

Why IB? Post-16 choice processes in a dual-curriculum UK independent school

Jeff Thompson Research Award Report

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This report presents the processes experienced by students when making post-compulsory curriculum choices at the independent boys' school in South London where I was IB Coordinator until 2022. The curriculum options at the school are the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme and Advanced Levels (A-levels). Hence, the research question was: In an independent, all-boys school that teaches both A-levels and the IB Diploma, how do students experience the process of post-16 curriculum choice?

I interviewed 21 students (10 as individuals and 11 in groups of four and seven), manifesting wide-ranging attributes, 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, although the information on which the students base their decisions is often inaccurate or incomplete. Five categories of student emerged in relation to choice processes: placid, quietly assured, fixated, performing as though satisfied and thriving.

The IB encourages educators to increase uptake (IBO, 2021c). But efforts to do so without establishing how distinctive students make curriculum choices might be futile, and I argue that educators and researchers can connect to students through coaching to reveal the choice processes in a particular school setting. All 16-year-olds, when making curriculum choices, deserve to be informed about the short-term realities and awakened to the long-term implications of the decisions they make.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this research report, I explore the processes involved in post-compulsory curriculum choices at the fee-paying boys' school in South London where I was International Baccalaureate (IB) Coordinator until 2022. I interviewed Year 11 students¹ on three occasions: before, during and after the period in which they made choices between the IB Diploma Programme (IBO, 2020a) and Advanced Level qualifications (A-levels²). The research question was: In an independent, all-boys school that teaches both A-levels and the IB Diploma, how do students experience the process of post-16 curriculum choice?

I used a 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 to benefit research participants.

Globally, IB Diploma candidate numbers increased by 20% and the number of schools participating increased by 24% between May 2015 and May 2020 (IBO, 2020b). But schools in the UK have not followed these trends. Over the same time period, UK candidate numbers fell by 8% (IBO, 2015, 2020b) and the number of UK IB Diploma schools decreased by 33% – from the 144 noted by Bunnell (2015) to 96. 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 timely and relevant. This study plays a role in examining the experiences of individual students at one dual-curriculum school as they make their post-16 curriculum choices.

The proportion of students who chose the IB Diploma curriculum (henceforth referred to as “IB uptake”) at the context school ranged from 12 to 24% in the five cohorts up to 2020-21. This meant that the expense to the school was higher per student than would be the case if the proportion of students studying the IB Diploma was at least 25%, which meant the IB's long-term future at the school was uncertain. 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 sons 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 was curious, therefore, about why a relatively small number made use of the IB

¹ Students aged 15-16 are in Year 11, during which those in England, Wales and Scotland conclude Key Stage 4 by taking General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations in advance of continued study or training. In Northern Ireland, GCSE examinations are taken at the same age, but in 'Year 12'. GCSE subjects are selected at age 14 ahead of two or three years of study. They are assessed by examinations and other formats (e.g., coursework). Mathematics, English and science are compulsory. In general, students complete eight GCSEs, but this amount can vary.

² 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-levels subject courses, the results from which are accepted for entry to jobs and higher education institutions in the UK and internationally.

Diploma alternative to the national A-levels curriculum and hoped that finding out would assist me in working towards the whole-school aim to increase IB uptake.

I analysed the emerging data 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 report. However, I hope my recommendations are of direct use to curriculum leaders in comparable 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).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Choice is a “fundamental process of human existence” (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001, p. 1). Each choice is important; our choices can impact on others and the choices of others can impact on us. Choices in education can be considered as being free for individuals to make, or as virtually non-existent with socially-structured pathways in which students have no agency (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). The reality is perhaps that positions on this ‘spectrum’ depend on the resources of the students involved.

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. Although longitudinal designs counter claims that quantitative research is typically post hoc (with participants’ memories blurred or forgotten), qualitative approaches can provide richer insights into the processes involved in choice-making. If education is to be successful in producing “reflective and socially critical young people” who are developed in “personal, social and intellectual terms” (p. 8), then it follows that students need to be involved in decisions about their future curriculum.

2.1 Literature search

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) that connected with my study and to get a sense of what scale of contribution I could make with this report 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 following entry, all of the first 50 emerging studies related to macroscopic curricula or to science and mathematics: ("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)

This search term also succeeded in excluding articles that contained no empirical data (for example, essays in which the IB Diploma was compared with A-levels).

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 on post-compulsory science to reach a point of relative saturation.

2.2 Literature findings

My consideration of more than 50 articles for this literature review resulted in 19 that I discuss here in depth (Archer et al., 2017a, 2017b; Asbury & Plomin, 2017; Bennett et al., 2013; Bland & Woodworth, 2009; Blenkinsop et al., 2006; DeWitt et al., 2019; Doherty et al., 2009, 2012; Holmegaard, 2015; Jugovic, 2017; Lyons, 2006; Mathieson et al., 2020; Moulton et al., 2018; Nagy et al., 2006; Palmer, 2020; Papworth, 2020; Sheldrake et al., 2014; Shirazi, 2017). 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 Aspires2, a longitudinal UK research project studying young people's science and career aspirations (UCL, 2018).

The research design in this literature subset that is most similar to my own is by Papworth (2020). Studying participants during and after post-compulsory curriculum choice at an IB Diploma and A-levels 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, all expended time and energy. 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 with students choosing A-levels physics likely to be male, Asian (or Middle Eastern) with higher levels of cultural capital, in the top set (based on highest prior academic attainment) for science and to 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). More widely, Program for International Student Assessment data suggest that students with high, well-calibrated or underestimated self-concept in mathematics had highest achievement (Chiu & Klassen, 2010) with students from Asian regions more likely to have a bias towards modesty in their abilities with higher mathematics achievement and lower self-concept than students in the US (Chiu, 2017).

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) with a university destination taken for granted. A more “savvy” (p. 769) operation was involved. Saying this, I personally argue that the risks involved when not choosing the IB are as important to consider. One remedy to support the levelling out of ‘savviness’ 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); prior to this study, I questioned whether curriculum choice is positive (in favour of A-levels) or negative (avoidance of the IB Diploma) 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. There is little-to-no relationship between the time a student spends 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 doctoral research at my school in 2018 on the perspectives of physics teachers on the post-16 subject selection process (Mitchell, 2018); data analysis yielded 13 influences on students categorised within five themes: 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 Award³ sciences and come to accept this experience as legitimate, despite the school having most say. This legitimisation might coincide with Holmegaard (2015)'s observations of student performativity when they present their choices as appropriate, natural, well-researched and individual when the opposite was often true. And the IB has been shown, regardless of its mission statement, 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). These metrics are associated with global-mindedness, which Gándara et al. (2021) have shown to be higher for students who participate in IB Diploma and Career-Related Programmes than for country-level benchmark groups in Australia, Germany, Mexico, Spain and the US.

³ Double Science students receive two GCSE qualifications from a combination of Biology, Chemistry and Physics assessments. Triple Science students have increased course content and numbers of examinations and receive three GCSE qualifications. Triple Science offers better preparation for post-compulsory study in science, and it is viewed favourably by competitive post-16 education providers and universities.

2.3 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 capital, 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.

Here, I employ Bourdieusian terminology, 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 (1999b, 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 ...⁴ 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 with approximately 80% selecting this curriculum.

One Bourdieusian term of relevance is *habitus*, which 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 some degree of “freedom of movement” (p. 532) between “possible situations” (p. 535). The competitive realm (of curriculum choices) in which students practise these dispositions is the *field*, which, in the education context, I see as analogous to a zero-sum game because the most academically successful schools and competitive universities have limited growth in the availability of places.

The next term that I will discuss is *capital*, which is the cultural, social or economic currency that can facilitate relative advances in, rather than *reproduction* of, position or status (Rawolle & Lingard, 2013). 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). Cultural capital is 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); it 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 and the potential for students to meet or exceed the entry requirements for competitive universities, 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, affects General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) performance (Sullivan,

⁴ ... indicates omitted material.

2001). For example, 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). Furthermore, 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.

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. *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.

3 DESIGN

The problem that inspired this research was the proportion of students at my school choosing the IB Diploma as their post-16 curriculum. As it was less than 25%, the continued sustainability of the IB Diploma could not be guaranteed. I suspected the low uptake 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, I felt, were 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 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 and that’s all you can do cos you have no learning ... I will be upset. But if I pass by there and you digging graves with an education then that is what you choose to do and I must support that. (2020)

My professional view, based on 11 years of teaching post-16 students, is that at least half would achieve outcomes through the IB Diploma to match those through A-levels because of the breadth of skills gained overall, the potential for flexibility of movement between Higher and Standard Level subjects and many UK universities viewing IB Higher Level grades of 7, 6 and 5 as equivalent to A-levels grades of A*, A and B (e.g. The University of Manchester, 2022). An increased IB uptake at the school would mean providing a more internationally-minded education overall to its urban community. There is also a practical downside in the current student balance as the per-student

costs of running the IB Diploma brought into question its longevity and placed constraints on subject availability.

In this study I explored the post-16 curriculum decision process through the research question: **In an independent, all-boys school that teaches both A-levels and the IB Diploma, how do students experience the process of post-16 curriculum choice?**

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. The methodology selected was an overarching case study of the dual-curriculum independent school at which I was IB Coordinator until 2022, with student cases selected from the Year 11 cohort.

My method for data collection was interviews. As I was managing aspects of the curriculum-choice process itself, I acknowledged that I was not able to observe it through the same lens as a student, so I employed 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 were unlikely to replicate the controls that would be found in a natural sciences enquiry, coaching has peer-reviewed underpinnings and provided additional benefits to my school (through increasing the range of its use) and the qualitative research community (through trialling an interview strategy). Because of selecting the school where I work for data collection, I also maintained a research journal in which I sought to relate my personal and professional 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).

I adhered to the British Educational Research Association guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) and obtained ethical approval (including issues related to data protection regulation procedures) from UCL before data collection commenced. I attained written permission for the study from the Headmaster and 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. The student names used below are pseudonyms.

The timing of this study coincided with a period in which UK secondary school sites 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.

4 INTERVIEWS

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, because ‘good’ responses in career interviews can lead to greater ‘success’). This familiarity can also breed issues for interviewers; we might rely on routines, expect that communication will 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.

I conducted three interviews with each individual and group, following the school’s curriculum-choice launch event (October 2020), the month before student decisions were submitted (January 2021) and the month following the submission (March 2021).

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*⁵, in which I invited the participant to share how they wanted us to interact. My opening session (Appendices I and II) included the use of *Values 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 III and IV), I introduced *Lenses* (in which I asked for a word or metaphor to describe current feelings about the curriculum-choice 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 V), I asked what decisions had been made with respect to curriculum and subject choices and how the closing stages of the curriculum-choice process had gone. A *Pic-A-Card* sheet of 90 images, quotes and icons (some reproduced below) 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.

⁵ Coaching terminology presented in *italics* is from Graydin (2019). Note that *italic* text was also used to introduce the Bourdieusian vocabulary.

I took care to avoid influencing the participants' responses. 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). 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).

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. I surveyed the population for the study (the school's Year 11) to inform this selection and to enable a before-and-after comparison of initial curriculum intentions and ultimate choices. I invited 16 students from across Year 11 to my individual interviews; 10 (63%) 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 (31%) 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).

5 ANALYSIS

After concluding each set of interviews (in which I had used elements of coaching questions, *Values Visualisations*, *Lens* shift 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 12 software. Although I have experience of formal thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006), 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 question in mind to search for the recurrent categories of choice processes
2. Noting all feasible process types
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. In short, these 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 quite different mechanisms for the school enacting the decision and, accordingly, two different student perceptions; I felt these needed to be separated. ‘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 the Results chapter, where I have also included some of the values that the students shared about themselves or that I deduced. I relate the choice processes to the Literature Review in the Discussion chapter.

6 RESULTS

It was not immediately obvious how best to present the students’ curriculum choice processes for the purposes of this report. One option would have been participant-by-participant – 10 ‘pen portraits’ of choosers and their curriculum choice experiences – but this would have risked reducing the richness of their data because of space restrictions. Another consideration was by outcome, because upping IB Diploma recruitment was 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 (Table 6.1) that I have categorised the students.

Table 6.1 Process categories, participants and exemplar quotations

Process	Participants	Exemplar quotations
Placidity embodied	Patrick	<p>“I’m not really sure what exactly I need to ... what I would do.”</p> <p>“I’m not sure, probably the same as GCSEs and all the other years. I’m not really sure.”</p> <p>“I feel like maybe we haven’t got enough information yet.”</p>
Quietly assured	Quentin	<p>“Oxford or Cambridge or like Imperial?”</p> <p>“Like, maths or sciences. Yeah. Or economics maybe.”</p> <p>“I haven’t been giving it too much thought yet, but I think I’m leaning towards A-level.”</p>

Process	Participants	Exemplar quotations
	Qasim	"Do the things that you enjoy." "I think I probably got four or five out of the six IB subjects certain." "You kind of have to work out the general direction you wanted to go in the university."
Fixated	Fahad	"I feel more sort of secure knowing like where I'm heading." "It's just hard to make a decision when you enjoy two things, so much." "I double-check myself ridiculous amounts and then run out of time."
	Felix	"I do anything in my power to ensure I find the answer." "Am I sacrificing quality over quantity? Will it really help me?" "Deadlines and procrastination which have become much worse due to the lockdown ... scare me."
	Fraser	"I'm a bit torn between A-levels and IB." "Just try as many things as you can, things you might enjoy, things you might not enjoy, but you will never until you've done it." "I really wanted to do as much as I could."
Performances of satisfaction	Spencer	"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." "I think with Covid and how everything played out, I think there have been obstacles." "I've attained everything that I wanted and ... done the best I can"
Thriving	Theo	"I genuinely have no idea where I want my future to end up." "I'm happy and I feel like, you know, a bright spring flower." "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."
	Tyler	"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." "Trying new things out is literally, like, my best way to improve." "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."
	Timothy	"The subjects I chose for A-levels are perfectly suited for me." "I'm going to think more deeply about it." "Studying hard is the main thing I should do."

Table 6.2 shows how the individual and group 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 6.2 Curriculum considerations, intentions and choices for participants – ordered by final choice

Participant	Individual (I) or Group (G)	Considering A-levels (AL) or IB Diploma	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

Participant	Individual (I) or Group (G)	Considering A-levels (AL) or IB Diploma	Intention	Certainty	Final choice
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
Felix	I	AL and IB	IB	Quite confident	IB
Qasim	I	AL and IB	IB	Quite confident	IB
Fahad	I	IB	IB	Quite confident	IB
Theo	I	AL and IB	IB	Only a bit	IB
Fraser	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 choosers 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 Fahad (with apparently only the IB Diploma 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 curriculum-choice process but later switched to A-levels.

In each of the sub-sections that follow I present a paragraph on the characteristics of the category of choice process. There is an uneven distribution of participants within these categories and, although I will focus predominantly on one student case in full (including *Pic-A-Card* selections) for each category that most exemplifies it, I have sought to bolster and contrast my ideas in the Discussion chapter, which includes the other individual and group participants too⁶. 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’.

6.1 Placidity embodied

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’

⁶ Interview data for all participants can be obtained at <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10147316/>

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.

The evidence for this choice process relates to the experience of just one student. 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.

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 there was 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 goes into exams 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 curriculum-choice process meant he would make a choice about subjects, which it struck me he had 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. ... 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 curriculum-choice 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; he had a noticeable flair for only one subject (Latin) and weaknesses in none. 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 appreciated 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 coincided 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: 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.



6.2 Quietly assured

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.

The two students (Quentin and Qasim) in this category 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 received a substantial bursary that enabled him to attend the school and he is the only participant in the sample to reside in a Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) ⁷ middle-quintile area, while he was 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 had often wondered whether students with aspirations in quantitative subjects are deterred from choosing the IB Diploma 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 POLAR 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

⁷ Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) is a measure of the likelihood of young people attending higher education in the UK, organised into quintiles.

aspirations emerged from his most immediate peers. It is Qasim's interview data that I will share here.

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 curriculum-choice 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” 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.”



6.3 Fixated

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 and become fixated. 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-levels or more than three IB subjects at ‘Higher’ Level). The effects of this fixation 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 ‘fixated’ choice process have a more valuable post-16 academic experience.

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 curriculum-choice process – and sacrificing other aspects of their lives as a result: Fahad, Felix and Fraser.

Fahad was 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. Fahad 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. Felix 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 that, however more likely IB graduates from some nations might be to study science-related university courses (Davies & Guppy, 2022), it is rare for an aspiring medic at the context school to desire to study the IB, so Felix 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. Fraser was in the top academic sets for science and mathematics and received 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), Fraser 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.

Fahad, Felix and Fraser have come through the curriculum-choice 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. It is Fahad who I will focus on henceforth.

I sensed from our *Visualisation* exercise that Fahad 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. He hoped his company could "further humans" whilst being "financially sound" and one that everyone would "approve of". He also wished 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".

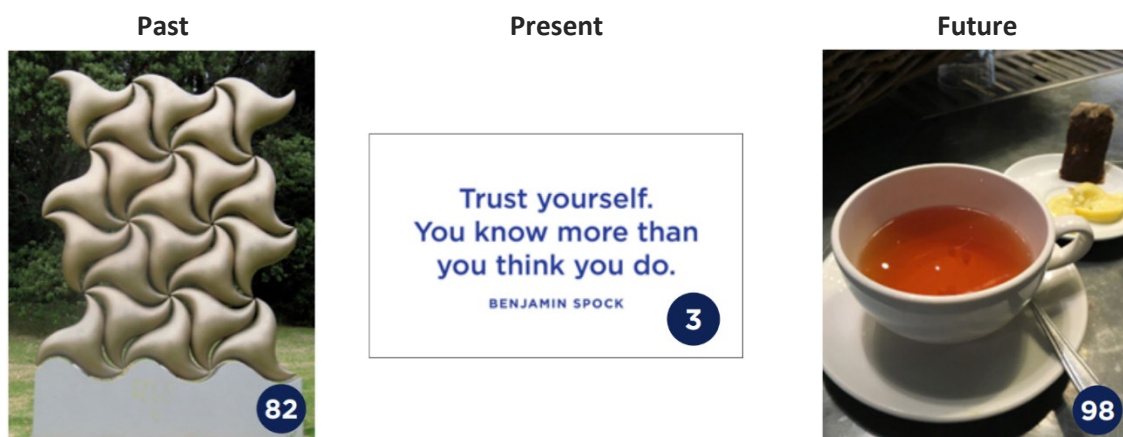
It struck me that Fahad might in some ways have needed this choice, and that he would have been inclined to invent one if it did not exist; he had been thinking about it "for a couple of years" in a bid to "feel more sort of secure knowing like where I'm heading" and, although to me he seemed far from 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. Fahad 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 Fahad 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.

Fahad 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 was hopeful that this constraint would perhaps be a positive for Fahad 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 Fahad’s two conceptions of how the curriculum-choice 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 Fahad to “[engage] in [his] work”.

It was in our final interview that I sensed that all was not quite right. Fahad 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 Fahad accepted that his peers might have made last-minute curriculum choices. The *Pic-A-Card* exercise 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 curriculum-choice process with mocks and final exams preparation, despite not attributing any blame to the school. Fahad admitted that his parents were quite involved, particularly in the decisions between computer science and chemistry and between philosophy and economics, through “a lot” of conversations. The family’s perceived utility of each subject seemed to be given higher priority than Fahad’s enjoyment or making full use of the IB Diploma to generate variety.



6.4 Performances of satisfaction

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 be for nothing if school-level constraints stand in their way.

Ironically, the more upfront the constraint, the more accepting a student and their family might be. An example of this is simply not offering a subject (like a particular modern foreign language) or curriculum route (like the IB Career-Related Programme) 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).

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.

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 had 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”. 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”.

Spencer is from a pro-IB family, with his siblings IB alumni, and he ultimately wanted to select the IB Diploma 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 curriculum-choice process when the student tallies for each subject were counted. 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-levels 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.



6.5 Thriving

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, 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.

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 received a means-tested bursary, he is Black Caribbean, and he was 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 boarded 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.

Theo is the participant with greater consideration here and, although I hesitate to suggest in 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[s] 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 curriculum-choice 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”.

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. ... 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. ... 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”.



7 DISCUSSION

In this chapter of the report, I draw connections between the interview data (for all participants, not just those featured in the prior section) and the literature. It is organised into four sections: curriculum choice as an outcome, a spectrum of processes, external factors and the journey.

7.1 Curriculum choice as an outcome

First, I will make the case that post-compulsory curriculum choices are as much an outcome of education as qualifications. The process requires commitment and flexibility, and barriers may come into play.

Fahad, who became quite fixated about choosing his curriculum, was academically eligible for all sixth-form subjects and possessed an abundance of interests. He had already spent many years considering his curriculum-choice 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 as significant in one's future career 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, Fahad'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-levels 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 (Archer et al., 2017a, 2017b; e.g. Bennett et al., 2013; DeWitt et al., 2019; Holmegaard, 2015; Jugovic, 2017; Lyons, 2006; Mathieson et al., 2020; Palmer, 2020; Sheldrake et al., 2014; Shirazi, 2017) when 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 curriculum-choice process as a welcome distraction.

Restrictions can also emerge from limitations in awareness or the national, institutional or individual context. Some students confessed to nervousness because of the importance of the decision, saw both IB Diploma and A-levels students as being "smart", but with less effort required for the same outcomes via A-levels, and revealed the different opinions they had heard from teachers. One of my interview groups 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). The IB

was therefore perceived as “not worth it”. Even the one member who was certain what choices he was going to make found that curriculum choice was consistently one of his predominant topics to think about.

7.2 A spectrum of processes

With the acknowledgement in the previous section that the choice can be made by the student or the school, here I will consider the possible breadth of experiences – in terms of both agency and engagement.

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). Some 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 the other group was between wanting to maintain a range of future pathways and choosing complementary, enjoyable subjects for which they had high aptitude.

Alternatively, we can consider the student’s engagement. 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. He expected that his teachers would teach him his subjects (and nothing more) and that he might receive good grades from his studies (with no mention of, for example, lifelong skills). 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-levels 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 curriculum-choice 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.

7.3 External factors

I believe that certain groups of students are likely occupy certain positions on these agency and engagement spectra. The associations between some external factors and choices are high.

One external factor linked to post-compulsory choices is socioeconomic status, which is highly associated with uptake of subjects (Archer et al., 2017a) and related to the IB or national curriculum decision (Asbury & Plomin, 2017). Felix (fixated, like Fahad) 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.

Another external factor is subject content (Shirazi, 2017), with success sometimes stereotypically associated with particular student groups (Archer et al., 2017a). For Tyler (thriving, 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 his enthusiasm to sports management, Tyler came to own his plan to study BTEC sports science (rather than A-levels PE) even though this was essentially forced upon him because of a concern from a school leader 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).

7.4 The journey

I have focused so far in this chapter on choice as an outcome, the spectrum of choosers and the external factors at play. Now it is high time that due attention be given to the journey between the commencement and conclusion of the choice, not least because the aim of this study is to explore processes.

I will commence by considering the third participant in the 'fixated' category, Fraser, who despite competence at managing schoolwork and examination preparations was at risk of overthinking the curriculum-choice 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. Fraser 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, he had replaced his seeking of perfectionism with a steadier approach to lifelong preparation. In short, the process for Fraser was complex.

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. Some 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 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.

A pipeline of interventions is needed that taps into and raises awareness of career aspirations (Bland & Woodworth, 2009), and which draws out each student’s own capacity to develop a choice framework. 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, 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 curriculum-choice experience. One of my interview groups of students similarly became optimistic because this big challenge forced them to grow in self-belief. 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. It is also worth remembering that 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).

8 CONCLUSION

Although every student 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 report 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 fixated behaviours; performances of satisfaction in spite of constraints; and thriving during and because of the choice.

The IB aims to improve the world (IBO, 2021b). 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, 2021a) 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, 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 average number of Diploma Programme students (88 158) to schools (3 020) is 29 (IBO, 2020b), which suggests 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. 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.

In addition to the professional relevance of this work, I hope these findings 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.

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

Note that minor edits have been amended to the interview schedules since they were used. Some Graydin content is blurred for copyright reasons.

I. Interview schedule 1 – individual

Introductions

- Self – Emma Mitchell, Director of IB at Whitgift, 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)

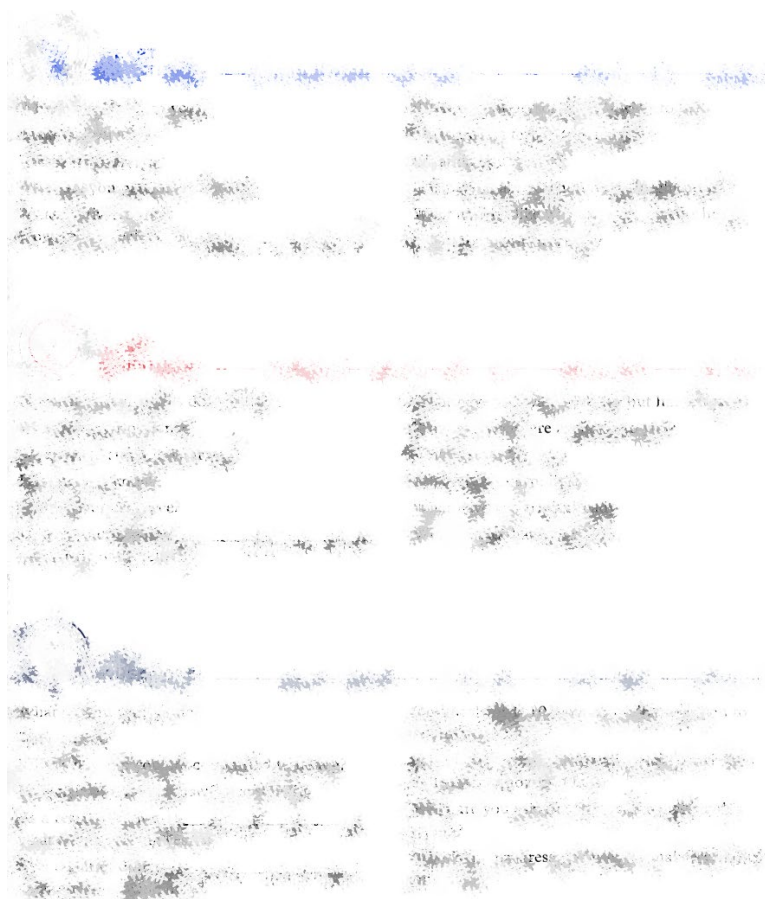
Partnership agreement

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.

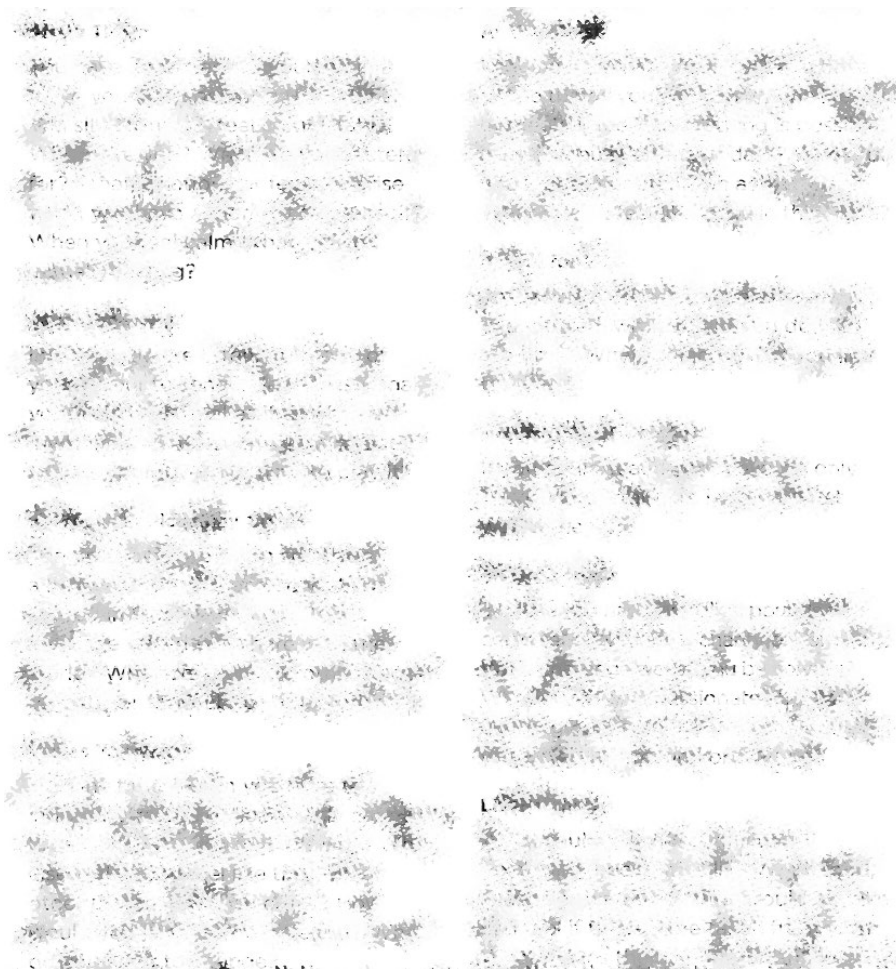
How would you like us to be together? What do you need from me? What would you like to offer?

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 Whitgift so far, subject interests and aspirations?)

II. Interview schedule 1 – group

Introductions

- Self – Emma Mitchell, Director of IB at Whitgift, 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 Whitgift 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 Whitgift?
- 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 Whitgift so far, subject interests and aspirations?)

III. 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

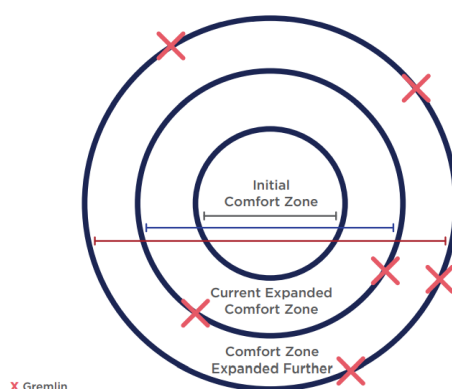
1. In a word (or metaphor), how do you currently feel and think about the Options process?
2. What are the positive implications of this current lens? What about the negatives?
3. Now let's find a new lens. Who would have an extremely different view of the Options process to you? These could be real 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?

IV. 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?

V. 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?

