for curriculum leaders like me to support students in making better choices, we need to know the processes, values and tensions involved. Research evidence on post-18 transitions has shown that subject choices at age 16 can generate a barrier to successfully fulfilling university aspirations for one in five applicants (UCAS, 2021), which suggests that the decision is neither fully informed nor sufficiently forward-looking. Within my school and nationally, ratios of IB : A-level students per school are falling (Bunnell, 2015), despite the IB Diploma providing a broader and more flexible route through the now-compulsory sixth form years and significant potential to contribute to improvements in higher education eligibility if its cohort was to grow.

In my literature review I identified at least ten theoretical perspectives that can be used to analyse, model and explain choices in education (Section 2.9). There is no consensus, even when the scope of the search is confined to empirical, qualitative studies, such as mine. I have employed a loose 'spectrum' of considerations, from imagining the optimisation of some form of capital by conscious, active, individual students through a critical realist position that contextual structures might reduce the outcome of any 'choice' to a near-inevitable conclusion driven by societal reproduction. In doing so, I have been able to draw upon aspects of phenomenology and narratives to analyse post-16 curriculum choice and student experiences, respectively. My dual-curriculum fee-paying UK independent school might be considered an 'engine of privilege' by some commentators (Green & Kynaston, 2019). However, my teaching and leadership experience has exposed me to disparities in the accuracy of and access to information (a form of capital in itself) used to inform choice processes, the curriculum options field available to a student and the knowledge of what to optimise in making the decision that relates to a feel for the game. There is symbolic violence in the naivety that students possess. Through personal reflexivity and ascertaining my own and students' values, I hope that thesis might enable school leaders to widen participation in the IB (disrupting the reproduction of an elite IB habitus).

The research design through which I hoped to answer my research questions on processes, values and tensions was grounded in pragmatism (wanting to ascertain the practical experiences and dispositions of students), my professional role (because of the concurrence

of data collection with the students' post-16 curriculum choices) and methodology (a 'hunch' that coaching might support students' 'Options' experiences). I selected interviews as my main method for qualitative data collection. The coaching format (I hope) provided a benefit to the Year 11 participants while simultaneously enabling me to find out students' values and tensions with a focus on students' accounts of their experiences and the decisions they might make. These case studies of students choosing between more and less popular curricula at a lone school bore a pleasing resemblance to some of the physics retention literature (e.g. Lyons, 2006; Archer et al., 2017a; Jugovic, 2017; DeWitt et al., 2019) in which, similarly, surveys only serve the purpose of highlighting disparities and the majority factors that drive these. To have collected data in more schools might have risked masking within-school variation, and, anyway, was not really feasible within a single EdD thesis. The sample was selected from the Year 11 population following a questionnaire about potential curriculum choices combined with school data, and ensured some variation among the individual participants in socioeconomic status, academic motivations and setting, sixth form intentions, boarding status and familiarity with me as a staff member. In addition, I formed two groups (from the tutor groups who were most and least responsive in the survey) to increase the sample size in case of attrition and for checking the typicality of the individuals' accounts.

Leaning on both narrative and thematic analysis techniques enabled me to paint a picture of each participant and their experiences whilst looking across all participants to develop a sense of the array of process types for curriculum choice across the school. My descriptions of these processes might be the start of long-term change at this and other dual-curriculum schools.

5.1 Processes

My first research question is: *In an independent, all-boys school that teaches both A-levels and the IB, how do students experience the process of post-16 curriculum choice?* My analysis suggests there are at least five ways.

Omar, who became quite obsessed about choosing his curriculum, was academically eligible for all sixth form subjects and possessed an abundance of interests, had already spent many years considering his 'Options' already and wanted to continue to succeed personally in the short term but also to contribute to humanity in the future. The care that he demonstrated

in taking so much time over the decision is a helpful reminder that subject choices are just as much an outcome of Year 11 as subject results (Jugovic, 2017), and also that competence in school subjects and accurate perceptions of this of this competence are associated with continuation (Sheldrake et al., 2014). However, choosing a curriculum and subjects is not enough for them to be studied the following year. There are hurdles to overcome between indicative selection and uptake the following September. These can be absolute and based on robust academic measures like GCSE examination results but also on less reliable data, like teachers' expectations (Jaremus et al., 2020) or parental enthusiasm (Lloyd et al., 2018). In the end, Omar's choices came down to his "geek" and subject-based interests, the tradition of STEM careers in the family (science capital) and choosing positively rather than through avoidance, despite sometimes finding himself stressed rather than cheerful.

Alternatively, curriculum combinations might simply become unavailable (Mathieson et al., 2020), as was the case for Spencer, who had a moderate preference for the IB but ultimately prioritised his future study of particular subjects (Latin and Greek) by whatever means possible. In this juggling act, he experienced both the affordances and the constraints in a dual-curriculum education because of the availability of both classical languages but their presence only in the A-level route during the year in which data were collected. I might also suggest at this point how arbitrary it is that literature on subject disparities often focuses on mathematics and physics (e.g. Bennett et al., 2013; Lyons, 2006; Sheldrake et al., 2014; Holmegaard, 2015; Archer et al., 2017a, 2017b; Jugovic, 2017; Shirazi, 2017; DeWitt et al., 2019; Mathieson et al., 2020; Palmer, 2020) when in fact classics has far lower availability and uptake nationwide. Spencer was content that the remaining subjects would serve a function – like languages for future travel and economics to provide a distinctive alternative. Because he felt he was working at full speed and maximum effort towards examinations, he viewed the 'Options' process as a welcome distraction.

Restrictions can also emerge from limitations in awareness, as for Group A, or the national, institutional or individual context, as seen for Group B. Group A members confessed to nervousness because of the importance of the decision, saw both IB and A-level students as being "smart" but with less effort required for the same outcomes via A-level, and revealed the different opinions they had heard from teachers. Group B contained students who were themselves nervous because of the extensive and unknown impacts of the curriculum

choices made for US university admissions, maintaining sporting co-curricular activities and the long-term. They considered the IB to be daunting and restrictive as a result of the broad disciplinary requirements (which ironically block some subject choices) and therefore "not worth it". Even for the one member who was certain what choices he was going to make, 'Options' was consistently one of his predominant topics to think about.

The literature indicates that the process of subject choice can be conceived of on a spectrum from no agency to individual freedom to choose (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Group A students expected little intervention from parents but a complex range of interventions from school, including hurdles to overcome for certain subjects and the lack of any requirements or aptitude tests for others. But despite confusion, indecision and intentions to keep working hard and keep engaging throughout Year 11, I was refreshed by the students' awareness that deselection of a subject did not mean it could not still be studied and their gratitude that the IB Diploma is an option (even though none of them planned to take it). The more relevant spectrum for Group B was between wanting to maintain a range of future pathways and choosing complementary, enjoyable subjects for which they had high aptitude.

Choices can be based on aspirations, tactics, past experiences and the chooser's identity (Bennett et al., 2013), with enjoyment and interest the primary determinants of contending subjects and advice or other factors used to make the final cuts (Palmer, 2020). Patrick, whom I thought of as placid, held broad interests but was initially unsure whether to select the IB or A-levels, perhaps because of some incorrect assumptions about the IB concerning the types of subjects that might be essential. I detected that his identity was very much under construction, based on his lack of certainty and charisma in our sessions and because he expected nothing from his teachers except to be taught or from his studies except good grades (which he takes meticulous notes to assist with). Lacking simultaneously in information and the realisation that he could ask for it, our sessions served to highlight the importance to him of double-checking curriculum content in the sixth form; ultimately, he was content with his own hunches (like GCSE and A-level subjects having common content) and sense that he would only ever have chosen four (because he was required to choose four).

On the other hand, thriving Theo was positively joyous, proactive in asking questions and sharing thoughts about his experience and had a big subject range under contention. He resolved his stalemate by selecting based on subject content, experiences of exciting lessons and passionate teachers, co-curricular interests that have a curriculum connection and cultural interests, and the IB being tied to his priority subject (Japanese), because of the opportunity to study at low-stakes Standard Level. He saw the positives of the IB in spite of the concerns reeled off of his peers, willed himself to "Do it!" and was so enthused by the formalities of the 'Options' experience that, despite choosing in advance, he waited until the deadline day. Post-choice, Theo was flourishing in a state of flow and relaxation from having been forced through the process to visualise his future in detail and to read more widely because of the inspiration generated.

Socioeconomic status is highly associated with uptake of subjects (Archer et al., 2017a) and is also related to the IB or national curriculum decision (Asbury & Plomin, 2017). Oliver conformed to the IB stereotype in his craving for what could be described as a transnational lifestyle with ambitions of undergraduate study in the US whilst keeping a family foothold in the UK. He also held misconceptions about the nature of IB study and its suitability for a career in the UK that might have been exaggerated because of his lack of access to school staff as a result of pandemic-induced school closures. He struggled with the balance between breadth (for the US) and depth (for the UK) but was able (through choosing the IB Diploma) to have curriculum provision for his long-term 'no-brainers', personal likes and university wants. Quietly assured Quentin, who received a means-tested bursary and who was resident in an area that is not associated with progression to higher education, had a sister forging a path to elite university study. Yet, perhaps because of inaccurate beliefs held by his parents, he assumed that meeting the entry requirements at the highest tariff universities would ensure eligibility at others and was prepared to be decisive but not necessarily adept at reading between the lines for the 'unwritten' requirements. He considered his friends' choices to be irrelevant and appreciated that choices of this significance take time, narrowing the longlist to just five subjects well in advance.

There is also subject content to contend with (Shirazi, 2017), in which success can be stereotypically associated with particular student groups (Archer et al., 2017a). For Tyler (like Theo), there was one subject (physical education / sports science) that acted as the

curriculum decider. A former aspiring footballer, he was enormously focused on his career and accurate in his awareness of his own potential, despite having less aptitude for GCSE subjects. Now going through the process of transferring enthusiasm to sports management, Tyler came to own his plan to study BTEC sports science (rather than A-level PE) even though this was essentially forced upon him because of concerns that he would fail to meet the academic hurdle. He believed that anything was possible with adequate confidence, passion and perseverance, admitted that examination results are important to his parents, had the added challenge of applying to other schools to contend with and used his awareness of his own characteristics to select his fourth subject and make up the "quota". We can see that not only does the process vary from person to person but within each individual too (cf. Papworth, 2020).

Otto, despite competence at managing schoolwork and examination preparations, was at risk of overthinking the 'Options' process because he valued both breadth and variety. He associated mathematics with intelligence and the IB with happiness, perhaps implying a belief that the two did not go hand-in-hand, which is in line with much research in STEM subjects (Archer et al., 2017a; DeWitt et al., 2019) and patterns of uptake there. Otto considered the people in his life to be his greatest influences and, although choosing his "loves", admitted to finding the challenge of curriculum choice to be a "struggle", especially after attempting the January mock examinations. Aware of the decades of his career that will follow this choice but unsure of what the path will look like, he described the process as "scary", as providing a "thrill" and "joy" and making him feel "challenged". After the conclusion of his choice process, had replaced his seeking of perfectionism with a steadier approach to lifelong preparation.

Adjusting and negotiating are required as fragments of information emerge, which is difficult and frustrating (Holmegaard, 2015). These fragments would do little to reduce the perceived risks (Doherty et al., 2009) or elite exclusivity (Doherty et al., 2012) of the IB Diploma. Group B students were taught by teachers who held and presented different perspectives and parents who shared tales of former students' failures. They admitted that they had lacked awareness of the importance of their GCSE selection. The lenses they mentioned were "scared", "labyrinth", "tough", "confused" and "excited", and the process was seen as lengthy. Some started with their eventual career plans and worked backwards,

others considered university entry requirements to respond to the "gravity" when choosing sixth form subjects and one felt the school provision was like a dark room in which he was left to find the light. There were associations between the IB Diploma and GCSEs (in which there had been a reduction in the quality of learning experience due to Covid) and between A-levels and stability. There was, however, acknowledgement by some students that the IB's range of subjects reduces the impact of one poor grade, unlike for Timothy who was influenced by both interest and grades and saw no reason to study the IB when A-levels appeared to be perfectly adequate. Timothy also appeared overly assertive in his selection of subjects, making no acknowledgement of those not taken, and was perhaps misguided in assuming that a career in banking would necessarily provide the financial security that he valued in the long term – although he did find clarity from the initial blur and sensed that he would gain no benefit from delaying further.

Instead, a pipeline of interventions is needed that taps into and raises awareness of career aspirations (Bland & Woodworth, 2009). While family members can transmit impressions of subject difficulty (Lyons, 2006), schools rather than parents are able to join the dots between effective curriculum choices and eventual career goals. The quality of education impacts the resilience of a student's decision (Blenkinsop et al., 2006), whereas the time that a student spends making curriculum choices does not (Papworth, 2020). Despite mentioning only four subjects as being of significant interest, Qasim viewed the IB as the optimal precursor to undergraduate law; he saw himself as intelligent, looked forward to the diverse perspectives that he imagined benefitting from in the IB cohort, like Quentin took full personal responsibility for optimising his sixth form curriculum decisions and recognised the implicit need to check the university implications as well as those within the sixth form. It was his burgeoning creative identity that he saw as pivotal in managing the complicated 'Options' experience. Group A students similarly became optimistic because this big challenge forced them to grow in self-belief.

5.2 Student values and tensions

My second research question is: *What are the students' values and what, if any, tensions do they experience?* This was related to the coaching methodology and seeking interventions that might improve the post-16 curriculum choice process for future cohorts. Throughout this section I will link back to Chapter 2.9.2 in which I discussed the understanding of a

Bourdieusian vocabulary that I have adopted for this study and how each term could relate to the real-world phenomenon under study.

The sheer diversity of values that students hold, even if not driving the 'Options' experience, resembles the number of factors listed in the literature, where enjoyment, interest, ability and perceived need come out on top for influencing subject choices (Palmer, 2020). I identified at least 45 distinct values (Appendix XVII), with enjoyment/interest/love/passion, organisation/preparedness, focus/depth and balance/variety the most prevalent. These values, or long-lasting dispositions and aspirations, relate to a student's *habitus* (Sweetman, 2003) and manifest at all choice points throughout their life that they consider to be important. When in the *field of play* and selecting between their post-16 'Options' these values will interact with the information that they hold to generate preferences that might feel automatic because of the student's associations. Although a student's values are unlikely to change (particularly if the student's awareness is raised so that they come to recognise and articulate them), their habitus in terms of selecting A-levels or the IB might be swayed given advice and time to think through the implications.

Choices can be made positively or negatively (Nagy et al., 2006), and because of utility (Palmer, 2020). A curriculum route or subject might be considered to align or contend with a developing identity (Holmegaard et al., 2014) – like for Theo who views people as being both influential and important – or perceived reputation and risk, for example the IB (Doherty et al., 2012) or mathematics (Mathieson et al., 2020) – like for Omar who was keen to mimic what was typical for his family. The family's *doxa* (Atkinson, 2011), or unquestioned expectations and repeated patterns, can be hard for a teenager to overcome, especially if a parent proactively endorses one curriculum route over another.

University considerations too have a significant part to play (Moulton et al., 2018), just as the GCSE subjects being taken in Year 11 (chosen two years previously) restrict eligibility for sixth form subjects, which in turn makes the importance of sixth form choices in advance of university study all the greater. Whether or not we choose to refer to students' possession of knowledge of this kind as *cultural capital* (Sullivan, 2001) really does not change the *reproduction* that follows from inequities in access to it (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013): students who are more aware of the tactics that can be employed over a series of years to gain a place at university are likely to be more successful in the competition of admissions;

students who have access to role models or friendship groups in the IB cohort are more likely to be familiar with the positives and negatives of the curriculum route than those who do not.

While a student's values can drive their curriculum choices, the number of values and priorities can be a source of tension, although a student with an inherent or learned *feel for the game* (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013) may find the negotiation of conflicting values easier than others. Qasim sought to optimise career opportunities, enjoyment, balance, likelihood of top grades and friendships. Omar was seeking advice through too many conversations with too many people. Timothy knew that his parents had high expectations of his grades and that his teachers had influence over his enjoyment of their subjects. With his observant personality inadvertently seeking less reputable sources of information, Oliver found that the 'Options' process itself (rather than the study of subjects that feed into and will result from it) required motivation. His Year 11 experience coincided with an increase in school-based uncertainty about how he would be assessed in his GCSEs but with what he perceived as a reduction in global uncertainty because of the election of Biden as US President. He benefitted from being reminded that mistakes (in curriculum selections and examinations) can be remedied.

A student's place at a fee-paying school relies on parental finances (Papworth, 2020), as was mentioned by Omar who was grateful for financial investments made on his behalf. UK students of higher socioeconomic status and therefore in possession of greater *financial capital* (Reay, 1998) are more likely to have access to the IB Diploma in their school. Schools have power to wield when trying to balance availability with overall curriculum cost. In the case of Patrick, who was required to study physics and not classical civilisation because of subject blocking, the choice of subjects is strongly advised (Blenkinsop et al., 2006) or even made for students (Archer et al., 2017b). Often, though, students act as though these choices were their own (Holmegaard, 2015), just as theories of symbolic violence in situations of power imbalances predict (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). While Omar experienced a tension because of the upper limit of two sciences and one mathematics course in the IB, the January mock examinations revealed to Timothy that his favourite subject was his least successful. Schools may also control the flow of information for more supportive reasons, such as when students risk exposing themselves to an unrealised deficit

through the process of avoiding a subject (Leaton Gray, 2017) or in emphasising the ability of motivation to outweigh challenges created by workload (Bland & Woodworth, 2009). Sometimes, students are aware of this flow of information, as was the case for Spencer who appreciated rapport with his teachers and what he perceived as student-centred care (perhaps because his family background had IB capital, meaning that he resided in siblings' academic shadows) but who was required to study A-levels.

Conducting this research has made me consider whether my school is complicit in "[refusing] to develop a universal pedagogy" (Nash, 1990, p. 436), given that the IB is on offer but with limitations perceived by my colleagues as to which students are eligible for its consideration. The Headmaster is considering an 'IB for all' or 'IB by default' strategy in the not-too-distant future, but this might risk implicitly excluding certain students from the school altogether. The Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) require that students receive appropriately differentiated and challenging lessons, which might in part be satisfied by more than one curriculum offer. However, Bourdieu believed that the sorting of students into curricula of unequal academic and practical merit reproduces inequalities and is not linked to individual students' abilities (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013). The school will need to avoid a "decline in loyalty and commitment" with "lasting and profound ... alienation or estrangement" (Sweetman, 2003, p. 546) while making efforts to see IB numbers increase.

5.3 IB Coordinator tensions

I now discuss my response to the third research question: *What are the tensions for the IB Coordinator?* Because I hold this role and conducted the research, I used critical realist strategies (Section 3.1) to expand my consideration of my professional identity and responsibilities:

- Although there are (obviously) bigger problems in the world than students making curriculum choices based on incomplete information or short-term planning, I suggest that there is nonetheless an injustice at play at my school and that this study may have exposed only the tip of an iceberg in post-16 transition. Movement, Edge, Level and Dimension (MELD) is a four-part dialectic in which a dynamic movement from identification to transformation can be stimulated (Bhaskar, 2008).

- The four-planar social being is a model through which the interactions between phenomena and people can be understood more thoroughly. The researcher is forced to consider their findings through four lenses – material relations with nature, interpersonal subjective relationships, broader social relations and inherited structures and the inner being (Bhaskar, 2008) – which is perhaps three more than might otherwise have been donned, depending on the focus of a study.

I recognise that my participants may only have presented their perceptions of their experiences and that my conclusions may have been influenced by my biases and worldview. In adopting this critical realist approach, I aimed to dig deeper than the empirical and actual data to explore the real differences in post-16 curriculum choice processes, to articulate the lived values and tensions that students aim for and persevere through, and to enhance my own reflexivity as an IB Coordinator (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016). There are certainly variations between students at dual-curriculum independent school settings, for example with respect to curriculum intentions, boarding status, number of years at the school, home location, socioeconomic status, family characteristics, subject specialism interests and career aspirations and therefore variations in processes, values and tensions. But what do I notice about the curriculum choice phenomenon while asking questions (as I have done in this study), suspending judgement (through coaching), thinking about the steps that might follow from my observations (and those that I have already taken through my documentary analysis) and considering *my own* education about choices *in education* (as I go on to do when delving into the four planar social being framework)?

5.3.1 MELD

I will first consider the extent to which I have satisfied the MELD model for real-world change.

The first stage is 'moment', in which prejudices are suspended, questions are asked and observations are planned. In this study I chose to explore what Year 11 students are feeling and experiencing, and the freedoms that are withheld, during and as a result of post-16 curriculum choice. The second is the 'edge', in which data are collected. I aimed to maintain an open mind as researcher through coaching strategies and to understand the students' environment and its impact through incorporating elements of autoethnography. It is clear

that some students were isolated, misunderstood and distressed, while others were jubilant and excited – and that it was possible for any one student to move in either direction.

Findings become recommendations in the third stage: 'level'. Although this thesis does not present evidence on the effectiveness of any particular interventions, I suggest that new or amended practices should aim to develop student-led curriculum choice processes, that connections need to be made throughout the school and with universities or employers, and that there is some capacity for organisational change, provided that schools recognise that choices are as much an important outcome from Year 11 as are GCSE results. Through the fourth stage, 'dimension', transformations in agency and power are proposed beyond the context that prompted the initial exploration. Further research is required on how educators can themselves be better educated on matters of choice, and the education policies that should be implemented in seeking more informed and robust curriculum choices for future cohorts.

Socrates is said to have announced "I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think" (Ozmen, 2019). On matters of post-16 curriculum choice, to encourage *thinking* among students is my aim at my school. Unlike Hogwarts' Sorting Hat, which claims "There's nothing hidden in your head / The Sorting Hat can't see / So try me on and I will tell you / Where you ought to be" (Rowling, 2001, p. 88), I cannot know everything that my students are aspiring to move towards when choosing between A-levels and the IB Diploma, and nor can I force them into either route. However, with adequate and widely distributed information, enough time to weigh up the options and clarity about the long-term implications, IB uptake may increase without radical shifts in school culture.

5.3.2 Four-planar social being framework

Knowing the importance of informing students and providing them with the time and decision tools needed to make robust curriculum choices, I myself must also be "serious" in the sense of having realistic expectations about how I might like things to change (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016, p. 2). And being realistic means I need to pause to consider all aspects of Year 11 students that have relevance during the curriculum choice window.

The first plane of a student as a social being is material relations with nature, which I understand here to be the biological, psychological and social inevitabilities that coincide

with post-16 choices. Adolescence is a period of change as students develop more distinct identities and need to balance competition, ambition, awareness of workload and risk-aversion. It may be that there is some influence of genetics on attributes and behaviours as well as the propensity for success for each individual in any given route (Krapohl et al., 2014), but education professionals have an important role to play in providing guidance on how best to navigate the years ahead and a responsibility to fill in the gaps where parents lack expertise.

The next plane is interpersonal subjective relationships. Each student is influenced by a unique mix of family members, peers, teachers and role models, each of whom has their own set of unique experiences to draw on. In addition, all students receive information through formal school-produced videos and events (within which there are some inconsistencies), advice-giving interviews (in which the knowledge about the student can be a help in terms of specificity but a hindrance in breadth and objectivity), informal school-based interactions (where biases and misconceptions exist among expert advice), focused conversations in which the student will learn from well-intentioned but potentially agenda-driven others (which can provide new perspectives but lack balance) and hearsay (in which there is imbalance between the positive and negative aspects of each route and subject and which excludes 'unwritten' material). Text-based resources range from official careers documentation to open-ended internet searches. In schools, students are grouped by age (which is how the timetable is organised horizontally and teaching provided, and the level at which IB uptake interventions are most important and effective), tutor groups and academic classes (where an average of 30 minutes per day is spent in each subject), 'houses' and co-curricular teams, ensembles and societies (where vertical friendships may form) and in more casual, unmonitored ways (such as according to the locations in which undirected time is spent, attendance at one-off events and friendships born out of other interests or contacts). Although quite a sweeping suggestion with implications for equality, I think it is fair to make the case that students are more likely to become interested in options that they are aware of in the first place.

There are also broader social relations and inherited structures to consider. A school can only employ so many teachers and each teacher can only work so many hours, and therefore decisions are made about how that time is spent. Examination results and

university destinations are considered the ‘academic highlights’ of the school and receive most attention and resources from senior management (year teams monitor each student’s general progress, Heads of Department monitor their teachers’ and students’ results, a higher education team provides individual guidance throughout the sixth form and an academic leadership team manages the curriculum). But there is no one responsible for the quality of transitions between stages, who possesses knowledge about each Year 11 student’s aptitudes and aspirations, the logistics of the Year 12 and 13 curriculum and the university admissions process, and who coordinates the post-16 ‘Options’ process with all of this in mind. Having university-related expertise is essential, even when advising 16-year-olds. There are some prerequisite subjects published in black and white (chemistry for medicine or mathematics for mechanical engineering, for example), there are the grades that must be attained in these subjects (typically A*/A at A-level or 7/6 in the IB at most Russell Group institutions) and there are hidden bottlenecks because of competition for places, some of which can be controlled through choosing an appropriate post-16 curriculum (such as studying further mathematics or more than the minimum three subjects). In short, universities discriminate between applicants with the same apparent likelihood of success, based on decisions made by the student when aged 16, and I suggest from professional experience that there is less tolerance for errors in subject choices when the student has been educated at a fee-paying school. There are limitations as to which subjects are available and constraints on what combinations can be chosen. The existence of league tables leads some schools to impose academic hurdles to entry (GCSE results). Students may wish to study with or away from existing friends. A National Curriculum of subjects and the optional EBacc exists up to the conclusion of KS4, and yet the Department for Education in England consulted on the possibility of withdrawing maintained sector per pupil funding if A-levels or T Levels were not the qualifications chosen (DfE, 2021b). Just as A-levels can be and are taken overseas, the opportunity to take international Level 3 qualifications in the UK should, in my view, be available to all irrespective of financial means. Students have a fundamental human right to have a say in their education, but parents too have the right to be involved. There are certain deadlines to be met, particularly as transitioning from Year 11 to Year 12 typically takes place at age 16 in school-based settings. And all of this is while a pandemic has led to policy decisions to close school sites to

the majority of students for several months in 2020-21, making it more challenging for the (already limited) support to continue.

There is a lot to negotiate related to the inner being. For a start, there is the impact of all of the above (physical reality, relationships and societal structures), the requirements of the choice process imposed by the school, one's own aspirations, likes and aptitudes, the expectations of others (expressed formally or informally) and the hard bounds of what is available – all of which generate tensions and challenges because of their concurrence. As proposed, based on the data collected in this study, there are (at least) five ways in which the process is experienced: placidly; with quiet assurance; obsessively; through disappointment with performances of satisfaction; and while thriving. Students hold (at least) 45 values that can link to or contrast with their choices, knowingly or unknowingly. Choice is a complex phenomenon, filled with interactions.

5.3.3 Critical realism summary

Using a critical realist paradigm supported me in recognising the differences that I would like to see for Year 11 students going through curriculum choices and the challenges in pursuing these that are implied by the extent of how much these students already have to contend with. I hope I have shown that students in the independent sector are not homogeneous in their aspirations, experiences, processes and values, and nor are they immune from curriculum constraints that might normally be associated with maintained sector schools that have less funding per student. I will not go so far as to claim that the collective body of participants in this study are disadvantaged, but some individuals within it have inaccurate expectations of the A-level and IB Diploma routes, are restricting their potential university options and receive contradictory advice from different people (even within the school). Use of interviews was effective in meeting the leading aims of this research: to explore the post-16 curriculum choice process for students at a dual-curriculum UK independent school with consideration of when curriculum choices are made, who is involved, what factors are important, what information is used and the impact of the choice experience; and to uncover the values and tensions for students at the school and me (as IB Coordinator) and how these values and tensions guide, influence and change the choice process. However, there may of course be biases in the sample and I am unlikely to have uncovered the full extent of processes, values and tensions, which inhibits the extent of the

critical realist claims that I can make. For example, I am unable to generalise about the extent to which individual students exercise agency amidst the structures in which they exist. And it was not within the scope of this study to take the MELD model for real-world change beyond the exploratory phases; having conducted this study am I only in a position to hypothesise about what recommendations I might make.

5.4 Conclusion

Although every student of course has different family members, balances of influences, resources and priorities that lead to nuanced and unique expectations of the IB Diploma and A-levels, this thesis presents evidence for some categories of post-16 curriculum choice processes that might be common to other schools: embodying placidity; quietly expressing assurances of contentment; displaying of obsessive behaviours; performances of satisfaction in spite of constraints; and thriving during and because of the choice. In terms of values, future preparedness, enjoyment, focus and variety seem to be key considerations for at least half of those who experienced curriculum choices, but they manifest in different ways, for example in wanting a relatively comfortable sixth form experience or through consideration of the tactics that might be involved in competitive university applications; the two mutually exclusive curricula, IB Diploma and A-levels, that are available in the context school are selected by students who share common dispositions and attributes. This research has also provided a timely reminder of how Year 11 students are required to negotiate learning (for qualifications and its own sake), preparation for exams, post-16 choices and potentially applications to other institutions, and the role that the curriculum leaders can play in ensuring that IB Diploma and A-level decisions alike are recognised as at least as important as university decisions, and the necessity of involving families and the school community as well as the students.

5.5 Evaluation

When proposing this research in the earliest stages, I had anticipated conducting an action research study of change management while seeking to increase the IB cohort size. But this, in hindsight, was not the right approach. Instead, the issue that this thesis has come to address was a fundamental blind spot in school management, namely the processes by which students were making post-16 curriculum choices. While the Gatsby benchmark to provide “opportunities for guidance interviews” (DfE, 2021a, p. 38) was being met, I was not

convinced that these interviews were “tailored to the needs of each pupil” (p. 20) nor that students had adequate information about the consequences of their choice for university applications to “understand the full range of learning opportunities” (p. 33). In having suggested five overarching ways in which students experience the choice, I recognise that another researcher at even the same institution might have come to different conclusions, and I cannot claim that the categories represent the full range or resolution of processes elsewhere. However, I am hopeful of sparking conversations within and among dual-curriculum settings nationwide and beyond, particularly as I have shown through my review of previous research that ‘real time’ individual student stories have rarely been collected and shared, and with the Group B participants in this study supporting my tracking of the ‘Options’ process from a research quality perspective:

> It's been very encouraging to know that you're part of something so very interesting and professional. ... We didn't know that other people possibly shared misconceptions or, like, angst. ... You’re basically just sharing your own thoughts and those thoughts are going to be used to ... create an argument that can be used for how it’s not very easy for a teenager ... when you're going through certain things and you want to make rational decisions. ... It might help other people to say ‘I have made the right decision’.

Research in education has sometimes been criticised for failing to provide evidence for policy decision making, support teachers’ professional practice, demonstrate coherence and reliability and provide relevance to researchers in other contexts (Pring, 2015). I would argue that this study addresses these criticisms head on. It was motivated by a problem in practice – how to secure a future for the IB Diploma Programme as an alternative to A-levels as numbers of candidates per school fall in the UK – that can now be approached with an awareness of students’ experiences of post-16 curriculum choice processes. Teachers and leaders at the context school (me included) have developed a greater appreciation of the importance of sixth form choices in the short and long term with the more formal GCSE qualifications also secured in Year 11 no longer the *de facto* school-leaving qualification. I hope that readers in other education settings will find agreement and disagreement alike in the conclusions presented here on processes, values and tensions that have emerged from a deep consideration of just one school, and also on the coaching approach to research

interviews and 'Options' advising that could be replicated elsewhere. And, although there are not many dual-curriculum schools that happen to offer precisely the IB Diploma and A-levels as post-16 options, the relevance of my findings extends far more widely – to choices in education at all stages of children's lives.

One might ponder whether I could have offered more emphatic endorsement of a single theoretical framework as offering explanatory power in this setting. But to do so could have masked the extent of influences, attributes, dispositions, aspirations and challenges at play and the unique ratio of priorities for each student who participated. I believe that the practical wisdom will benefit the audience of this work, with education professionals able to offer swift support to their students and researchers in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment able to recognise that choice, in and of itself, is inherently educational; schools and other institutions facilitate the process, there are conceptual frameworks and problem-solving involved and individual students experience a transformation through acquiring knowledge, understanding and skills that will better prepare them for the future.

5.6 Implications

The IB Organisation aims to improve the world (IBO, 2021c). The knowledge, understanding and skills of most benefit to secondary school graduates are in flux. And there is a tension between the elite university entrance pursued by many IB alumni and the principles, balance and care that form part of the IB Learner Profile (IBO, 2021b) that might ideally lead to students seeking a broader range of future destinations. But to focus on these ideals, uncertainties and debates risks making them redundant. The IB Organisation, while not-for-profit, has a budget to maintain. Its philosophy fails if its student intake dries up.

Student numbers are not universally rising. The ratio of Diploma Programme students to schools reveals that not all final-year students at IB World Schools are choosing the IB. While the total number of IB Diploma schools increases, the latest 5-year trends in the UK are downward, suggesting that the IB's future may not be as secure as hoped. The *#WhyIB* and *#IB4All* initiatives (IBO, 2021d) to market the IB Diploma and diversify its intake inadvertently reveal the IB Organisation's barriers to participation: the relatively high expense of IB tuition; the curriculum requirements that constrain flexibility in subject choices; the Core demands that are difficult to explain concisely and transparently; and the fact that national curricula are often presented as equal to the IB by universities.

It is children aged 15 or 16 – and their parents – who are asked to trust the IB Diploma as a curriculum route in spite of these complexities. An understanding of the processes through which students make post-16 curriculum choices and the values involved is required before meaningful recommendations can be made about how best to inform and advise. This study has drawn on qualitative student data and my autoethnographic reflections as IB Coordinator at a dual-curriculum school (one of hundreds – and a little exploited resource for growth).

Post-16 curriculum choice is guided by subject interests, ongoing progress in KS4 courses and assessments, aspirations, influential family members and friends, advice from teachers, perceived 'fit', extra-curricular interests and past experiences. The information on which decisions are based is often inaccurate or incomplete. The timing of choices varies, and unique frameworks are involved, yet five categories of choice process emerged: placidity; quiet assuredness; borderline obsessional; performances of satisfaction; and thriving. Combining a Bourdieusian lens and critical realism tools reveals the relevance of capital, habitus, field, reproduction, doxa and symbolic violence within a dual-curriculum UK independent school setting.

In addition to the professional relevance of this work, I hope this thesis will find an academic audience in the fields of curriculum and educational choice and in education researcher practitioners who may be seeking methodological advice. When I asked students how they would compare their mindsets before and after coaching sessions, they told me of their heightened clarity and sense of self, and their gratitude for simply being able to talk things through. I gained new clarity myself: all students should have the opportunity to be coached. I have long been an advocate for the transformative possibilities of the IB Diploma but have often struggled to convey this to academically-cautious students. It seems that coaching, as well as revealing the student experience, can provide students themselves with the opportunity to consider what they really want, what options they have and what steps they might take.

The process of organising this study has supported my professional development. I am managing a whole-school project and have benefitted from conducting this concurrent research. Internal dissemination took place following the close of the post-16 'Options' process, with the school governors the first audience in the autumn term 2021 and

curriculum committee meetings upcoming to decide on policy changes as a result of the research to ensure that 16-year-olds, when making curriculum choices, are informed about the short-term realities and awakened to the long-term implications. Future work could include studies at other dual-curriculum schools to further explore the post-16 choice experience and to develop a broader body of knowledge on what distinguishes IB entrants from other students. There is also the question of how families choose schools that provide an IB curriculum.

Understanding the choices of individual students at each unique school setting is key to increasing IB uptake. Continued research on the process of post-16 curriculum choice supports this endeavour.

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Appendices

I. Literature review summary

Researchers / organisation	Study period(s), location and aims	Theoretical perspective	Design and methods	Setting, population and sample procedure	Analysis procedure	Findings – choice process	Findings – values / tensions	Similarities to thesis study	Differences from thesis study	Recommendations / gaps
Blenkinsop et al. (2006) Department for Education and Skills	2005-6 in England; to explore how educational choices are made at ages 14 and 16 and influences on decisions	Educational mindset model developed for DfES by SHM; relationships between school context, decision-making and students' educational mindsets	Primarily qualitative; advance documentary analysis; two waves (Feb to May before and Oct to Dec after choice) of in-depth one-to-one narrative-eliciting interviews; 'circle of influence' activity (level of importance and value); short self-completion questionnaires for attitudes towards subjects and school support mechanisms; and contextual interviews with 67 key school staff and 47 telephone parent interviews	Purposive school selection to ensure variety in size, geographic area, socioeconomic settings, affluence and headline results quintiles; teachers selected students representing different sexes, ethnic backgrounds and ability ranges; 85 Year 9 and 80 Year 11 pre-choice students at 14 schools (seven of which had a sixth form) – of which 70 and 57 were available for post-choice follow-up	Characterisation of schools using framework comprising context, effectiveness and careers provision; student interview data examined for allocation of educational mindset and its stability over time	Link between effective schools (curriculum, support, expectations, leadership) and rational, resilient decisions; school more influential than friends and family; quality of decisions varies with context, means of info provision and individual approach; mindsets vary, and decisions fluctuate; careers guidance and decisions disconnected; process is individual	Time to make choices, individual conversations, and detailed, clear and impartial info; teachers not impartial (encouragement to remain at school), (sometimes compulsory) vocational KS4 qualifications not recognised for AL entry, timetables restrict choices available	Purposive sampling strategy with involvement of teachers in student selection; Interviews with participant sample > 10; at-interview activities; values ascertained	All maintained sector; multiple school locations (many of which were involved in Increased Flexibilities Programme and/or Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative); 15 years since data collected; clear agenda to road-test a mindsets model for funder	Youth Matters green paper (2005) "What kind of help and support is most important for young people? How can we ensure that information, advice and guidance provided to young people is comprehensive and impartial and challenges rather than perpetuates traditional stereotypes?"; "young people make decisions in different ways"; thesis is 15 years' later and focused on a private school – time for an update?
Lyons (2006) Findings from doctorate project	Not reported (perhaps 2003?) in New South Wales (Australia); to explore the decisions of high achieving Year 10 students about taking physics and chemistry courses	'Multiple worlds' of family, peers, school science and mass media which inform the self; cultural and social capital	Mixed-methods; two questionnaires (students and teachers) after choices made followed by narrative interviews in which survey findings were explored	196 15-16-year-olds and 24 teachers from three coeducational government schools, two coeducational nongovernment schools and a non-government girls' school; A or B grade in School Certificate science (top 30%); 37 students interviewed	Statistical analysis of questionnaire data (relationships between background characteristics, subject choices, and sources of advice); comparative analysis of interview data using NUD*IST software (to identify patterns between descriptions of worlds and enrolment decisions)	Pedagogy of limited impact because it's "uninspiring" (p. 298) for all but teachers' and family members' opinions about relative difficulty are influential; students need confidence in abilities and motivation; external factors (e.g. limited prospects, low status) are limited in influence	Physical scientists sought post-school career opportunities (especially if science and formal education endorsed by familial cultural capital and supported by high self-efficacy) and biological scientists sought enjoyment and interest; avoidance of physical science is due to culture of school science (not intrinsically satisfying)	Range of decisions in interview sample (14 physics, 9 biology/ general science, 14 none); trust that students had some involvement in their decisions (their perceptions more important than others); cultural and social capital concepts support understanding of correlations between family-related factors and enrolment in physical science	Involvement of teachers; no single-sex boys' school; analysis techniques; at least 18 years since data collected (and in another country); focus on uptake of physical sciences (generalizability across other subjects unclear); entirety of data collection *post-facto* after choices made (limiting findings about process)	Model suggested for future studies that illustrates how congruence between school science and family worlds influences decisions; "there has been little qualitative research done in Australia to investigate science subject choice" (p. 290); "little in the literature giving students' perspectives on their subject deliberations" (p. 294); from reading this I now question whether curriculum choice is positive (e.g. in favour of A-levels) or negative (e.g. avoidance of IB)

Researchers / organisation	Study period(s), location and aims	Theoretical perspective	Design and methods	Setting, population and sample procedure	Analysis procedure	Findings – choice process	Findings – values / tensions	Similarities to thesis study	Differences from thesis study	Recommendations / gaps
Nagy et al. (2006) *Learning Processes, Educational Careers, and Psychosocial Development in Adolescence and Young Adulthood (BIJU)* Max Planck Institute for Human Development	Not reported (1997?) in Germany; investigate relations between domain-specific achievement, self-concept, intrinsic value, and academic choices in upper secondary school	Internal/external frame of reference model – here used for behavioural outcomes on course selection (compare own achievement with perceptions of others' and own in one domain with own in another) – in combination with expectancy value theory – always focused on behaviour and academic choices (academic self-concepts are closely connected to achievement in the same domain)	Longitudinal – end Grade 10 and middle Grade 12 each with subject achievement tests and psychological construct / sociodemographic variable questionnaires; Grade 12 questionnaire included item on course selection	Random sampling to obtain 46 schools with Advanced Biology from four states (two in East Germany and two in West Germany); 1148 academic-track school students (60% female) representing half of BIJU sample	Multigroup structural equation modelling using Mplus 3.0 with multiple imputation (MI) methodology to account for missing data (NB: longitudinal)	Males have higher maths self-concept and intrinsic value and are more likely to choose it; females have higher maths self-concept and intrinsic value and are more likely to choose it; gender moderated the relationship between math and biology achievement, self-concept, intrinsic value, and course enrolment	Self-concepts and intrinsic values had substantial effects on course choices (EV); domain-specific self-concepts and intrinsic values were positively related to course choices in the same domain, but negatively related to choices in the other domain (I/E); choices of specialized courses were related to their aspired field of college education	Longitudinal data collection; asked about specific course selection (not abstract 'process')	Focused on selection of mathematics and biology; no extended qualitative data collected; at least 15 years since data collected	High school course selection is gendered; "no previous studies based on the I/E framework have explicitly contrasted math with biology" (p. 341); impact of school contexts on individual decisions thus warrants internationally comparative, longitudinal studies to gain a deeper insight into students' educational decisions
Bland & Woodworth (2009) Center for Education Policy SRI International; sponsored by IB Organisation	December 2008 in US; improve participation and performance of low-income and minority students in the IB Diploma Programme		Purposive selection of two case study schools (offering 2-year Pre-IB programmes) with 20 or more students who are underrepresented and high pass rates across all racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups; 2 days spent at each case study site; interviews with DP teachers, school administrators, selected district administrators, students and parents; semi-structured interviews; data requested on student selection, participation, and performance	IB coordinators selected focus group participants representative of student and parent population; teachers interviewed represented a range of content areas, grade levels, and years of experience at the schools; participant numbers not reported	Broad categorisation of interview transcripts; comparisons within and across the two schools	Increased student participation depends on awareness and interest; pipeline = availability, early preparation, recruitment, selection, enrolment, persistence, and successful completion; early academic preparation, including exposure to IB in elementary and middle school grades, may increase the number of students who are prepared for IB high school programs	Recruitment is increased when motivation (not prior achievement) is highlighted as key to success and focus is on college opportunities (despite the workload)	Students were interviewed through focus groups	Just 2 days spent on each site; focuses on identifying the characteristics of high-uptake schools (which is my eventual goal, but not within scope for this thesis); 13 years since data collected	Case studies used to explore issues of uptake and achievement in low-income and minority students so perhaps can also be used to explore low uptake overall
Doherty et al. (2009) Funded by Australian Research Council	2008 in Australia; to explore the rationales and strategy behind the choice of the IB Diploma curriculum	Globalisation and reflexivity (the social imaginary) with senior schooling curriculum explored as "an exercise of individualised reflexive strategy, played out through what alternatives are available, towards an aspirational personal goal" (p. 761)	Student focus group interview at one school and survey at 23 schools (pilot for larger three-phase mixed methods study)	Focus group of 10 Year 11 students already enrolled in the IB chosen to make up a transnational cohort and 240 respondents (160 IB); What reasons did the students give for choosing the IB? How do these students imagine their futures? How do these students link their IB choice with their imagined future?	Descriptive analysis from interview data; statistical analyses from survey Likert responses	IB choice is "high stakes" (p. 768); university destinations taken for granted; "students and their families appear savvy operators – monitoring global offerings, weighing up the benefits and risks – while acknowledging that their strategy is not without risk" (p. 769)	Different motivations in the group (e.g. overseas university plans, wider career opportunities, future mobility, continuation from MYP, quality of curriculum); some students are positioning themselves through curricular choice to be internationally mobile; IB perceived as an academic risk (workload, difficulty, exams, subject requirements)	This pilot study examined the IB choice; focus groups allow researchers to observe how and why individuals accept or reject others' ideas and how attitudes and perceptions are developed through interaction; acknowledgement that parents were left out but could have a bearing on choice; weighting of survey in favour of IB uptake	Wider project examined the IB experience, IB outcomes, and understanding the IB philosophy; no questions asked about the past or the live experience of the choice (all *post-facto*); 13 years since data collected	This pilot study informed design of a survey but could also be seen as a pilot for focus group interviews with students regarding curriculum choice more broadly

Researchers / organisation	Study period(s), location and aims	Theoretical perspective	Design and methods	Setting, population and sample procedure	Analysis procedure	Findings – choice process	Findings – values / tensions	Similarities to thesis study	Differences from thesis study	Recommendations / gaps
Doherty et al. (2012) Funded by Australian Research Council	2008-9 in Australia; to examine the growing popularity of the IB as a transnational secondary credential amongst local populations, focusing on its uptake and the discourses underpinning its spread and popularity	Social class, degrees of transnationalism, adherence to neoliberal, neoconservative educational and cosmopolitanism ideologies, and why some parents, students and schools, but not all, choose the IB	Following pilot, survey with both qualitative and quantitative items on IB choice, the IB experience, IB outcomes and the IB philosophy.	The surveys achieved 179 responses from parents (144 choosing the IB, 35 not choosing the IB), and 231 student responses (160 choosing the IB, 71 not choosing it), across 26 schools (half of those implementing IB) in the country out of the 33 that had agreed	Statistical testing for differences between IB and non-IB respondents	IB choosers more likely to be from high income, varied citizenship, globally mobile, multi-language speaking, postgraduate families and to be interested in overseas universities	IB parents more likely to value breadth, cultural heritage and traditions, assessment through exams, university entrance, independent (fee-paying) education, language-learning, internationally recognised qualifications and international cooperation; workload, difficulty and exams all considered particularly risky by students; irony in IB mission statement and high status choosers; NB: is there a tension between parents who value liberal, international curriculum but which forces certain subjects and modes of assessment that wouldn't otherwise be required?	More understanding of "what motives and discourses sponsor its uptake" (p 330)	All data collected by survey; parent and student responses from multiple schools; 12 years since data collected	"There has been little rigorous empirical research on the IB. Published work tends to be practice- or advocacy-based, anecdotal, small-scale survey with convenience samples or essayist critique. What empirical research is available is limited by sampling only IB graduates or students without any comparative foil, and failing to account for the effect of selectivity when reporting its outcomes." (p. 314); "Understanding the perennial issue of relative disadvantage in education requires a conceptualisation of relative advantage and how it is increasingly accomplished through choice behaviours and 'strategies of closure' (Ball 2003) in niche settings" (p. 329)
Bennett et al. (2013) Funded by Astra Zeneca Science Teaching Trust	Not reported (2011?) in England; to explore a range of individual and school factors that influence the uptake of chemistry and physics in post-compulsory study	Grounded theory	Qualitative component of a combined methods research study; case studies of eight schools, each with interviews of curriculum staff, two groups of students (choosers and non-choosers of chemistry/physics) and evidence gathering of results and teacher specialisms; student group interviews stimulated by position statements and direct questions about prior experiences	Use of National Pupil Database to identify four matched pairs of high-uptake and low-uptake schools; convenience sample (based on willingness to speak and timetable availability) of two groups of students per school (except that two groups were not interviews)	Transcripts read and re-read for emerging themes relating to decision strategies; independent interpretation checks performed by second researcher with 90% agreement on themes	Strategies were aspirations (career or university choice guiding subjects – or subject interest guiding university choice), identity (type of person or confidence in abilities), tactical (reducing risk, options open, complementing subjects) experience (what I have enjoyed, who has taught me or academic strengths) or entirely outside (timetable constraints or parent/teacher instruction)	Students in high-uptake schools appear to make a proactive choice in relation to aspirations, rather than a reactive choice on the basis of past experience; to improve uptake, have diversity science in compulsory curriculum, an admission strategy for advanced level study that appropriately matches student ambitions; appropriate and targeted career advice with science teacher contributions, appropriately timed work placements, matched to students' career interests and a range of opportunities for students to interact with the world of work	Changeable uptake of chemistry and physics in England analogous to uptake of IB; group interviews with students with planned activities and direct questions	Secondary data analysis used to select the school(s), matched pairs of schools; timing of when students were interviewed (and what ages – although implied *post-facto*) not reported	"Regardless of students' views about their school science experiences, the main reasons for the uptake of post-compulsory chemistry and physics studies are instrumental, that is, as a strategic positioning for desirable tertiary courses or desirable careers" (p. 668); "it is desirable to gather additional data to illuminate the situation particularly in relation to school and individual factors affecting post-compulsory uptake" (p. 668); "case studies were specifically undertaken to explore in detail school-related reasons for post-compulsory uptake of chemistry and physics" (p. 685)

Researchers / organisation	Study period(s), location and aims	Theoretical perspective	Design and methods	Setting, population and sample procedure	Analysis procedure	Findings – choice process	Findings – values / tensions	Similarities to thesis study	Differences from thesis study	Recommendations / gaps
Sheldrake et al. (2014) Complementing 'Understanding Participation rates in post-16 Mathematics And Physics' (UPMAP) project, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council	Not reported (2012?) in England; exploration of how accurate calibration of abilities relates to intentions to study post-compulsory mathematics	Self-beliefs (with links to attainment and academic interest) and their accuracy	Longitudinal calibration of confidence vs ability in Year 8 and Year 10; mathematics questionnaires with Likert scales for self-concept, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, emotional responses, perceptions of lessons, perceptions of teachers, advice or pressure and home support, and ability tasks	Random sampling of 89 schools within certain categories for mathematics attainment and progression; 2490 students (mostly in top two thirds of cohort – A* to D) in both Year 8 and 10	Calibration 'bias' measures formed by subtracting mean performance from mean confidence and scaled to generate accuracy from 0 to +1; SPSS 20 for analysis	Intentions for boys in Year 10 correspond to accurate task calibration, high self-reports for further mathematics self-beliefs and attitudes including task-level enjoyment, ease, and interest, and subject-level self-concept (but no differences for girls in Year 10 or for any gender in Year 8)	The whole topic of this study could be considered a tension – between self-concept of ability and actual achievement scores	Disproportionate inclusion of participants more likely to take the subject under question; tendency to include participants from more advantaged backgrounds	No ability measures in my interviews (although science and maths sets used as proxy); large sample masked any potential for narratives to emerge	"Self-beliefs have strong influences on students' subject choices, together with past attainment, perceptions of subjects, and numerous other factors" (p. 49); "further work is required to clarify the associations between calibration, subject-choice, and the included factors... the influence of calibration on subject-choices may potentially be smaller than other key factors, such as the perceived utility of a subject and the advice or support provided to students to continue with subjects once they are no longer compulsory" (p. 57)
Holmegaard (2015)	Not reported (2014?) in Denmark; to study how science students' choices of higher education are performed and to uncover the patterns of students' construction of their choice-narratives	Narrative psychology combined with post-structural thinking: how identities are a platform for performing choices to create a sense of fit alongside dynamic choice considerations (previous research based on rational choice, identity and values, social inclusion, and interest-based choice)	Longitudinal qualitative approach starting with questionnaire on background, interests, courses, grades and future plans then semi-structured interviews on upper school experiences including those in science and considerations about future (focus was on encouraging students to share narrative descriptions)	Population for questionnaire 134 from six schools (two each of urban, suburban and provincial and other variations in student populations); 38 final year secondary students interviewed with bias towards those intending to study STEM in higher education (according to questionnaire)	Narrative analysis and the six-step thematic analytical approach with the aim to identify the patterns in the students' construction of their HE choice-narrative	Choosing what to study is "difficult" and "frustrating" (p. 1464), students struggle to find a pathway that suits perceptions of and aspirations for selves, interests compete; only "fragments of information" (p. 1465) from internet, family and media; choices performed as not too predictable or narrow but appropriate, natural, well-researched; choice ascribed as individual but really a negotiation within social networks; well-educated family → more resources; less-educated → aim for prestige; students unable to connect science in HE with full range of careers	Want a good fit, career prospects and interest in subject matter; improving students' interests insufficient to increase admission to post-compulsory science due to equally intervening interests (study culture, attractive campus, high-profile university, location, staying close to family and friends, same university as one's partner, prestige); continuous process of adjusting, negotiating and reconstructing choice-narratives	Variations in school demographics non-stratified	Emphasis on analysis narrative construction and the way in which processes were presented rather than just the content of what was said; no reference to Bourdieu despite inferences of cultural and economic capital	"Recently there has been a call for qualitative studies to explore how choices create a sense of fit for individual students." (p. 1454); "upper secondary and HE science educators are urged to present science in a way that invites students to take active part in crafting their own education" (p. 1473)

Researchers / organisation	Study period(s), location and aims	Theoretical perspective	Design and methods	Setting, population and sample procedure	Analysis procedure	Findings – choice process	Findings – values / tensions	Similarities to thesis study	Differences from thesis study	Recommendations / gaps
Archer et al. (2017a) Part of Aspires2, funded by Economic and Social Research Council	Not reported (although Year 11s could be ascertained from Aspires2) in UK; to explore how a select few girls develop and persist with their post-16 physics aspirations	Bourdieusian (habitus, capital, field, hexis, doxa, cultural arbitrary) and Butlerian (gender as performance, intelligibility) conceptual lenses	Qualitative and quantitative data collected using surveys from more than 13,000 Year 11 (age 15/16) students and interviews with 70 students (and 62 parents) as part of a wider longitudinal study of students' science and career aspirations age 10–16	Focus on seven girls who aspired to continue with physics post-16	Discourse analytic approach informed by feminist poststructuralism; coding of key topic areas, about specific themes, and by responses to particular questions on NVivo then identifying discursive gender repertoires and patterns of aspirations/ relationships with science	Physics associated with masculinity so four girls distanced themselves from femininity (leading to massive identity work and resource mobilization), sometimes immune from stereotypes, intentions usually (but not always) associated with science capital	Even if more women enter post-compulsory physics, there would still be a dearth of working-class women	Single-sex data collection (albeit girls); Bourdieu as a theoretical lens	Focus on femininity and identity (due to Butlerian lens selection) rather than the mechanics of choice	Similar to articles on IB elites, "if the only women who can make it into post-compulsory physics are essentially clones of the current cultural arbitrary, then in seems unlikely that the culture of physics will change dramatically; the mere presence of more women in these fields may not necessarily widen participation in any meaningful way" (p. 33); "a potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry may be to focus on what might be done to change the cultural arbitrary of physics and the conditions within which students make their subject choices, rather than attempting to change the attitudes and aspirations of girls themselves" (p. 34); "our findings raise questions as to whether there is a latent pool of girls/women who are simply waiting to become interested in physics" (p. 34); "We consider the exclusion of girls/women from physics to be a social injustice that needs to be challenged, both for the good of underrepresented groups but also in the interests of creating socially just science." (p. 34)
Archer et al. (2017b) Part of Aspires2, funded by Economic and Social Research Council	Not reported (although Year 11s could be ascertained from Aspires2) in England; to explore the role of KS4 Science stratifying practices on patterns of participation, how young people experience 'choice' (or not) of GCSE science and identity and other implications (for social justice and widening participation in science) associated with participation	Bourdieu's concept of pedagogic action, in which the imposition of the cultural arbitrary (the notion of sticking with 'how things are') generates symbolic violence	National survey of over 13,000 Year 11 students aged 15/16 years and in-depth longitudinal interviews conducted with 70 students from this cohort (age 10-16)	Focus on interview data (all of whom had been tracked in survey from age 10 to age 16) with interviews lasting between 30 min and 1 h (for students) and up to 1.5 h (with parents)	Discourse analytic approach; over-arching themes (e.g. schools' pedagogic work, appropriateness of the choice, connections with prior achievement, high stakes and Double Award threat, reproduction of inequalities, STEM pipeline) with narratives to exemplify student perspectives	Students are 'channelled' into a particular choice that many come to accept as legitimate	Triple Science became an entitlement for KS3 level 6 (not for all) in 2008 but criteria have reduced in clarity with time; Confederation of British Industry propose it should be mandatory (wanting more A-level scientists); selective practices around Triple Science create and perpetuate social inequalities, producing different patterns of student identity, aspiration and attainment; Triple Science as 'for the clever'	Combination of narrative and thematic approaches	Choice processes involved in KS4 Science (rather than across curricula)	The very existence of Triple Science as a means to stretch the top students from KS3 may actually reduce the quantity of post-compulsory physicists as the existence of an elite pathway leads to an assumption of it's "not for me" (p. 313); "the notion of students' 'choice' of science route at KS4 is, in most cases, fictitious" (p. 312); "we would question whether young people (and society) are best served by being encouraged to take a relatively narrow, specialist set of A-levels" (p. 313)

Researchers / organisation	Study period(s), location and aims	Theoretical perspective	Design and methods	Setting, population and sample procedure	Analysis procedure	Findings – choice process	Findings – values / tensions	Similarities to thesis study	Differences from thesis study	Recommendations / gaps
Asbury & Plomin (2017) Funded by Nuffield Foundation	2010-12 in England and Wales; to explore which experiences in school and elsewhere influence young people, whether these environmental factors differ between groups based on socio-economic status, gender or general cognitive ability and potential benefits of these environments for post-16 transition	About half of GCSE performance differences can be explained by genetic differences with environment and measurement error accounting for the remainder	Phase 1 qualitative hypothesis-generating study on monozygotic (100% common genes) twin differences design; Phase 2 full twin design with questionnaire developed on non-shared environment scales	Participants drawn from the Twins' Early Development Study of twins born in the UK between 1994 and 1996; Phase 1 with 497 questionnaires and 97 interviews (interviewees selected based on divergence of two grades in one or more subjects or future plans); Phase 2 invited 2165 same-sex twin's families with 1834 individuals' data received	Phase 1 codifying of qualitative responses with analysis of frequencies of response for English, Maths and Science; Phase 2 exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis for measure development, descriptive statistics, correlations, univariate genetic analysis and bivariate Cholesky decomposition analysis with group differences analysed using t-tests and ANOVA	Qualitative explanations included different teachers, setting, student personality, ability, interest and effort and peer relationships; quantitative English outcomes correlate with self-perception and perceptions of teacher, correlations in Maths and Science largely genetic; boys have higher perceptions and confidence but girls self-report more effort; few significant differences for socio-economic status; strong correlations explained by cognitive ability	It seems that non-shared environments play very little role in differences in outcomes and future plans for twins except for teacher quality and teacher-student relationships – so perhaps I as Coordinator have very limited scope to effect change; friendships affect personality, confidence, interests and social life	Variation sought in interview participants; qualitative phase to data collection	Data collected after conclusion of GCSE results so directionality of relationships cannot be ascertained; although largely about correspondence with GCSE outcomes, these in turn impact curriculum choices	"Year 11 is a transition point during which young people's decisions can have important and lasting consequences" (p. 1); "it remains unclear whether and how we can influence pupils' choices and behaviour at this important developmental stage" (p. 31)
Jugovic (2017)	Not reported in Zagreb, Croatia; to explore the role of motivation, gender roles and stereotypes in the explanation of students' educational outcomes in physics	Eccles and colleagues' expectancy-value model; hypotheses that motivation is the strongest predictor of intentions, endorsing masculine stereotypes harms girls' intentions and that more socially-acceptable gender roles for girls has a negative impact on intentions	Variables were expectancy of success, self-concept of ability and subjective task values of physics, gender roles and stereotypes, and educational outcomes (achievement and post-compulsory intentions); one 45-minute questionnaire with voluntary non-anonymous responses (Likert scales)	736 grammar school students of average age 17	Descriptive and inferential statistics; correlations between criterion variables and predictors followed by hierarchical regression analyses	Self-concept of physics ability was the strongest predictor of physics school grades, whereas the utility value of physics was the key predictor of educational intentions	Girls have lower self-concept of ability and lower expectations of success but better grades whereas boys have stronger intentions of continuing in physics	Research prompted by a curriculum subject dominated by a stereotype (physics and males) whereas my thesis is on the IB and globally-transient elites; recognising that curriculum intentions are an outcome (on par with results!)	Post-16 data collection; merely correlations (not causations); only intentions and not actual choices (recommends longitudinal design); no focus or correction of misconceptions; gender effects sought	"It would therefore be more useful to start organising activities aimed at achieving gender balance in educational choices in early primary school, and not at the end of primary or secondary school (when gender stereotypes are already formed). It would also be useful to specifically focus on deconstructing gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles that restrain students from choosing gender non-stereotypical careers, despite their real interests and abilities." (p. 90)
Shirazi (2017)	2011-12 in England; to explore the link between experiences of school science of post-16 students and their decisions to take up science for their higher studies	Student perceptions as dependent on school influences, and intrinsic influences such as gender, self-efficacy and interest, as well as social and cultural influences	Two-phase mixed methods; students aged 16–17 (n = 569) reflected on five years of school science in a quasi-longitudinal approach to determine a typology of experiences; interviews of a sample of these students (n = 55) to triangulate and extend findings from the first phase	Year 12 students at five secondary schools with 10% of questionnaire respondents interviewed; purposive sample to ensure equal numbers male and female scientists and non-scientists with each trajectory type (but convenience in reality)	Students categorised as scientists or non-scientists; storyline tool in questionnaire with statistical testing (progressive, regressive, progressive with ups and downs, stable); interview questions categorised in advance to enable inductive thematic analysis	Positive experiences lead to increased likelihood of taking the physics (what's the analogy for IB?); curriculum content more important than interest or motivation; interest and motivation depend on teacher practice and perception of science as difficult	Science curricular content needs to be less repetitive and exam-driven; difficulty of science and its focus on examinations means that curriculum provided contributed to a negative experience	Interviews as a means to extend findings; trajectories ascertained over time (akin to pic-a-card)	Quasi-longitudinal; post-facto (good for validity of post-16 choices but misses the live choice process)	"The question whether researchers can directly and faithfully capture a fixed and final snapshot of lived experience is one that cannot be answered here" (p. 1909); "fewer studies have used students' reflections of their school science experiences in order to establish how school experiences shape future choice of science" (p. 1895)

Researchers / organisation	Study period(s), location and aims	Theoretical perspective	Design and methods	Setting, population and sample procedure	Analysis procedure	Findings – choice process	Findings – values / tensions	Similarities to thesis study	Differences from thesis study	Recommendations / gaps
Moulton et al. (2018) Funded by Economic and Social Research Council and Nuffield Foundation	2007-8 in UK; to explore whether subject choice, prior attainment and school characteristics at 14–16 influences post-16 transitions (and whether this accounts for socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic differences post-16)		Observational quantitative analysis of National Pupil Database and 'Next Steps' cohort using matched longitudinal school attendance and outcomes data	'Next Steps', a study of 16,000 people born in England in 1989–1990, linked to administrative education records (the National Pupil Database); sample was nationally representative using stratified sampling but over-sampling in deprived schools; state schools only; 11 801 aged 16-17	Three transitions considered (post-16 study, A-levels post-16 and two or more facilitating subjects); multiple logistic regression models		Students pursuing an EBacc-eligible curriculum at 14–16 had a greater probability of progression to all post-16 educational outcomes (NB: not all are given this choice); no relative benefit based on class but girls and white pupils benefit more than others; also increases likelihood of studying facilitating subject at A-level	Over-sampling for a particular school type	Entirely quantitative, so no scope to ascertain motivations or influences – but could be beneficial from removing any bias or researcher effects	"we are unable to find evidence to support the value of a less academic curriculum ... Policy makers have experimented with the curriculum, often without evidence regarding the average effects, let alone the implications for particular groups of pupils. Our findings suggest that such policies may have an unforeseen and long-term influence on young people's educational trajectories, with implications for inequalities in the life course." (p. 114)
DeWitt et al. (2019) Part of ASPIRES Funded by Economic and Social Research Council	Not reported (but could be ascertained from ASPIRES) in UK; to explore what insights into post-compulsory physics choice might be provided by students who could have chosen physics, but did not	Bourdieu's theory of social practice, particularly notions of the 'cultural arbitrary'	Survey and qualitative interviews; questionnaire on background, aspirations, subject preferences and attitudes to science; interviews on aspirations, interests, likes/dislikes, attitudes to science	Survey of 13 000 Year 11s (from 340 schools) and interviews with 70 Year 11s from ASPIRES project	Quantitative analyses on physics/non-physics intentions with demographic variables; thematic organisation of interview transcripts with constant comparative analysis followed by application of lens	Individual aspirations have a key role in subject choice as well as enjoyment and university progression; students choosing physics A-level more likely to be male, Asian (or Middle Eastern) with higher levels of cultural capital, in top set for science and have family members working in science	Cultural arbitrary of physics (e.g. as difficult, masculine) leads students to conclude that physics is not 'for me' even when they know its status and utility	Consideration of KS4 Science setting	Large sample size, quantitative analysis	"entrenched nature of the challenges facing efforts to increase equity in post-compulsory physics participation" (p. 1071); "limited work ... in this area" (p. 1072); "using the lens of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and especially the notion of the cultural arbitrary, provides insights into subject choice and related equity issues surrounding participation in post-compulsory physics" (p. 1083); "In the long term, we would like to argue for the democratisation of physics and dismantling its elite positioning." (p. 1084)
Mathieson et al. (2020) Funded by Nuffield Foundation	Autumn 2017 in UK; to explore perspectives on how the new Core Maths qualification is being positioned within the existing post-16 curriculum structure	Social justice	Qualitative data from 13 case study post-16 institutions (part of three-year mixed-methods) on transitions to post-16 mathematics, staff expertise, the content and approach of CM, and experiences of and perspectives on mathematics education	Semi-structured interviews with 15 CM teachers, 12 Heads of Mathematics and 11 senior leaders (Heads, Deputies, HODs) and 62 students	Inductive and deductive issue-based then thematic analysis with separate codes for students and staff	Continuing with Core Maths (AS equivalent) perceived of as an opportunity alongside three A-levels because of maintaining GCSE knowledge but for some it is self-perceived inadequacy for A-level Maths	Many have a positive regard for the qualification but students are manoeuvred by systemic processes; more students taking post-compulsory maths is beneficial but routes to progression are restricted; "Core Maths chooses you; you don't choose Core Maths" (p. 716); clear vertical positioning in teachers' language (e.g. 'drop down' or 'end up'); timetabling constrains even those eligible for A-level Maths	CM very recently introduced nationally as an alternative to A-level (analogous to relatively small cohort IB at larger secondary institution)	Interview participants include teachers, heads of department and senior leaders, formal coding procedure	"Interrogation is needed of restrictions within the education system, such as access to the prestigious A-level Mathematics, penetrating the rhetoric of choice and discovering a social order, a hierarchy, based on cultural capital and differential access" (paraphrased from Bourdieu, p. 708); "Inequality still pervades the English system" (paraphrased from Pring, p. 718)

Researchers / organisation	Study period(s), location and aims	Theoretical perspective	Design and methods	Setting, population and sample procedure	Analysis procedure	Findings – choice process	Findings – values / tensions	Similarities to thesis study	Differences from thesis study	Recommendations / gaps
Palmer (2020) Australian Postgraduate Award funded by the Australian Government	Not reported in Sydney, Australia; to investigate students' decision-making at the time they were choosing their senior high school subjects and identifying strategies to influence them to consider continuing with post-compulsory science	*Intrinsic* factors relate to students and their preferences, and *extrinsic* factors relate to the environment within which students choose their subjects	Focus group interviews on subject choice process, difficulty of choice, who they asked for help, factors considered and choice to study or not study science	10 focus groups were conducted with 50 students from four schools; schools selected students for the focused group (passing grade or above in Year 10 or chosen Science / could have chosen Science in Year 11)	Grounded theory approach with constant comparative procedure to code transcripts according to identified nodes; some consideration of frequencies	Two-stage process (select/reject based on enjoyment, interest and need then use of information and advice to fulfil their subject quota)	Students hold misconceptions about utility of science; "the fear of missing career opportunities in the future was enough incentive for some students to persevere with a subject even though they did not like it" (p. 606)	Prompted by under-valuing of a curriculum option (science) by students during the choice process	Two-stage model seems insufficient (in professional experience) to describe subject choice (e.g. not all liked subjects are chosen)	"It is suggested that ... perceptions can be addressed at subject-selection time" (p. 591); "This study is unique as it explored the subject decision-making process at the time students were making their choices." (p 607)
Papworth (2020) Findings from doctorate project	Not reported in Guernsey; to explore the experience of students making their decisions around Sixth Form education with reference to risks and benefits of the IB and the national curriculum	Expectancy Value Model of Motivated Behavioural Choice (EV-MBC)	Mixed-methods case study, with twelve in-depth conversational interviews guided by vignettes (two to allow reflection pre- and post-choice) and two surveys (for gathering of whole-cohort views)	Year 11 to 12 longitudinal study at Guernsey state secondary schools; stratified random sample but with aberrations	Conceptual mapping to produce a portrait of each participant (for ease of comparison) and identification of themes	Choices are individual and shift over time (depending on experiences) except for students with firm and achievable aspirations; time and energy are expended by students; no relationship between time spent making the choice and later satisfaction	Past experiences only significant if they include traumatic or difficult events; cost is a factor in curriculum choice if families are wary of possibility of failure; social collective identity unimportant unless family not involved	IB vs A-level curricula on offer; IB Coordinator as researcher	Guernsey as an independent and isolated position with a strong local employment market	"the interviews provided the rich data that demonstrated that the cultural context influences many of these factors so that trends are able to emerge that are not predicted by theory" (p. 131); "A next step for future research could be to examine what works to influence choice, and how to encourage students to make better informed choices that lead to the best possible outcome for them." (p. 135)

II. Timeline

Timing	Process/outcome
May – June 2020	First contact and negotiation with Headmaster about the proposed research, application for IB research award, professional learning from similar institutions with similar problem, institutional procedures to familiarise study cohort and parents with IB curriculum and upcoming post-16 curriculum choice process, early stages of gathering documents from previous years for analysis
July – August 2020	Commencement of journal for autoethnography including evaluation of professional role in context of IB uptake to date, review of the literature on curriculum choice and post-16 education influences, strategic planning for professional interventions, registration of study with UCL Data Protection Officer and ethics application
September 2020	Ethical approval, questionnaire distribution, selection of participants, implementation of informed consent procedure, communication with colleagues, journal updates
October 2020 – January 2021	Two interviews with each participant (transcription required), ongoing documentary analysis, professional communications, journal updates
February – March 2021	Curriculum choice takes place, evaluation of whole-cohort IB uptake, third interviews with cases (transcription required), journal updates
April – June 2021	Commencement of analysis, internal dissemination of findings, journal updates
July – November 2021	Conclusion of analysis, writing up the academic research
December 2021	Writing up the academic research, writing of EdD reflective and impact statements

III. Questionnaire

Dear Fifth Form student,

Please complete this short survey about your initial plans for the Sixth Form at [School]. The responses that you provide will help your tutor, the Fifth Form team, the Sixth Form team and other members of staff to support and advise you throughout Michaelmas Term.

The formal post-16 'Options' events will take place in the Lent Term. This is when you will be asked for your formal choices of subjects and route.

Miss E Mitchell

1. What subjects are you thinking about for Sixth Form study? (Tick all that apply) [Not required]

Art	English Literature	Music
Biology	French	Philosophy
Business Studies	Further Mathematics	Physical Education
Chemistry	Geography	Physics
Chinese	German	Politics
Classical Civilisation	Greek	Psychology
Computing	History	Religious Studies
Design Technology	Japanese	Spanish
Drama	Latin	Sports Science
Economics	Mathematics	

2. What Sixth Form routes are you considering? (Tick all that apply) [Not required]

   International Baccalaureate
   A-levels
   BTEC (plus one A-level)

3. At this moment, which Sixth Form route are you most likely to choose? [Not required]

   International Baccalaureate
   A-levels
   BTEC (plus one A-level)

4. How sure are you about your choice of route? [Not required]

   4-point Likert scale from Certain to Unsure.

5. What are your plans after you finish the Sixth Form? Briefly describe your career aspirations. [Not required]

6. If you have any comments or questions about this survey or the Options process, please write these here. [Not required]

Thank you for completing this survey about your plans for the Sixth Form. Your response has been recorded.

IV. Interview schedule 1 – individual

Introductions

- Self – Emma Mitchell, Director of IB at [School], part-time EdD researcher at UCL
- Study – post-16 curriculum choice with emphasis on processes, values and tensions
- Reminder of ethics – audio recording, right to end the coaching session at any time
- (Tech issues – I'll call back if needed; turn off video if bandwidth is required)

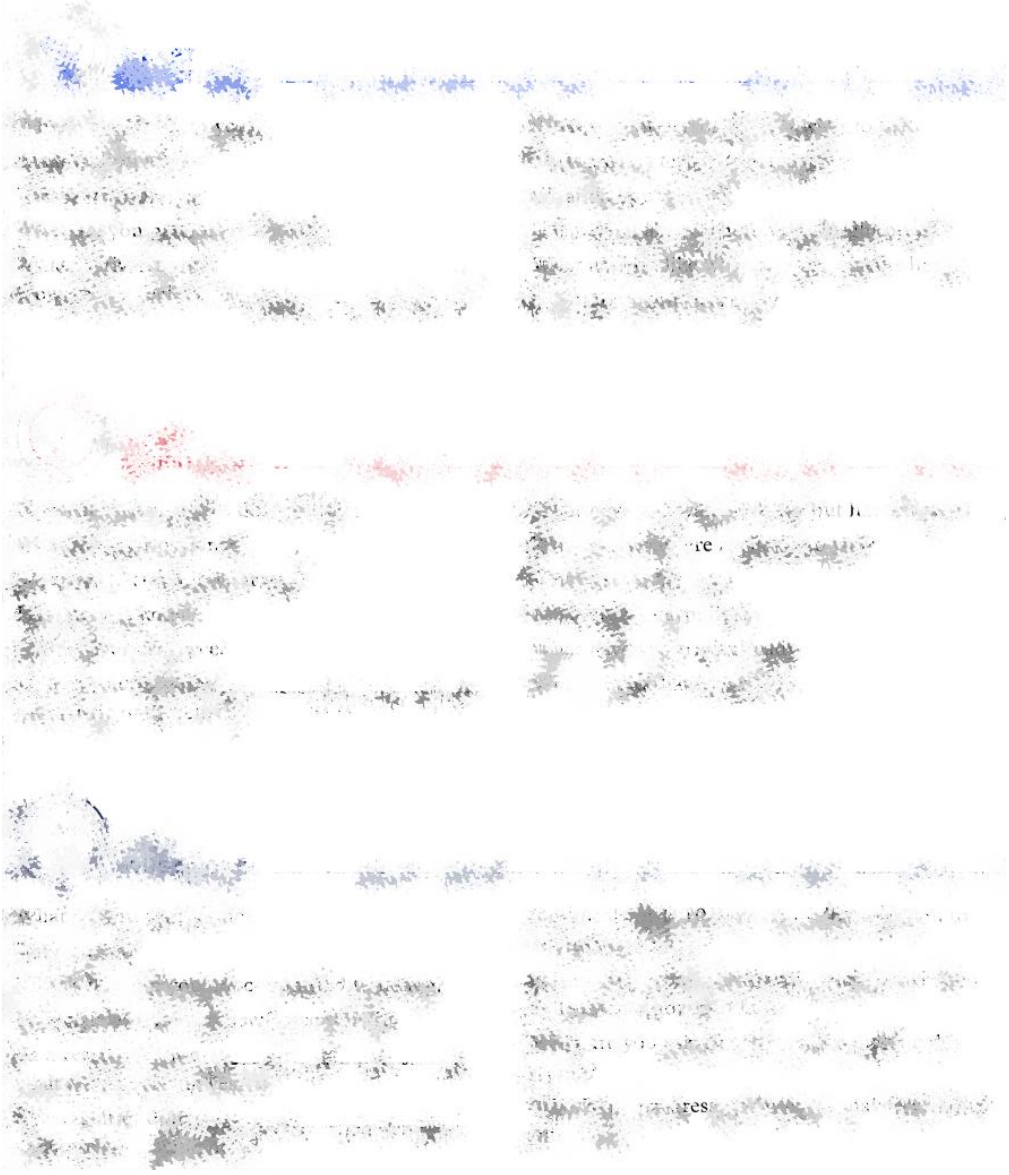
Partnership agreement

Coaching is for the coachee, you have all the answers, my job is to ask and not tell. But I am using these techniques in a research context, so I may steer the conversation. I'll also answer your questions when we're done.

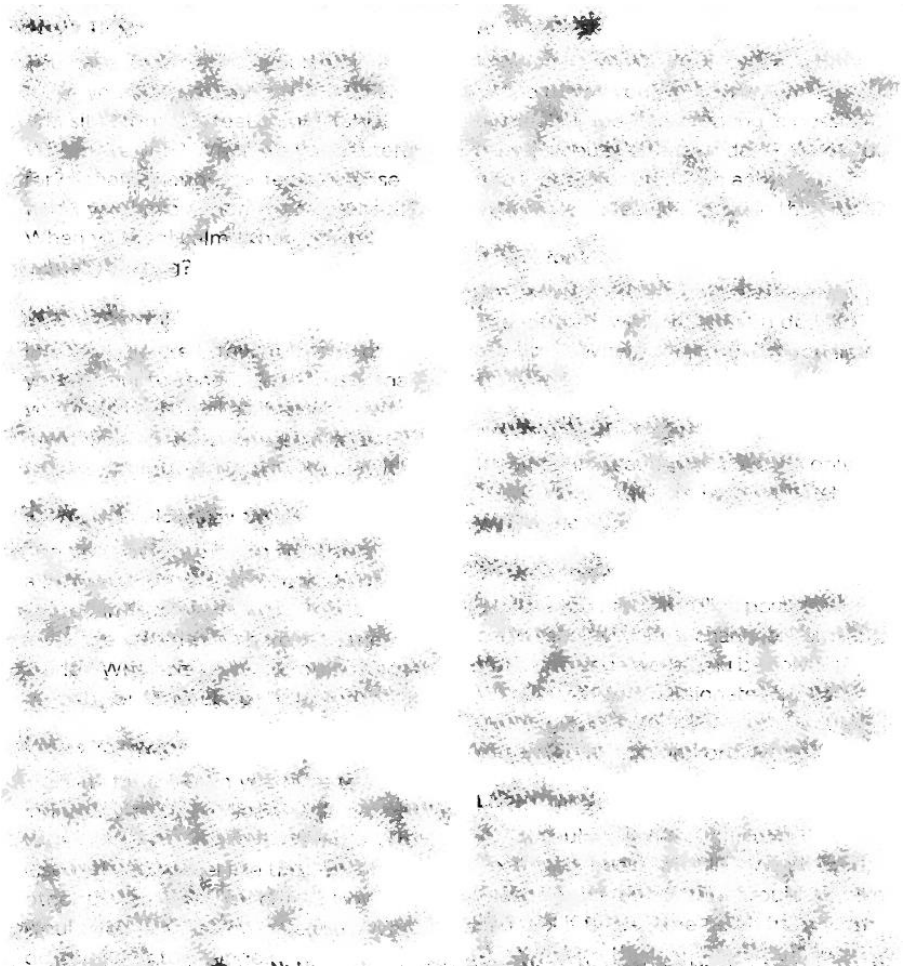
How would you like us to be together? What do you need from me? What would you like to offer?

Coaching questions

- How are you feeling about choosing your Sixth Form curriculum?
- What thought have you given the Options process so far?



Values visualisations



1. Close your eyes, place two feet on the ground and breathe deeply to calm body and mind
2. Visualisation(s)
3. Reflections on the experience
4. Potential values
5. Explore these further
6. Name and describe each value

Wrap up – have I considered…

- How are you experiencing the process of post-16 curriculum choice? When are curriculum choices made, who is involved, what factors are influential, what information is used and what is the impact of the choice?
- What are your values? What tensions do you experience?
- (What about home language, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, academic setting, time at [School] so far, subject interests and aspirations?)

V. Interview schedule 1 – group

Introductions

- Self – Emma Mitchell, Director of IB at [School], part-time EdD researcher at UCL
- Study – post-16 curriculum choice with emphasis on processes, values and tensions
- Reminder of ethics – audio recording, right to end the session at any time, withdrawing data

Partnership agreement

How does this feel so far? How would you like us to be together? What do you need from me/each other? How will I know if this session has gone well?

Coaching questions

- How are you feeling about choosing your Sixth Form curriculum?
- What thought have you given the Options process so far?
- What's making it hard for you?
- What images come to mind when you think of A-levels? What about the IB?
- Where do you think these ideas have come from?
- What do you think a teacher at [School] would advise you to do? Tutor? Parents? Older students?
- As a result of choosing IB/A-levels, what are you agreeing to? What are you saying no to?
- What do you want from the Sixth Form at [School]?
- How will you know if you have been successful when you finish school?
- What type of person do you want to be?
- What do you need to find out? What are your next steps? What might stop you?
- How will you make up your mind? What would it take to change your mind?

Wrap up – have I considered…

- How are you experiencing the process of post-16 curriculum choice? When are curriculum choices made, who is involved, what factors are influential, what information is used and what is the impact of the choice?
- What are your values? What tensions do you experience?
- (What about home language, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, academic setting, time at [School] so far, subject interests and aspirations?)

VI. Interview schedule 2 – individual

Introductions

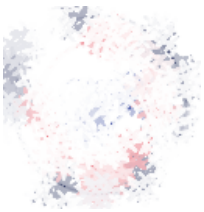
- Study – post-16 curriculum choice with emphasis on processes, values and tensions
- Last time – feelings about Options process, exploring values and tensions (visualisation)
- This time – possible impacts of curriculum choice, challenges, inspirations
- Reminder of ethics – Covid-19, audio recording, right to end the coaching session at any time

Partnership check-in

How did you find our first session? What did you learn? How would you like us to be together today?

Coaching questions

How are things going with making your Sixth Form curriculum choices? What's important to you? What's making it difficult? What steps could you take?



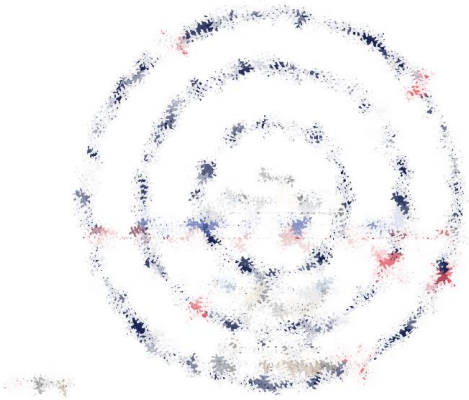
Lenses: looking at the situation in a variety of ways to support goals, dreams, and true fulfilment

1. In a word (or metaphor), how do you currently feel and think about the Options process?
2. What are the positive implications of this current lens? What about the negatives?
3. Now let's find a new lens. Who would have an extremely different view of the Options process to you? These could be real people or types of people.
4. What is [person's] view on the world? What is their lens? As [person], what do you think about the Options process? What advice would you give [student]? How would you deal with this situation if you were them?
5. Cartoon? Family? Role model? Teacher? Profession? Celebrity? Sportsman? Animal? Age?
6. Which lens would you like to adopt? What makes this lens useful? What word or metaphor best describes this person's lens?

Gremlin: a radio station that always plays negative thoughts and songs – you have volume control

You know that feeling that you get when you try something, like riding a bike, for the first time? Maybe there's something you want to get better at, like standing up for yourself or listening carefully to others. Or you might notice that you keep putting something off, perhaps to protect yourself. All of us have things beyond our comfort zone. These can make us feel angry, resentful, worried, frustrated and embarrassed. We might even hear negative self-talk inside our heads. In coaching we call this the Gremlin.

How familiar is this? What does the idea of the Gremlin make you think of? What words does your Gremlin say to you? What are some benefits of talking to yourself like this? What would it be like to quieten this thinking? How about in the context of school? What about when you make decisions?



Champion: a tremendously strong and confident voice that must be uncovered and amplified

Your Champion is not a superhero or other person in your life. Your Champion is within you. This voice has one purpose: to steer you towards a life of alignment and fulfilment, motivating you beyond roadblocks and fear. Like an internal compass, you can always rely on your Champion to guide you towards your north.

Imagine you have your Champion Radio Station on full blast. What messages does it share to support you? What words do you hear? What phrases does it repeat? How does this impact you?

What would it be like to live the majority of the time listening to your Champion Radio station? When would you listen the most? What is one song that best represents the Champion Radio station? What can you do so that you listen to your Champion Radio more often or more clearly? How can you make your Champion more prevalent in your life?

How might this change the way you view school? What about the process of Sixth Form curriculum choice? What values does this bring up? What challenges could you tackle?

Wrap up – have I considered…

- How are you experiencing the process of post-16 curriculum choice? When are curriculum choices made, who is involved, what factors are influential, what information is used and what is the impact of the choice?
- What are your values? What tensions do you experience?

VII. Interview schedule 2 – group

Introductions

- Study – post-16 curriculum choice with emphasis on processes, values and tensions
- Last time – feelings about Options process, exploring values and tensions (visualisation)
- This time – possible impacts of curriculum choice, challenges, inspirations
- Reminder of ethics – Covid-19, audio recording, right to end the coaching session at any time

Partnership agreement

How did you find our first session? What did you learn? How would you like us to be together today?

Coaching questions

- How are things going with making your Sixth Form curriculum choices?
- What's important to you?
- What's making it difficult?
- What steps could you take?
- In a word (or metaphor), how do you currently feel and think about the Options process?
- What are the positive implications of this current lens? What about the negatives?
- What is [person's] view on the world? What is their lens? As [person], what do you think about the Options process? What advice would you give [student]? How would you deal with this situation if you were them?
- What does the idea of the Gremlin make you think of? What are some benefits of talking to yourself like this? What would it be like to quieten this thinking? How about in the context of school? What about when you make decisions?
- What messages does your Champion share to support you? How does this impact you? How can you make your Champion more prevalent in your life? How might this change the way you view school? What about the process of Sixth Form curriculum choice? What values does this bring up? What challenges could you tackle?

Wrap up – have I considered…

- How are you experiencing the process of post-16 curriculum choice? When are curriculum choices made, who is involved, what factors are influential, what information is used and what is the impact of the choice?
- What are your values? What tensions do you experience?

VIII. Interview schedule 3

Introductions

- Study – post-16 curriculum choice with emphasis on processes, values and tensions
- Last time – possible impacts of curriculum choice, challenges, inspirations
- This time – the choice, the process, and the values and tensions involved
- Reminder of ethics – Covid-19, audio recording, right to end the coaching session at any time

Partnership check-in

How have you found our sessions so far? What have you learned?

Heart Head Step

How did things go with making your Sixth Form curriculum choices? What did you choose? How did you choose? What was important to you? What helped along the way? What made it difficult? What steps do you still plan to take?

Pic-A-Card activity

Choose one card (picture or quote) that represents where you were at the beginning of this year, one card that represents where you are right now and one card that represents where you want to be in the future.

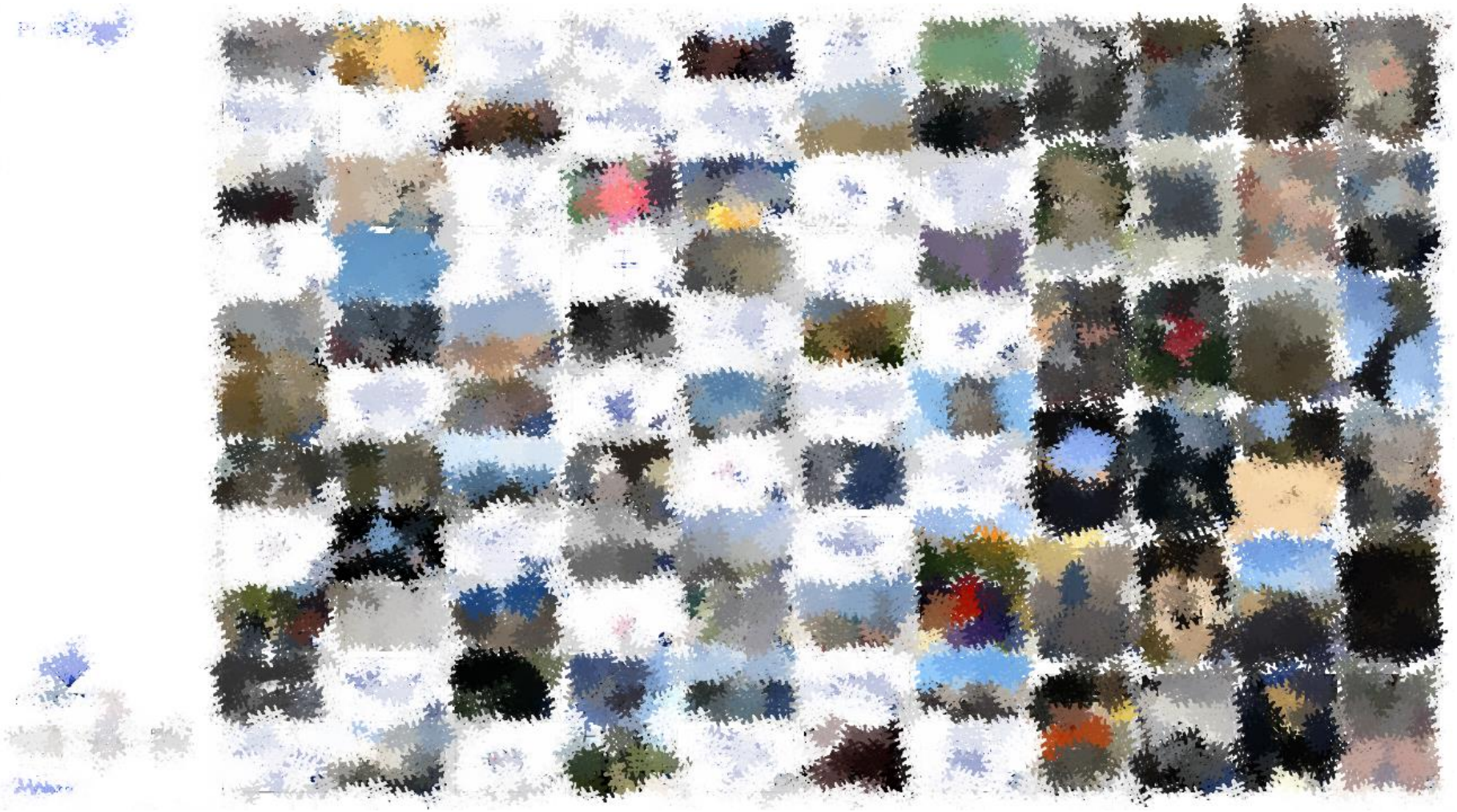
- What about the card you chose represents where you were?
- What about the card you chose represents where you are now?
- What about the card you chose represents where you want to be in the future?

Experience questions

How have you found the experience of being a research participant? How did this affect your curriculum choices? What are your feelings about coaching for Fifth Form students?

Wrap up – have I considered…

How did you experience the process of post-16 curriculum choice? When were your curriculum choices made, who was involved, what factors were influential, what information was used and what has the impact of the choice been so far? Values? Tensions?



IX. Data collection strategies' relationships with research questions

	Documentary analysis	**Interviews (participants selected from survey)**	**Autoethnographic journal**
RQ1: In an independent, all-boys school that teaches both A-levels and the IB, how do students experience the process of post-16 curriculum choice?	The documentary exploration provided a sense of the complexity of the choice experience because of the number of sources that students have access to	Interviews were the predominant method by which I developed a response to this research question because of the narratives the students shared about how they were making post-16 curriculum choices	The nature of autoethnography meant that this method did not contribute directly to this question. However, I might not have tested the extent to which my findings 'rang true' had I not been reflecting systematically during the study.
RQ2: What are the students' values and what, if any, tensions do they experience?	Considering the relative accuracy of the information provided and any imbalance in the presentation of the curricula generated evidence for the tensions experienced by students	Using coaching strategies as a model for the interview schedules and a vocabulary developed over hundreds of hours of coaching practice allowed me to ascertain some of the students' values that were of relevance to them during the choice process. I was able to ask them more directly about the tensions experienced, and inferred additional responses from the transcribed data.	Having a journal to hand and a regular practice of adding to it meant that I could jot down recollections of interactions with students (participants and non-participants) and colleagues that added to my overall awareness of the curriculum choice phenomenon
RQ3: What are the tensions for the IB Coordinator?	Generating a list of all the information sources available to students made clear just how many the IB Coordinator is linked to and how many others there are to either keep abreast of or seek to correct	Although I as IB Coordinator cannot hope to suppress all tensions for the students (and nor would I necessarily think this desirable), speaking to 21 students over a six-month period has given me new insight into how they experience the choice process and the ways in which I might improve it	Autoethnographic journaling was the predominant method by which I developed a response to this research question because of the entries made to both my workplace diary and research diary over a full academic year

X. Letter to Headmaster

Dear [Headmaster],

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research project for this thesis with a sample of Fifth Form students at [School] over the next academic year. The working title is Post-16 curriculum choice: processes, values and tensions at a dual-curriculum UK independent school.

The aims of this research are:

1. To explore the 'Options' process for students with consideration of when curriculum choices are made, who is involved, what factors are influential, what information is used and the impact of the choice.
2. To uncover the values and tensions for students and the IB Diploma Coordinator at a dual-curriculum school and how these relate to UN rights for children and parents on choices in education.
3. To develop a conceptual framework for post-16 curriculum choice at [School].

Data collection would commence in September 2020 and conclude in March 2021. Participating in the research would require each of 12 students (chosen in conjunction with the Head of Year) to take part in up to three coaching-style interviews. I may also employ 'pedagogical' research approaches such as workshops and/or focus groups with additional students using stimulus material and prompts.

If you agree to my conducting this research in principle, I will then make a formal ethical application (with adherence to BERA guidelines and data protection regulations) to UCL. The ethical considerations that you might like to be aware of include the following:

- Time burden on the Head of Year and the participating students
- Risk of dissonance for students when more actively aware of their 'Options'
- Bias in data collection given my position as teacher and researcher
- Participants' names will be pseudonymised but their comments could be recognisable to other participating students and to their teachers
- Successful publication of the assignment would include my name as author, so [School] could feasibly be identified as the context school

My research design would acknowledge these where possible. All students and their parents would be provided with an information sheet and be required to complete an informed consent form if they choose to volunteer. I do not foresee any significant benefits or detriments to students deciding either way. However, I believe that participation may illuminate more about the choice process and the values at play to the students themselves.

You would, of course, be welcome to read the output EdD assignment. I am also applying for a Jeff Thompson IB Research award, which would secure a mechanism for global publication of any findings that hold relevance to other schools.

I look forward to hearing your questions and suggestions.

Warm regards,

Emma

XI. Participant information sheet

Post-16 curriculum choice: processes, values and tensions

September 2020 – March 2021

Information sheet for Upper Fifth form students and parents/guardians

My name is Miss Emma Mitchell, Physics teacher and Director of International Baccalaureate at [School]. In my spare time I am also studying for a doctorate at UCL.

I am writing to invite you to take part in my doctoral research project, *Post-16 curriculum choice: processes, values and tensions at a dual-curriculum UK independent school*.

I hope to find out how students at [School] experience the post-16 'Options' process. I will use coaching techniques to uncover the values and tensions involved, and (more theoretically) seek to develop a framework for post-16 curriculum choice.

I very much hope that you would like to take part. This information sheet will try to answer any questions you might have about the project, but please don't hesitate to contact me if there is anything else you would like to know ([identifier]@[school].co.uk).

Who is carrying out the research?
Researcher: Miss Emma Mitchell
Supervisors: Professor Michael Reiss and Professor Alice Sullivan

Why is this research being done?
Uptake of the IB at [School] ranges from 12-24%. This research will help me to understand the post-16 'Options' process in more detail: when curriculum choices are made, who is involved, what factors are influential, what information is used and the impact of the choice. The findings may help me to better-inform future cohorts about the curriculum options available.

What will happen if I choose to take part?
Some participants will be interviewed individually using coaching questions (e.g. What's important to you? What are you passionate about? What motivates you? What are you like when you are at your best? What type of person do you want to be?) on up to three occasions. Some participants will be invited to take part in workshops, in which I will lead discussions about 'choice', prompted by quotations and influences discovered in previous research. You can expect to be involved for three 15-30 minute sessions across the 6-month Options process, but you will have the opportunity to opt out of any interview or workshop at any time for any or no reason.

If you consent, sessions will be audio-recorded. Additional personal information such as boarding status, number of years at the school, home location and subject interests will also be collected from existing school data to help me in describing you as one of the participants in this study. You can request for your data to be removed from the analysis up to 2nd July 2021.

Will anyone know I have been involved?
I have checked with your Head of Year and a small number of teachers that I may invite you to take part.

I will not disclose any personally identifying information that you give and will ensure confidentiality. If anything you say is quoted or any descriptive information about you is included in the research, your contribution will be pseudonymized (you will be referred to using another, fictional name).

The only exception would be if you revealed that you were in a risky situation that might cause you harm or ill health, in which case I would inform your Head of Year. This is in accordance with the school's policy for keeping you safe.

Could there be problems for me if I take part?
It is possible that the experience of reflection could result in some confusion about curriculum choice or remembering negative events from the past. There would also be a small time commitment. Please be reassured that if you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are entitled to pause or stop your participation.

In most cases, however, coaching and reflection are overwhelmingly positive experiences, and you may find that you are more engaged in the Options process than you would have been otherwise. It may also be interesting to take part in educational research.

What will happen to the results of the research?
The [School]-specific results of this research will be shared at the school's curriculum committee in the summer term 2021 (again, you will not be identified!). I hope to publish some of my findings. You can see examples of my publications in *Tes* and *Private Schools* (p. 39) magazines and as a research report.

I will keep the audio recordings for one year and my transcriptions for five years after I graduate from my Doctorate in Education. These will be securely stored on the encrypted UCL server or (if I am writing for a particular publication) temporarily on my password-protected laptop (which I keep on my person or behind lock-and-key).

If you take part in the research, I will offer to share my publications with you, and I will use what I learn (in a general sense) to help me to write assemblies, letters and informative documents for future cohorts.

Do I have to take part?
It is entirely up to you whether or not you choose to take part. I hope that if you do choose to be involved then you will find it a valuable experience. Please also be reassured that if you choose not to take part, there will be no negative repercussions.

Data Protection Privacy Notice
The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in our 'general' privacy notice for participants in research studies here.

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal data is: 'Public task' (performance of a task in the public interest). I will be collecting personal data such as boarding status, number of years at the school, home location and subject interests.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If I am able to anonymize or pseudonymize the personal data you provide I will undertake this and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk.

Contact for further information
If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can reach me at:

Miss Emma Mitchell
Director of International Baccalaureate
Tel: [School number and extension]
Email: [identifier]@[school].co.uk
Address: [School address]

If you would like to be involved, please complete the following consent form and return to my office in the Sixth Form Centre by 30th September 2020.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet.

XII. Consent form

Post-16 curriculum choice: processes, values and tensions

Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete this consent form (by ticking the following statements) and return to Miss Mitchell's office at [School].

- I have read and understood the information sheet about the research.
- I agree to be interviewed and to take part in workshops.
- I understand that personal information about me such as boarding status, number of years at the school, home location and subject interests will also be collected from existing school data so that I can be described as one of the participants in this study.
- I agree for my contributions to be audio-recorded during the interview and workshop sessions.
- I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations, I will not be identified by name.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time up to 2nd July 2021, and that if I choose to do this, any data I have contributed will not be used.
- I understand that the anonymized results will be shared with [School]'s curriculum committee, with Miss Mitchell's supervisors and examiners and possibly in research publications and/or presentations.
- I agree for the data I provide to be stored for up to five years after Miss Mitchell graduates from her Doctorate in Education.
- I understand that I can contact Miss Mitchell at any time up to 2nd July 2021 and request for my data to be removed from the project database.

Student name: _____ Student signature: _____

Parent name: _____ Parent signature: _____

Date: _____

XIII. Documentary analysis summary

Title/description	Date	Format	Lead contributor(s)	Audience	Curriculum balance	Notes
What is the IB?	Always available	Video	IB Coordinator	[School] families	IB only	Description of IB programmes worldwide, [School]'s successes and Diploma curriculum
Exams cancellation and results processes	Summer 20 and 21	Qualifications awarded	UK government and IB Organisation	General public	IB and A-levels affected	Teacher-assessed grades awarded unchanged for A-levels but resulted in substantial grade inflation; IB grades based on external assessments and underwent modification by IB Assessment but resulted in improved rankings for [School] as a whole
GCSE forum	September 20	Video	Head of Year 11, Director of Sixth Form and IB Coordinator	[School] families	IB and A-levels summarised	Sections included "What is the IB?" and "Sixth Form at [School]" which perhaps highlights the IB as being unusual
Careers Convention programme – available to Fifth Form	November 20	Live online talks	[School] Careers	[School] students	A-level implied as default	Almost all speakers were previously students at [School] before it offered the IB
Tutor groups workshops (those not participating)	December 20	Emma Mitchell and selected L6 IB students gave short talks	IB Coordinator	[School] students	IB preference implied	Short presentation about IB and A-levels, Q&A opportunity and conclusion about what the IB offers more than A-levels in the [School] context (flexibility, less academic risk)
Education Update	February 21	Live online panel discussion	IB Coordinator	[School] families	IB and A-levels mentioned	The appropriateness of both routes endorsed, although the panellists had been selected to represent slightly more IB focus (admissions tutor who has spoken at UK IB conferences, former IB student, Headmaster)
Options documentation	March 21	Digital letter	Director of Sixth Form	[School] students	IB and A-levels	Brief description of each curriculum route followed by an online form in which students select their provision curriculum choices
Is the IB DP for me?	March 21	Live online talk with digital resources	IBO	IB Coordinators	IB only	IB highlights presented but not relative to national curricula
Aspirations interviews	March 21	One-to-one coaching-style meetings between senior members of staff and Year 11 students	Head of Year 11 and IB Coordinator	[School] students	IB and A-levels	The session template commences with questions to be asked of the student and lists key reminders (e.g. mathematics requirement at university). Although the staff members involved have more understanding on the whole about A-levels, students with broad interests or all-round academic aptitude are paired with staff members who are able to provide IB information.

Title/description	Date	Format	Lead contributor(s)	Audience	Curriculum balance	Notes
What would an all-IB roadmap look like?	June 21	Discussion at Curriculum Committee	IB Coordinator	[School] staff	IB preference implied	I chaired a discussion in which I asked questions of Curriculum Committee members about the logistical, curricular, human and cost implications of moving to offering solely the IB Diploma post-16
Subject offerings across both routes	August 21	Online form for students to confirm Options and individual communications	Deputy Headmaster	[School] families	IB and A-levels	Although most subjects available at [School] are offered in both IB and A-level routes, this year Japanese as a first language and English as a foreign language are exclusive to IB (along with Environmental Systems & Societies) and Art and Greek were exclusive to A-levels (along with Business, PE and Politics)
[School] website	Ongoing	Concise details of Sixth Form routes	[School] Marketing	Prospective applicants	IB preference implied	The school website makes clear that IB results relative to A-level results are stronger (in 2020 [School] was 9th globally; we are approximately 70th among UK independent schools for our A-level results) and is clear about the 'extra' requirements for A-level students that make the experience comparable with IB
A-levels in the news	Ongoing	Education articles online and in print	e.g. Tes, Telegraph, local press	General public	A-levels only	There is a debate about the future of A-levels: do they offer 'gold standard' university preparation or are examinations in just three or four subjects still fit for purpose? Recent grade inflation has meant an excess of students meeting offers for university.
IB in the news	Ongoing	Education articles online and in print	e.g. Tes, Telegraph, local press	General public	IB only	Generally receiving positive press about its broad curriculum, famous alumni, local schools' results and its suitability for a more interdisciplinary future, more recently the IB has suffered because of the method by which grades were awarded in 2020 (i.e. coursework)
Headmaster bulletins	Ongoing	Emails and blog	Headmaster	[School] staff	IB and A-levels mentioned	Headmaster often implies a preference for IB (he is considering an all-IB future for the school) and IB students generally feature more regularly than others
University websites	Ongoing	Entry requirements within course pages	University admissions tutors	Prospective applicants	IB and A-levels	Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, St Andrews, Warwick and Exeter websites discuss A-level and IB entry requirements for each course together. While a positive step for the IB to be included, there are implicit indications that it might be preferable for students who have it available at their school (i.e. "A-levels are fine")
Competitor schools' Sixth Form curricula	Ongoing	Hearsay	School publications	Prospective applicants	A-level preference implied	[School M] reverted to all-A-level (from dual-curriculum) in 2014; [School S] and [School C] offer only A-levels

Title/description	Date	Format	Lead contributor(s)	Audience	Curriculum balance	Notes
Open events and admissions materials	Ongoing	In-person Open Day and online documents	[School] Admissions	Prospective applicants	IB and A-levels	Curriculum guides highlight quantity of subjects at all ages and suggest equivalence in IB and A-levels in terms of student uptake and student destinations
Home culture	Ongoing	Informal conversations and advice	Parents	[School] students	A-level implied as default	Most students are influenced by their parents' careers, most of which will have involved A-levels. Parents choose the school for their child and [School] happens to offer the IB, so there is an uphill battle to convince them of its credibility.
Mentoring scheme	Ongoing	Informal conversations and advice	Sixth Form students	[School] students	IB and A-levels	Sixth Form students are trained to mentor younger students. Although curriculum choice is unlikely to be a topic of conversation, a balance of students from IB and A-levels are involved.
School culture	Ongoing	Informal conversations and advice	Teachers, tutors and Head of Year	[School] students	A-level preference implied	Despite the IB's presence at [School] for almost 20 years, many members of staff refer to "A-levels" as a proxy for "Sixth Form" and most studied A-levels when at school. The number of teachers who are hugely in favour of the IB is small (perhaps less than 10) leaving 200 who have no strong view or preferring A-levels, which leads to the perpetuation of misconceptions e.g. IB only for very bright, A-levels more appropriate for STEM careers.
Mumsnet	Ongoing	Online forum	General public	Parents	IB and A-levels	Questions and conversations on curriculum topics usually focus on difficulty, 'typicality', workload and subject requirements. Overall, there is reasonable balance and accuracy in the responses, with most concluding that it depends on the individual student (IB more challenging in the short term but with better gains long term).
Student Room	Ongoing	Online forum	General public	Students	IB and A-levels	The advice given by current and former Sixth Form students endorses the IB for its varied days, challenge, cohort togetherness and university preparation, but A-levels are promoted for students who know what they want to study and for those who want an 'easier' experience
IB website	Ongoing	Sections for students, schools and future candidates	IBO	General public	IB only	Public-facing sections focus on marketing the IB to prospective schools and students with particular focus on university destinations, but does this 'one stop shop' make the IB appear somehow too compact in comparison with entire governments?

Title/description	Date	Format	Lead contributor(s)	Audience	Curriculum balance	Notes
UCAS website	Ongoing	Tariff points calculator, information sheets and undergraduate course search	UCAS and university admissions tutors	General public	A-level implied as default	UCAS tariff points favour IB students (45 points equivalent to 5 A* grades and each HL equivalent to an A-level with the other components on top) but A-level entry requirements are listed above IB requirements for each course
Careers drop-in	Ongoing	Twice annual	Careers advisor	[School] students	A-level implied as default	The advice provided is of immaculate quality with respect to the jobs market, but there is less nuance provided regarding university admissions
YouTube – IB or A-levels?	Ongoing	Video search	Various	General public	IB and A-levels	Combined, videos claiming to compare the IB and A-levels have had tens of thousands of views, with an explainer solely about the IB having received over 250 000. On the whole, the videos seem quite factual and fair.
Google – IB or A-levels?	Ongoing	Web search	Various	General public	IB and A-levels	Suggests that IB provides a more academic, holistic, broad, time-consuming and internationally-minded curriculum than A-levels

XIV. Attributes of participants

These bullet points summarise the participants' attributes:

- Curricula considered ranged from solely IB (one) to solely A-levels (three), with six weighing up both the IB and A-levels. At the time of the indicative curriculum interests survey, six said they were most likely to choose IB and four A-levels, which represented a bias in acceptances of invitations to participate in favour of IB; of the six who declined, four said they were most likely to choose A-levels and two IB. A bias also emerged in the certainty with which curricula would be selected; all three who were 'certain' in the survey declined to participate, leaving a range of in my 10 interviewees of 'unsure' (two), 'only a bit' (three) and 'quite confident' (five).
- One participant was a boarder and nine were day students, roughly in line with the Year 11 population (in which 12% board).
- Years of arrival at the context school ranged from 2015 to 2019, representing one to five years of prior attendance.
- Day students' family homes are situated in a range of locations – from urban areas in central or south London, to leafy suburbs and Surrey villages. The boarding student lives in Hong Kong outside of term time. For those in England, POLAR4 quintiles representing the typicality of young people entering higher education range from 3 to 5, indicating a good likelihood of going to university (HEFCE, 2017). One student in the Year 11 population lives in a POLAR4 quintile 1 area but declined an invitation to participate in the study.
- Four participants in the study receive scholarships (either all-round or sport), which provide a reduction in school fees. Of these, two receive means-tested bursaries, which (combined with scholarships) may reduce the school fees up to 100%. This indicates that their families would not be able to afford the school fees without these reductions.
- The school has a diverse ethnic make-up and the participants in this sample represent some of this diversity. According to self-identified characteristics completed by parents or guardians upon entry to the school, five are white British, two are black Caribbean and the remaining three are Pakistani, Indian and Chinese. All participants speak English as a first language at home, except the student residing

in Hong Kong (whose family speaks Chinese). I had also invited Russian and French students to take part; they declined.

- At the time of the survey, the students who consented to one-to-one interviews had indicated a wide range of possible subjects to form part of their sixth form curricula: biology, business studies, chemistry, Chinese, classical civilisation, computing, design technology, drama, economics, English literature, geography, German, Greek, history, Japanese, Latin, mathematics, further mathematics, philosophy, physical education, physics, politics, psychology, religious studies, Spanish and sports science. The students invited to participate who were interested in taking art declined.
- The career aspirations ranged in both qualification level and specificity and included higher education subjects, the armed forces and eventual jobs.

XV. Aspirations template

Prep

Consider any subject interests and career aspirations listed. How are his mock grades – overall and by subject? What would you recommend? Check the option blocks for IB and AL.

Introduction

Introduce yourself and the aspirational nature of the meeting. Any questions?

- How are you feeling about choosing your Sixth Form curriculum?
- What thought have you given the Options process so far?
- What's important to you? What's making this difficult?
- What are your career aspirations? What else do you have to consider?

Getting the subjects right

- What subjects would you like to take in the Sixth Form?
- How have you chosen these subjects? What might be different next year?
- What were your mock results for these subjects? How do these compare with the hurdles?
- What about taking a new subject?
- How will these subjects support your career aspirations?

Getting the Maths right

- Interested in Physics, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics or PPE → Maths needed for university
- SL Maths useful for Biology, Psychology, Medicine and Chemistry
- Aspiring to Oxbridge/Imperial/LSE or a degree in Natural Sciences/Engineering → Further Maths/HL Maths essential
- Loughborough requires a 6 in Maths, English Language and a Science at (I)GCSE

Getting the route right

Boys at all rankings in the year group should consider both A Levels and the IB as potential Sixth Form routes. The primary decision must always be made on subject combinations and availability, there are other factors to consider:

Flexibility – A Level students start on four subjects and can complete the Sixth Form with three or four. IB students start and finish on six subjects, but there is great flexibility in the balance of these (and at any time).

Workload – both A Level and IB students must forge a path towards excellence. A Level students create their own super-curricular programme beyond the classroom. For IB students, completing the set work is sufficient to be distinctive.

Depth – A Level and IB Higher Level subjects offer similar depth. IB grade boundaries are often lower for the top '7' in comparison with an A*.

Results – A Level boys achieve (on average) AAB-AAA. IB boys achieve 39-40 points. While both are exceptional, it is our IB results that places us 9th worldwide.

University admission – UCAS and university websites are often misleading. Entry requirements often appear more 'doable' from the A Level perspective. But for applications in Medicine, Law,

Economics, Maths and Engineering, or at Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, Durham or LSE it is getting an **offer** that enables you to enter. IB students are more likely to get offers for competitive courses at competitive universities. No UK university requires more than two Sciences for any course.

Extras – A Level students take Critical Reflection, General Studies, Games and (often) an EPQ. IB students take Theory of Knowledge, an EE and CAS (and get three additional qualifications for their efforts).

Downsides – It is often unhelpful for boys to dwell on the 'downsides' of the IB, as this risks them missing out on a transformative Diploma experience for the sake of 5 periods per fortnight of a subject they're unsure about (in which they'd probably get 6 points!). Typically, Lower Sixth IB students have 2-3 extra taught periods per fortnight.

Next steps

- What have you learned from this session?
- What would you have liked me to ask you?
- What else would you like to know?
- What are your next steps?
- What voluntary/work experience could you acquire online?

The deadline for Options decisions is 26th February. It is possible to make two choices in both the IB and A Level routes, if necessary. Miss Mitchell will follow up to support.

XVI. IB Coordinator 'Options' involvement

In chronological order (from the student perspective), I:

- introduced the IB Diploma at the end of Year 10 to self-selecting students;
- spoke at the 'GCSE forum' panel event for all families;
- met Year 11 students (in assemblies, small invited groups or in tutor groups) to inspire interest in active choice-making and the IB Diploma;
- arranged individual meetings with dozens of families;
- organised an *Education Update* information event in the Spring that encouraged long-term thinking;
- checked the school's formal 'Options' documentation for accuracy;
- presented talks and written materials about the IB Diploma and its constituent Core components at the 'Options Evening';
- supported the Director of Sixth Form with admissions procedures for potential IB entrants;
- designed the 'Aspirations' process;
- updated my understanding of university expectations of IB students (including mathematical requirements);
- checked students' choices for potential issues at the university applications stage (for example, science without mathematics or mismatches between Higher Level or A-level subjects and ambitions) in March and again after GCSE Results Day;
- selected the best-fit subjects to offer on the IB timetable once students had provisionally made their selections (and met those where negotiations, consolations and alternatives were needed);
- coordinated an 'IB retention strategy';
- and was (I hope) a positive role model and an 'available figurehead' for Year 11.

XVII. Values from interview data

I listed instances of what might be considered values in the interview data and present these in three groups of frequency among students.

More than five students:

- Organisation/preparedness/ activity
- Enjoyment/interest/love/passion
- Focus/depth
- Breadth/variety

Four or five students:

- Grades
- Informedness/awareness
- Flexibility/open-mindedness
- Family
- Career opportunities/utility
- Prosperity/financial security
- Endeavour/perseverance
- Education/learning/scholarship
- Comfort/contentment
- Aspiration
- Expertise/understanding

One to three students:

- Competition
- Success
- Connections/communication
- Friendship
- Individuality/self-satisfaction
- Contributing/generosity/ responsibility
- Invention/discovery
- Inheritance
- Teamwork
- Certainty/future security
- Impact/completion
- Energy/confidence
- Honesty
- Global citizenship/the world
- Freedom
- Happiness/joy
- Spirituality
- Criticality
- Curiosity
- People
- Culture
- Community
- Equality
- Talent/instinct
- Sport
- Wisdom
- Acceptance
- Fairness
- Health
- Risk-taking