An exploration of how curriculum is designed and delivered in the English primary school to provide pupils with what is needed to 'succeed in life', through an analysis of the perceptions of pupils, parents and their teachers.

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I, Paula Moses, declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the curriculum in English primary schools is designed and delivered to provide all learners with what is needed to 'succeed in life', through an analysis of the perceptions of pupils, parents, teachers and headteachers. It is intended for school leaders, curriculum designers, teachers, policymakers and researchers. The study engaged 45 pupils, 20 parents and six teachers across two primary schools in the Northwest of England, investigating how they defined success in life and how they perceived the National Curriculum in supporting this. The research was motivated by Ofsted's claim in the Education Inspection Framework (2019:6) that 'knowledge and cultural capital' provides all learners with what 'they need to succeed in life', a claim both causally unclear and insufficiently defined.

The methodology combines Husserlian phenomenology with Deweyan pragmatism in a pragmatic phenomenology designed to capture both the lived essence of 'success in life' and the practical implications for primary curriculum design. Analysis shows that success was consistently understood by participants in relational and affective terms, happiness, fairness, belonging, adaptability and contribution, rather than solely in terms of knowledge and cultural acquisition.

The thesis critiques Ofsted's narrow and vague framing of cultural capital, situating the findings in relation to Bourdieu's theory of economic, social and cultural capital (1986) and Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth. While these frameworks illuminate patterns of advantage and resilience, they cannot fully account for participants' emphasis on coherence and alignment across values, relationships and learning. Drawing also on systems thinking (Meadows, 2008; Capra and Luisi, 2014), the thesis introduces the concept of congruent capital: a dynamic, relational form of capital that emerges when curriculum, pedagogy, relationships and environments align to support learners in connecting who they are with what they know and how they act.

This original contribution advances understanding of how schools might cultivate the conditions for all pupils to flourish, offering both theoretical insight and practical implications for curriculum policy and design. It highlights the risks of leaving cultural capital ill-defined and causally overstated, while also presenting congruent capital as a constructive alternative for rethinking how success in life can be fostered in primary education.

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List of Abbreviations

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
APA	American Psychological Association
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
DEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfE	Department for Education
EEF	Education Endowment Fund
EHE	Elective Home Education
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EIF	Education Inspection Framework
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage (3,5 years old)
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education.
KS1	Key Stage One (5,7 years old)
KS2	Key Stage Two (7,11 years old)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPG	Pupil Premium Grant
PSHE	Personal, Social and Health Education
RAF	Royal Air Force
SATs	Statutory Assessment Tests
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SMSC	Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural

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Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter starts in 1.1 with an explanation of the spark which inspired my research into the concepts of success in life and the primary school curriculum in England. I then move on to outline the significance of Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (1.2) for primary schools in England. In 1.3 I then outline how my professional and personal lives have intertwined to bring me to the point where I was motivated, ready and able to carry out this research in a way that I felt would be effective and make a contribution to the sector. This is followed by 1.4, where I outline how my thesis approaches the central phenomenon of success in life and its relationship with the primary school curriculum in England. The last section, 1.5, then provides the research aim and questions which inform the structure and approach of the whole project.

1.1 The spark

As a primary school teacher and leader in England between the years 2007–2019, I witnessed and experienced a significant amount of change within the primary school system, informing how teaching and learning were delivered or designed. These changes culminated in a new National Curriculum (DfE, 2013a) and a new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) in 2019 from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2019). This Framework (EIF) stated, in the section entitled *Intent* which provides the criteria used to judge the quality of education provided by a school, that school leaders: '*take on or construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life' (Ofsted, 2019:6).* Encountering this statement prompted me to question and seek a deeper understanding of the key concepts outlined: *success in life*, *knowledge and cultural capital as curriculum* and the idea of *all learners*, and to explore the implied causal relationship between them. In particular, I was curious to find out why the concepts of knowledge and cultural capital seemed to be interchangeable and held such a prominent position in the expectations placed on schools to provide a good quality curriculum for all learners at primary level in England and ultimately provide them with what is needed for success in life (Ofsted, 2019:6). These three concepts are discussed in more detail in 1.4 and again in the literature review (2.2, 2.3 and 2.4).

1.2 The significance of Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (EIF)

Ofsted is a central actor in shaping educational practice in England and therefore carries particular significance for this thesis. As the non-ministerial government department responsible for inspecting schools, its judgements carry substantial weight: inspection outcomes affect school reputation, parental choice, staff morale and in some cases institutional viability. For primary schools in England, which educate children between the ages of five and eleven, Ofsted's frameworks often determine what is prioritised in the curriculum and how teachers or leaders interpret their professional responsibilities. In this sense, Ofsted is not merely a monitoring body but an institution that actively constructs what counts as quality education and, by extension, it could be argued, what counts as success in life.

The introduction of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) in 2019 marked a significant shift in Ofsted's discourse. Moving away from a narrow emphasis on attainment data, the EIF sought to reassert the importance of the curriculum, organised around the triad of intent, implementation, and impact. Within this framework, schools are required to demonstrate not only what they intend pupils to learn, but how learning is sequenced and delivered, and what outcomes can be evidenced. The EIF also introduced cultural capital as a central concept, defining it as 'the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens' (Ofsted, 2019:6). In practice, this positioned schools as responsible for identifying, transmitting and evidencing the cultural resources which may be considered valuable by inspectors. This apparent broadening of scope was presented by Ofsted as an attempt to move inspection beyond headline outcomes and to 'rebalance inspection towards the substance of education, not just results' (Spielman, 2019). Commentators sympathetic to this aim welcomed the framework for challenging the reductive use of attainment data and for encouraging schools to reflect more carefully on the coherence of their curriculum (O'Leary & Wood, 2017).

Yet the EIF (Ofsted, 2019) has also been subject to considerable critique. Scholars have pointed out that inspection continues to generate high-stakes pressures, reinforcing performativity and compliance rather than professional autonomy (Perryman, 2023; Courtney, 2016). The House of Commons Education Committee (HCEC, 2023) likewise reported that inspections contribute substantially to teacher stress and workload, with several high-profile cases drawing public attention to their damaging effects on wellbeing. Other research (Perryman, 2023, Wilkins, 2011;

Earley, 2013) also suggests that schools frequently adapt their practices in anticipation of inspection, even when such changes may narrow rather than broaden educational experience. In this sense, Ofsted's frameworks do not simply reflect the curriculum as it exists in schools but shape it through powerful anticipatory effects.

Ofsted's role in the reproduction of educational inequality has also been widely debated (Perryman et al, 2023). It could be suggested that by defining knowledge in ways that elevate certain forms of cultural capital and experience, the EIF risks presenting a narrow, homogenised vision of what it means to be an 'educated citizen'. Critics argue (Reay, 2004; Sullivan, 2001) that this type of regulation fails to recognise the diverse cultural resources children bring to school and instead positions schools to deliver a deficit-oriented model where some pupils' backgrounds are viewed as lacking which aligns directly with the questions explored in this thesis, particularly the extent to which schools should or could provide '*all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs'* with *'the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life' (Ofsted, 2019:6).*

Taken together, these debates illustrate why Ofsted is so significant for my research. It represents not only a powerful regulatory mechanism but also a cultural authority that shapes how schools, teachers and pupils understand curriculum and success in life. Ofsted's frameworks provide the backdrop against which participants' voices in my research can be interpreted, and its invocation of cultural capital in the EIF provides the direct point of connection to the central theoretical problem of this thesis and allows a critique of how inspection priorities intersect with the lived experiences, dispositions, and aspirations of the pupils, parents, and teachers in my research.

1.3 How the professional and personal contexts intertwine

I have been interested in 'what and how' we learn at school for many years. It could be suggested that my passion for this work started, perhaps unconsciously, when I was a school pupil. As a child of the Armed Forces, I attended many schools, six settings by the time I was eight, with the final junior school being an RAF subsidised place at a boys' boarding school which had just started taking girls. From there I attended a private secondary school for girls until I was 15 and then moved again, two months before my GCSEs, to the local state secondary where I spent two years and completed my education to the end of A Levels. Over this time, I witnessed both subtle and vast differences across the different settings, within social classes, pupil aspirations, parental expectations, access to opportunity and privilege, as well as the styles and expectations of teachers for the outcomes of their pupils. This made me develop an awareness that education is not a simple transaction between teacher to pupil and that there could be other factors at play.

From a professional perspective, my interest started through my experience of working as a National Manager for a Sector Skills Council, 2000-2007. Here I liaised between the UK film industry and the DCMS (Department for Culture, Media and Sport) to ensure that skills funding was accurately informed by industry intelligence and research. I was subsequently involved in a range of initiatives to facilitate the building of relevant higher education courses, technical apprenticeships and short courses for professionals, which combined practical knowledge alongside opportunities to work with individuals who knew the industry. During this time there were repeated calls from employers within these industries for young people or potential new entrants 'not to specialise too early and to be made aware of the importance of how subjects and disciplines relate to each other' (Hirsch, 2004). The employers also wanted to take on people who were flexible team players and willing to learn new software or skills on the job and often through trial and error. Senior professionals in the film and digital industries often stated that the new entrants to the industry lacked these abilities and questioned the value of what was provided at school and University. This juxtaposition between what employers were looking for and what education providers thought was necessary for their students was fascinating to me, and in the latter part of my time at Skillset I increasingly questioned if a school curriculum could ever offer employers what was needed in some of the most creative, lucrative, and desired by young people, industries.

In 2007, I decided to train to be a primary school teacher and over the next twelve years (2007-2019) as a teacher and leader, I witnessed and experienced a significant amount of change within the primary school system in England.

Over the years since the inception of the National Curriculum in 1988 (Whitty, 2008), it was revised in 1999 (DfEE and QCA, 1999) and regularly added to through The National Strategies and Government guidance via quasi-statutory or regulatory bodies, unions and membership organisations (DfE, 2011). There were also two separate independent reviews of the primary curriculum at this time, one commissioned in January 2008 by the Labour Government and led by Jim Rose, and the other led by Robin Alexander from Cambridge University alongside the Esmée Fairburn Foundation (Rose, 2009; Alexander, 2010). These reviews drew on thousands of published sources as well as interviews with leading educationalists. Both reviews (Rose, 2009; Alexander, 2010) emphasised the need for a holistic, child centred approach to primary education, advocating for a balanced curriculum that addresses both academic standards and the diverse developmental needs of children, while also highlighting the importance of early identification and intervention for communication and literacy difficulties, including dyslexia. Despite the considerable time spent on these reviews, the incoming Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government decided not to proceed with the recommendations of the Rose Report 'to the immense frustration of many headteachers and practitioners who had welcomed its recommendations' (Duncan, 2010). The same decision was made not to proceed with the findings of the Alexander Review (Alexander, 2010) and instead work started on a new National Curriculum led by Michael Gove MP who was Secretary of State for Education from 2010 to 2014 (DfE, 2013a).

Michael Gove MP was clear in his belief that the National Curriculum in England needed to change and claimed that the outgoing Labour Government had failed to improve the system, stating at a House of Commons Education Select Committee in 2010 that 'in effect, rich thick kids do better than poor clever children when they arrive at school [and] the situation as they go through [the education system] gets worse' (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2010). These comments were a precursor to his announcement of the restructure of the secondary and primary curricula at the Conservative party conference of the same year, Gove continued to say that a major overhaul was needed because education had been 'undermined by left wing ideologues who

believed schools should not be doing anything so old-fashioned as passing on knowledge, requiring children to work hard, or immersing them in anything like dates in history or times tables in mathematics' with the result, he added, that 'countless children [had been] condemned to a prison house of ignorance' (Gove, 2010).

Concurrent to these significant structural changes over 12 years, I was immersed in professional development and action research which gave me a useful insight into how the primary school curriculum in England was developing. During this time, between 2007-2019, I completed my Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), Middle and Senior School leadership National Qualifications (NPQML and SL), a Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL), as well as my National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Furthermore, from 2014 onwards, when the new National Curriculum was rolling out in England, I observed many changes in how teachers were expected to plan, deliver and assess the curriculum. It could be argued that some changes did positively raise standards, yet the most notable differences I observed were the increased quantities of knowledge and information that were, and still are, required to be transmitted and retained, putting increased pressure on pupils and their teachers. Other significant changes for schools at this time were the introduction, by the Coalition Government (2010-2014), of the Pupil Premium funding in 2011, followed by High Needs funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in 2013. These initiatives provided schools with additional funding in recognition of the number of children categorised as SEND or disadvantaged, which included children from low-income families or children in care, adopted from care or having a parent serving in the armed forces (Ofsted, 2012). This is relevant to my thesis and will be discussed later in 2.4, as disadvantaged and SEND pupils are identified in the Ofsted statement above as particularly in need of the 'knowledge and cultural capital' if they are to have what is needed 'to succeed in life' (Ofsted, 2019:6).

Alongside the changes made to the curriculum, teachers and schools also received both statutory and non-statutory guidance on pedagogy and on managing pupil behaviour, with the stated aim of improving academic and personal progress (Husbands, 2015). As a headteacher, talent-spotted and trained in 2015 through the Future Leaders programme (then funded by Ark Schools), I was encouraged to lead with moral purpose and to raise aspirations among my most disadvantaged

pupils, in line with Ark's vision that 'every child, regardless of their background, should have the support and opportunities they need to reach their potential' (Heller, 2023). Towards the end of my time as a primary teacher and leader, I increasingly questioned both the purpose of the revised 2014 National Curriculum and its impact on staff and pupils. In 2019, I chose to leave full-time employment within the primary education system and to establish a Community Interest Company dedicated to teacher training and the delivery of whole-school, publicly funded projects in pedagogy and sustainability. This change of direction also enabled me to bring together different threads of my professional and personal experience and to embark on this research project in 2020.

The combination of my professional and personal experience provides a distinctive standpoint from which to develop this thesis. The phenomenological and philosophical methodology outlined in 3.2 emphasises the importance of intentionality and the co-constitutive relationship between researcher and phenomenon (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Within this framework, reflexivity operates as a deliberate and ongoing examination of how prior experiences, values and assumptions shape the research process, from the formulation of questions to the analysis of participants' accounts. My own positionality is therefore not treated as a source of bias to be eliminated, but as a methodological resource that can enrich interpretation. As Finlay (2002; 2008) argues, reflexivity is best understood as a dynamic, dialogic process that enhances depth and rigour by making the researcher's influence explicit rather than concealing it behind claims of neutrality. This approach aligns with the phenomenological practice of 'bracketing' (epoché), discussed further in 3.2.5, in which the researcher seeks to set aside presuppositions in order to engage authentically with participants' perspectives, while recognising that complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable. By foregrounding reflexivity in this way, the research acknowledges the inseparability of researcher and researched and, as I will suggest in Chapter Three, strengthens both the trustworthiness and the ethical integrity of the study.

1.4 Key Concepts

As previously explained, the three key concepts for my research are: *success in life*, *knowledge and cultural capital as curriculum* and *all learners* taken from the statement in the Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019:6) (1.1). However, this statement was not defined or referenced when it was first released in 2019 or when it was updated in 2023 (Ofsted, 2019:6) which led me to inquire whether there was a definition somewhere, or a societal understanding that I had missed, which would explain how a school curriculum can provide pupils with what is needed to succeed in life. It also raised the question for me that perhaps the term success in life within Ofsted's statement (Ofsted, 2019:6) was being used here as a rhetorical device, one that is increasingly invoked not only by policymakers, but also by school leaders, teachers, educational commentators and wider society. However, I felt that using the phrase success in life in this way can appear at first straightforward to understand, yet its meaning can be deceptive as it is so rarely interrogated or defined, which I feared can lead to ambiguity or loss of meaning. Furthermore, I was also concerned that the term success in life carries with it a range of implicit assumptions, both about what success in life entails and about what others understand it to mean. It also started to feel that the ambiguity and seeming alliance or interchangeability between the terms knowledge and cultural capital could lead to differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations among educators and policymakers and influence the quality of education for all learners.

In the meantime, I now need to acknowledge the work of the French philosopher Bourdieu as his signature concept of cultural capital is also used by the Ofsted guidance under investigation in this thesis (Ofsted, 2019:6). However, a key aspect of Bourdieu's work on cultural capital, relevant to my thesis, is that he explains that the development of his theory was also a realisation which made clear to him 'the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes' (1986:243) regardless of ability. Therefore, to explore the concept of cultural capital within education effectively I start here with the seminal article *The Forms of Capital* (Bourdieu, 1986) where Bourdieu identifies three primary forms of capital, economic, cultural and social, and conceptualises them as accumulations that, when appropriated by individuals or groups, can be used to secure social advantage. Economic capital refers to material assets and financial resources, which are directly convertible into money and property rights. Cultural capital exists in three

distinct forms: the embodied state, comprising long lasting dispositions and competencies such as language, tastes, and ways of being, developed through socialisation and family; the objectified state, referring to cultural goods like books, artworks, or instruments or technology; and the institutionalised state, most notably represented by educational qualifications, which serve to legitimise and convert cultural competencies into recognised status Bourdieu explains that we embody cultural capital through a process of socialisation in the family or home and education which is then reflected in the way we behave and interact with society. Objectified cultural capital represents the cultural 'goods' accumulated in life, for example, books, pictures or machines, and institutionalised cultural capital is the qualifications acquired through education, or the titles bestowed through our work, which in turn infer embodied cultural capital and can often be converted into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986:201). Finally, social capital denotes the resources embedded within networks of relationships and group membership, which can be mobilised to secure advantage of which Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field* are central. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990)

Habitus and field provide a theoretical framework for understanding how pupils' orientations towards success are shaped by their social positioning and by the structures and expectations of the school system. Habitus refers to the deeply internalised dispositions, values and ways of being that individuals develop through their social and cultural experiences. It is not fixed but shaped over time, often unconsciously, by family background, schooling, and social interactions (Bourdieu, 1977:72; Reay, 2004:432). The concept of field, in contrast, describes the social spaces, such as a school or an education system, in which individuals act, compete and relate to one another according to established norms, hierarchies and rules of value (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:97). These concepts are vital for my research because they illuminate the ways in which dominant educational discourses, particularly those embedded in curriculum policy, interact with the lived experiences and aspirations of pupils, parents and teachers. They help explain why some pupils may feel more at home in school, or better able to access valued forms of capital, while others may struggle to find recognition for their knowledge, ways of speaking, or aspirations. In particular, the concept of habitus helps to frame the disjuncture between the official curriculum's definition of success and the more diverse and personally meaningful definitions expressed by participants in this research.

Dumais (2002:46) develops this argument and our understanding further by proposing that despite the focus on cultural capital by many policy makers, it is habitus which has a more significant impact on a child's future. She describes the role of habitus as 'one's disposition (formed by your family life) which influences the actions that one takes…habitus comes to determine what is possible and what is not possible for one's life and develops aspirations and practices accordingly' (Dumais, 2002:46). Grenfell (2008) builds on this by reinforcing the theory from Bourdieu of the invisible nature of the advantage held by children within the dominant cultural capital, gained through their homelife, 'habitus develops a momentum that can generate practices for some time after the original conditions which shaped it have vanished' Grenfell (2008:51,52). I understand that Bourdieu wants us to acknowledge the complexity and dynamic nature of social phenomena, in particular the relationships between and within his key theories of field, habitus and capital which are woven throughout this thesis (Wacquant, 1989:16) and that these social entities are not static but evolve and change through their relational interactions over time. Bourdieu also introduces the concept of *symbolic capital*, which refers to the form that other capitals take when they are perceived as legitimate and granted recognition, often serving to reinforce existing hierarchies.

All the forms of capital described by Bourdieu are not only interrelated but also deeply implicated in the reproduction of social inequality through their conversion and transmission across generations (Bourdieu, 1986:241). Furthermore, when focussing on cultural capital (as that is the one identified by Ofsted) Bourdieu makes clear that the attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviours which an individual or demographic possess is not always valued in the same way by society (Bourdieu, 2010:9), which caused me to ask if there was a particular type of cultural capital that held more value within the National Curriculum for primary schools in England (2013). It could be argued that there is a liminal space between curriculum content and learners which is also relevant to cultural capital as it comprises a complex mix of knowledge acquired, and dispositions gained through the osmosis which occurs in early childhood, potentially impacting on a curriculum's ability to consistently impart what is needed to succeed in life.

However, the nearest thing to a definition of knowledge and cultural capital from the Department for Education (DfE, 2013a:6) and later by Ofsted was that a curriculum should not only provide learners with what is 'needed to succeed in life' (Ofsted, 2019:6) but also 'provide pupils with an

introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens...to the best that has been thought and said and [that they] develop an appreciation of human creativity and achievement'(DfE, 2013a:4). Instead of clarifying the concepts this led me to ask what could be described as the essential or best knowledge for a primary school curriculum and this is explored more deeply in 2.3. This thought also then led me to question the use of the phrase 'the best that has been thought and said' by the DfE (2013a) which has been adapted from the phrase 'thought and known' which was written by the school inspector Matthew Arnold (1822; 1888) in his book *Culture and Anarchy.* Richardson (2022) explains that Arnold's idea was radical at the time and in response to the 'monitorial system' of education which worked well for rote learning and which Arnold thought was to 'teach down to the level of inferior classes'. Instead, he advocated for an approach that should enlighten learners and 'make all live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light' where ideas would 'nourish and not bound' them so that we can see things as they really are' (Richardson, 2022). However, some confusion arises when the phrase from Arnold is then blended with the more recent education writer, E.D Hirsch, best known for his influential work on founding the Core Knowledge Foundation (1986) and whom Nick Gibb MP, Minister for Schools between 2010-12, 2015-2021 and again from 2022, explains significantly influenced his thinking when forming education policy in England and that for him, Hirsch is someone who 'gets it when it comes to curriculum and pedagogy' (Gibb, 2015:12). Richardson (2022) explains that the original vision of 'best' from Arnold advocated for the inclusion of the new knowledge that was rapidly being generated in fields such science, maths, and philosophy' (Richardson, 2022). However, it could be argued that the use of Hirsch's key theory, cultural literacy, by the DfE has placed the emphasis on the historical canon of literature, art and music, and not the new knowledge that is being rapidly generated today. There has also been a move towards the favouring of the transmission of curriculum content over the 'methods of instruction' in line with Hirsch's approach (1983:159). Any tension between curriculum content and pedagogy will be discussed in more detail in 2.3. I include this policy and intellectual context here because it helps to explain both my professional standpoint and my motivation for the research. As a teacher and leader during this period of reform, I experienced first-hand how these ideas filtered into schools and influenced practice, shaping the questions I later chose to pursue. In Chapter Two (2.3.3), I return to these thinkers and policy shifts in more detail, locating them within the wider literature on curriculum

design and cultural capital. There, my focus is on analysing how Hirsch's cultural literacy, Gove's reforms and Ofsted's invocation of 'knowledge and cultural capital' frame the curriculum in theoretical and policy terms. By setting out the background in this chapter, and then interrogating it in Chapter Two, I seek to show both why these debates matter personally and professionally, and how they structure the problem space that this thesis addresses. Finally, when thinking about the concept of cultural capital alongside that of 'all learners' (a term also used by Ofsted, 2019:6) question marks arise as to why the Ofsted statement highlights that some pupils are 'particularly' in need of 'knowledge and cultural capital' to 'succeed in life' and they are identified as 'the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs' (Ofsted, 2023a:6). Therefore, I seek throughout the literature, in 2.4, and the findings in Chapter Four, for elucidation on why these learners in particular are in need of knowledge and cultural capital and what the concept all learners might mean for the design of the National Curriculum for primary schools in England.

Ultimately, however, I am curious to unpick the definite nature of the term success in life used by Ofsted in the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (2019) instead of perhaps the term 'a successful life', 'success at school' or simply 'success'. Duckworth et al. (2012:1) describe two sides to the concept of success namely, subjective, which they describe as 'how we think and feel about our own lives' and objective which is 'how we stack up to others according to widely held standards'. I was unclear after reading Ofsted (2019) as to whether 'success in life' meant an end point in a person's life through achieving a goal or if it meant a way of living a life. I was also aware at the outset of this research that the concept of success in life could be highly subjective for many individuals, but its use in policy suggested that there may be something definite or universally attainable about it. This distinction raised questions in my mind about whether success can indeed be a suitable or attainable goal for any curriculum, and I wondered how a school leader or curriculum designer may approach 'success in life' as a goal or objective of a curriculum they were constructing. Therefore, through the data gathering stage of my research I was motivated to find out from the research participants the extent to which they perceive the National Curriculum for primary schools in England as equipping them with the tools they needed for success in life. I also asked them to outline their perceptions of success in life to explore its status as a purely subjective concept or if there exist any 'objective truths or ubiquitous traits' that resonate with a

broad spectrum of individuals and could serve as a foundational basis for the development of a primary school curriculum in England (Duckworth, 2012:1).

1.5 Research Aim and Questions

Therefore, in recognition of the wide-ranging nature of the concepts of *success in life*, *knowledge and cultural capital as curriculum* and the idea of *all learners* discussed above, and to ensure that a coherent contribution can be made by this research, I have identified the following aim and research questions to guide my work systematically.

Research Aim: An exploration of how curriculum is designed and delivered in the English primary school to provide all learners with what is needed to 'succeed in life', through an analysis of the perceptions of pupils, parents, and their teachers.

Q1: What are the established models of 'success in life' promoted through education policy in England?

Q2: What are the perceptions of pupils, parents and their teachers in English primary schools of what constitutes 'success in life'?

Q3: What are the perceptions of pupils, parents and their teachers in English primary schools of the role of the National Curriculum for primary schools in England.in achieving 'success in life'?

Q4: How do these perceptions above converge with established models of success and what analysis could be provided when offering a critique of the future of the National Curriculum for primary schools in England?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in 1.1, the spark for my research was Ofsted's (2019:6) directive that all learners should be provided, through the curriculum, with the 'knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life'. This phrase, embedded in the Education Inspection Framework (EIF, 2019), raised fundamental questions for me: what does it mean to succeed in life, and how can schools ensure that every learner is equipped to achieve that goal through the curriculum they provide? Drawing on my professional experience in primary schools (1.3), I also recognised a potential tension between Ofsted's ambition and the many competing demands of running a primary school and delivering the wide-ranging goals of classroom practice. In particular, I became concerned with how school leaders and teachers are expected to meet this aim of providing the 'knowledge and cultural capital needed for success in life' (Ofsted, 2019:6) without a shared or critically developed understanding of what success in life means for them and their learners.

In the early stages of my research, I started to survey a broad range of literature relating to the key concept of success in life so that I could situate these concerns within existing scholarly and policy debates. However, the literature was vast, covering philosophy, psychology, sociology and other disciplines, and I was mindful not to impose my own assumptions about what success in life should or could mean through selective coverage. Instead of beginning with a fixed theoretical framework, I structured the review so that it both draws on foundational concepts introduced in 1.4 and develops in response to patterns that emerged from the detailed data in Chapter Four. In this way, the literature review critically examines how success in life is conceptualised in policy, how knowledge and cultural capital have been framed within curriculum debates, and how these discourses relate to social justice and the agency of teachers and learners. It thus provides a conceptual grounding for the findings in Chapter Four and prepares the way for their synthesis in Chapter Five, where I discuss how participant responses both align with and challenge these dominant policy narratives.

2.2 Success in life

2.2.1 Defining success in life: policy ambiguity, historical perspectives and discourse

The Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019) presents success in life as a key aim for pupils, yet neither Ofsted nor the DfE define the term. This absence of definition of success in life means that the phrase functions as what Ball (2013) calls a 'floating signifier' which is compelling, emotive and regulatory, yet open to multiple interpretations. It could be argued that without shared clarity, definitions of the term success in life could default to statutory accountability measures such as academic attainment, employability, and behavioural conformity. Such narrowing risks overlooking the broader aims of education, a concern echoed in critiques of data-driven accountability (Bradbury et al., 2025; Perryman et al., 2023) and of meritocratic assumptions that individual effort alone can overcome structural barriers (Littler, 2017; Reay, 2017) which will be discussed later in 2.2.5. These tensions are also evident in my participants' accounts in 4.2 and are explored further in 5.2.4.

Beyond policy discourse, success in life has been understood in multiple ways across time and disciplines. Historically, qualities associated with success have shifted from the medieval suspicion of worldly pride, through the Renaissance celebration of individuality, to the pragmatist view of success as solving life's problems (Kayukov, 2016). Contemporary perspectives emphasise its complexity and subjectivity, incorporating material, relational, and personal dimensions (Stroyanovska et al, 2016; 2021). Success may combine subjective well-being with objective indicators such as health, security, and social support (Diener, 2000), requiring what Kayukov calls an 'interdependence' of the two. Maslow's (1987) concept of self-actualisation, becoming all 'one is capable of becoming', captures this synthesis, while recognising that fulfilment varies by individual. As shown in 4.2, my participants' views reflected many of these dimensions yet also revealed a distinct emphasis on living in alignment with one's values and interests, without pressure to conform. This perception of success in life, not fully captured by existing models, is exemplified through the findings in 4.2.4 and will be revisited throughout the discussion culminating in 5.7.

2.2.2 Accountability: Ofsted inspection and the assessment of pupils

Here I build on the introduction in 1.2 about the significance of Ofsted to outline the role of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (Ofsted, 2019) and its impact on schools. In the English primary system, Ofsted ratings are treated as definitive indicators of school success. Headteachers and School leadership teams work to align provision to the EIF while delivering the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013a) and meeting the Headteachers' Standards (DfE, 2020). The four areas inspected are quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development and School leadership and management, with safeguarding as a measure of overall effectiveness. It can be argued that these judgements exert a significant influence reputation, recruitment, staff morale and strategic direction of schools and school leaders. Pratt (2016) and Ball (2017) argue that Ofsted operates as a central mechanism of accountability in a system shaped by neoliberal performativity. Perryman et al. (2023) find that schools often adopt performative practices to present themselves as good for inspectors rather than to improve learning, focusing on data, rehearsed lessons and staged school leadership conversations, arguing that such practices also exert pressure on curriculum content, pedagogy and teacher identity. Assessment of learners is central to this accountability culture within schools inspected by Ofsted. In particular, the statutory primary assessments which incorporate the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, the Phonics Screening Check, the Multiplication Tables Check and Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) at the end of Key Stage 2 (DfE, 2023a; 2024b). These high-stakes tests then provide the main data for measuring or judging pupil progress, school performance and school leadership effectiveness. Critics argue that this programme of assessment narrows the curriculum and harms pupil wellbeing, especially for disadvantaged pupils (Wyse, Bradbury and Trollope, 2022; Quick, 2024a). Black and Wiliam (2018) add to this by arguing that classroom assessment should be inseparable from pedagogy, oriented towards learning rather than judgement. Their emphasis on formative practices highlights how assessment conducted in this way can foster motivation and deepen understanding, in contrast to the narrowing effects of summative accountability frameworks (Leenknecht et al, 2021).

. Teachers in my research echoed these concerns, describing frustration that their roles were at odds with their professional values and their pupils' broader needs (4.4). Ball (2003) describes this contradiction as a form of 'values schizophrenia', created by performativity regimes that force teachers to act against their professional beliefs. In such contexts, professional identity and

wellbeing become compromised, as agency is reduced to compliance with external accountability demands rather than alignment with pedagogical values. Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) describe a rise of datafication that positions teachers as data managers, while Youdell (2011) and Simpson (2023) highlight the exclusionary effects of assessment cultures on pupils whose linguistic, cultural or experiential capital falls outside dominant norms. This dynamic not only constrains teachers but also reshapes the ways success in life is defined by all involved and how it is enacted in schools, narrowing it to what is in line with and measurable by inspection and assessment frameworks.

Furthermore, research shows that pupils with lower attainment are often withdrawn from arts and humanities to focus on extra test preparation (Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan, 2023), reducing access to broader cultural and social capital experiences which are part of the school day or curriculum and potentially undermining the self-perception and motivation of these learners (Berliner, 2011). The impact on self-perception is significant, Cigman (2001) warns that early comparisons and narrowly defined measures of ability can cause an unfair situation where pupils disengage from systems they perceive as unattainable, particularly when success is presented as binary, opposite only to failure. Jerrim (2021) identifies a clear link between high-stakes SATs preparation and pupil anxiety, findings reflected in my data where teachers reported reduced autonomy and weakened relationships with pupils. Despite this evidence, the 2022 White Paper *Opportunity for All* reinforces a performative model of success, promoting high-quality assessment and targeted interventions (DfE, 2022b). These often involve ability grouping, triage, and intensive preparation, practices shown to affect identity formation and link academic value to behavioural compliance (Bradbury, Braun and Quick, 2021; Kirby, 2019; Dyson, 2020). In response, Mueller (2024) advocates for more authentic, project-based assessment, while Wyse and Ferrari (2015) identify England as an outlier in its emphasis on testing and limited commitment to creativity. Berliner (2011) and Deci and Ryan (2000) frame such regimes as undermining autonomy, relatedness and competence, key to wellbeing and long-term success in life. These accountability practices therefore shape not only what teachers can do, but also how pupils come to view themselves as learners. As a consequence, my research participants told me that the emphasis on test performance and compliance often feeds directly into children's dispositions, abilities and self-perceptions, influencing the embodied characteristics through which success in life is imagined and

pursued. The next section, therefore, turns to the literature about the type of person who succeeds in life, guided by the embodied characteristics and personal abilities identified in my research by my research participants, and critically examines how far the English primary curriculum supports their development.

2.2.3 Embodied characteristics and perceived abilities of success in life

When considering the type of person who succeeds in life I started with Bourdieu's (1986:243) theory of cultural capital of which he describes the embodied element as the 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body'. Importantly, Bourdieu also describes embodied cultural capital as one of the most problematic to define, as he believed it to be personally inculcated or assimilated over a long period of time through a person's habitus and cannot be bought or delegated (1986:245) (1.4). However, elements of embodied cultural capital appeared frequently in my participants' responses, encompassing qualities from happiness and confidence, attitudes to learning, physical behaviour and personality. Some align with established policy frameworks or psychological theories, while others could be argued to challenge narrow, imposed definitions of success promoted through the curriculum and inspection frameworks being discussed here. Some could be thought of as teachable through a primary school setting or curriculum, whereas others may be subject to inculcation or assimilation over a long period of time as cautioned by Bourdieu (1986). The flow of this section therefore follows the embodied elements prevalent in my participants' accounts in 4.2.3.3 grouped in the two areas identified by Bourdieu of 'mind and body', with theory used to interrogate and contextualise these perspectives which will be returned to in 5.2.

2.2.3.1 Dispositions of the mind

Happiness

The concept of happiness is broad and connects to both philosophy and psychology. In education Noddings (2003) acknowledges the prominence of happiness as a key concern for parents when thinking about their children and raises the question of what the education system may teach if it were to have happiness as a goal, a question I will return to in 5.1.3. In psychology, Stroyanovska et al. (2021:146) identify an energetic state as a characteristic of a person who has achieved success in life, while Vandepitte et al. (2023:3332) describe subjective wellbeing as the scientific

counterpart of happiness, noting that happy people live longer and healthier lives, have more rewarding and stable relationships, and are more productive and resilient.

The philosophical roots of happiness as a goal of education and life can be traced to Aristotle's notion of flourishing which scholars such as Waterman (2008:242) conceptualise as a balance between hedonia (pleasure and comfort) and eudaimonia (realising one's potential). Clarke and Platt (2023:964) summarise these as 'feeling good' and 'doing good' respectively. For Aristotle, flourishing is related to experiences associated with doing what is worth doing and having what is worth having and is considered the ultimate goal of human functioning. Kenny (1995:19) explains that happiness, in an Aristotelian sense, encapsulates most other moral and intellectual virtues and is the reason for which we do everything else in pursuit of a complete life, where the soul is in accordance with one's actions. From a psychological perspective, Vandepitte et al. (2023:3333) link flourishing to ataraxia, or equanimity, describing it as peace of mind. They note that recent emphasis in wellbeing research has shifted towards eudaimonia, which they define as living a complete human life by realising one's full potential through virtuous activity. However, Waterman (2008:42) warns that focusing exclusively on eudaimonia risks neglecting hedonic happiness, which was seen as equally important by Aristotle. This is vindicated through research by Clarke (2020:266) who found that for primary pupils, hedonic wellbeing is often more significant for all round achievement at school and wider life than eudaimonic wellbeing, which becomes more relevant in adolescence at secondary school. In my research findings this emphasis on hedonia was echoed strongly by pupils, parents and teachers (4.2.3.3). Many participants linked enjoyment, playfulness and creative expression with feeling motivated to learn and confident in their abilities. Several pupils associated happiness at school with having friends, feeling safe and being able to pursue activities or learning that they were interested in and enjoyed. These findings suggest that for primary-aged children, happiness is not an optional extra but an essential condition for engaging fully in learning. For example, fun experiential approaches have been found by Ranken et al. (2024) to link directly to attainment. They find strong evidence that practical, inquiry-based learning improves academic outcomes for 4–14-year-olds, suggesting that embodied engagement is not peripheral but central to both wellbeing and achievement. This links closely to the idea, explored later in 5.1 and 5.7, that curriculum and pedagogy should aim to create the conditions in which pupils can both enjoy the present and build towards long-term success in life.

Character and personality

To build on the concept of flourishing as happiness above, it is noted that within education policy in England, the term flourishing has been most widely adopted through character education programmes, which have gained prominence between 2014 and 2025. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham has been influential in this movement, framing the cultivation of virtues as the ultimate aim of education (Arthur and Kristjánsson, 2022). The DfE (2013a) expresses an ambition for England to be a global leader in teaching character, positioning it as integral to preparing learners for future successes. The Jubilee Centre defines character as a set of personal virtues that influence emotions, motivation and conduct, and which can sustain both a well-rounded life and a thriving society. It advocates for virtues to permeate all aspects of schooling, including curriculum, policies and extracurricular activities, so that pupils not only know what virtue is but also become good. This approach claims benefits for academic attainment, health, employment and social contribution (DfE, 2018:3; DfE, 2019a). Proponents such as Doyle (1997) argue that learning to be good is as essential as learning to read, and that this involves socially acceptable decision-making, respect for others and punctuality. From this perspective, character education can be seen as aligned with Ofsted's use of the term success in life. However, critics caution against uncritical adoption of character education initiatives. Brown et al. (2023:498) point to definitional ambiguity, while Davis (2003:38) warns that character education can drift into training rather than education, particularly when every aspect of school life is subordinated to a grand vision of school leaders. Kohn (1997) questions who decides which virtues are taught and why, cautioning against creating an idealised but unattainable state of moral niceties and social tranquillity, where conformity to dominant middle-class norms is rewarded (Reay, 2020:96). Simpson (2023) shows how 'white working-class underachievement' is often constructed through misrecognition of embodied dispositions (accents, repertoires of practice, local values) as deficits, rather than as culturally located forms of capital. Reinforcing Honneth's theory of recognition that 'rejects the idea of a universalisable form of reason that gives norms an absolute moral foothold in institutionalising norms' and 'acknowledges both transcendent and immanent factors that affect the production, distribution, maintenance of norms' (Pada, 2017:18). This risk of misrecognition underscores the predicament faced by some pupils where the dispositions which are

recognised as legitimate by schools is often socially patterned, with consequences for the identity and life chances of individual learners who do not fit this pattern.

An alternative to virtue-based approaches is offered by personality psychology, particularly the Five Factor Model (OCEAN) which emphasises openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (Duckworth, 2012). Unlike character education, this model seeks to understand human behaviour without attaching moral value, potentially offering a more inclusive framework for supporting a diversity of learners. Soto (2015:48) notes that focusing on personality development may avoid reinforcing normative frameworks not applicable to all pupils, making space for individual preferences and strengths. Pupils spoke about wanting to develop confidence in their own abilities, while parents and teachers emphasised kindness, empathy and resilience (4.2.4). These attributes overlap with some elements of both character and personality frameworks, but the emphasis from participants was on cultivating them in ways that felt authentic and relevant, rather than imposed. Philosophical traditions have long highlighted the value of this equanimity. The stoic notion of ataraxia describes a state of inner calm and freedom from disturbance, while related concepts of balance and congruence appear in both Eastern and Western traditions (Nussbaum, 2001). These traditions Nussbaum (2001) informs us, suggest that success cannot be reduced to external achievements or conformity but involves cultivating stable dispositions that allow individuals to align feelings and actions with wellbeing. This resonates with my participants' responses which suggested that success in life may be better supported through a combination of personal autonomy, confidence and competence than through prescriptive lists of externally chosen virtues which will be revisited in the discussion in 5.1 about the importance of conditions and relationships that allow these dispositions to develop naturally and sustainably.

Goal setting and motivation

In the English education system, pupils are frequently expected to demonstrate personal characteristics such as motivation and resilience, which are embedded in the Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019) as indicators of readiness to succeed in life. However, these traits are also often cultivated within a framework of externally imposed curricula, standardised targets and a high stakes testing regime as introduced in 2.2.2. This means that personal and academic goals are frequently set for pupils by adults rather than by them, which is in contrast to the emphasis on

autonomy and personal relevance voiced by the participants in my research. Pupils in my research also described success in life as not necessarily meeting a pre-determined academic benchmark but as achieving something that mattered to them personally, whether that was excelling in sport, developing a creative skill or mastering a practical competence (4.2, 5.4). This preference for self-directed goals aligns with research showing the significance of intrinsic motivation and metacognition. Gutman and Schoon (2013:13) explain that motivation depends not only on the nature of the task but also on whether an individual believes they can achieve it and perceives it as valuable. They distinguish between intrinsic motivation, acting for the inherent enjoyment or challenge, and extrinsic motivation, which is driven by rewards or avoidance of punishment. For the pupils in my research, motivation tended to arise when the learning content was meaningful and interesting to them, when they could work collaboratively and when they could see a clear link to their aspirations. In this way, motivation was closely tied to their sense of ownership over learning.

Within English primary schools, one of the most prominent applications of motivation theory has been Dweck's (2006) concept of growth mindset. The idea that abilities can be developed through effort has been widely promoted through interventions such as teaching about brain plasticity, praising effort rather than innate ability, and framing mistakes as opportunities for learning. However, evidence of its impact in primary settings is mixed. Large-scale studies by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2016) found no significant improvement in literacy or numeracy outcomes, and only modest gains in attitudes towards learning. Critics such as Sisk et al. (2018:558) argue that growth mindset approaches oversimplify the complex interplay of factors affecting achievement and risk overlooking structural inequalities such as socio-economic status or systemic bias. My participants' views provide a counterpoint to such generic interventions and explain that rather than being motivated by abstract notions of perseverance, they emphasised the importance of pursuing goals that reflected their own interests and values (4.2.5). For some, this meant working towards a long-term career ambition, for others, it was about achieving mastery in a skill or piece of knowledge and others, making a meaningful contribution to their community and family. These perspectives resonate with Baumeister et al.'s (1998:118) definition of self-regulation as the capacity to set appropriate goals and carry out the steps to achieve them. Locke and Locke (2002) and Waterman (2008) similarly connect goal fulfilment to both subjective satisfaction and objective accomplishment, arguing that the most effective goals are those aligned with personal

values. It could be argued that data from the DfE's National Behaviour Survey (2024a:47) highlight the urgency of this issue. While over half of pupils reported feeling 'fairly motivated' at school, nearly a third said they were not very or not at all motivated. Such figures point to a systemic challenge: if the curriculum does not connect with pupils' own aspirations, motivation is likely to decline, particularly for those whose strengths or interests lie outside the narrow focus of tested subjects. Teachers in my research echoed this concern, noting that prescribed targets could disengage pupils whose talents were not recognised by the formal assessment framework (4.4). These findings suggest that genuine resilience and motivation are less about enduring an imposed challenge and more about sustaining effort towards goals that have personal meaning and interest. For primary education, this raises a question about the balance between ensuring access to canonical or core knowledge and creating space for pupils to set, adapt and pursue their own objectives. The evidence from my research supports an approach in which goal setting is taught not as a compliance exercise but as a reflective process linked to autonomy, collaboration and fun, real-world application. This approach is explored further in 5.4.1 when considering curriculum design that enables all learners to succeed on their own terms.

Independence and wisdom

My participants saw the concept of independence as important to achieving success in life, not simply as self-sufficiency, but as a core disposition necessary for navigating the world with confidence and purpose (4.2.4). This notion of independence encompassed both behavioural autonomy or the ability to manage one's own actions, and intellectual autonomy which means the capacity to think critically, question assumptions and make effective moral or ethical choices. Pupils described independence in practical terms, such as knowing how to solve a problem without waiting for adult help, deciding when to ask for support, or being able to explain and defend their own opinions. Teachers, meanwhile, spoke about fostering independence as both a learning outcome and a means of preparing pupils for life beyond school. From a developmental psychology perspective, Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) identify secure early attachment as a foundation for healthy independence, allowing children to separate appropriately from caregivers and govern their own behaviour. Educational theorists such as Dewey (1938) have similarly framed autonomy as a product of experience and reflection, with human thinking acting as a tool for guiding successful

action (Kayukov, 2016:764). For Aristotle (Trowbridge and Ferrari, 2011:90) independence was not an isolated trait but linked to phronesis (practical wisdom) and sophia (deep understanding). Phronesis involves ethical decision-making in complex situations, weighing different virtues to decide the best course of action. Sophia, a blend of intuitive understanding (nous) and scientific knowledge (episteme), reflects the self-knowledge and moral clarity that underpin purposeful action. These philosophical concepts are increasingly used in contemporary education, especially within character education and moral development frameworks. Yet, as Kristjánsson (2014:155) cautions, phronesis is often invoked without its full moral depth, risking a reduction to mere cleverness or strategic goal pursuit. True phronesis involves deliberation about what is good for oneself and others, and the capacity to act in alignment with those values. My participants' accounts often touched on this moral dimension. For example, several pupils spoke about making decisions that might not be the easiest or most popular but were the right thing to do, such as supporting a friend or admitting a mistake (4.2.3).

However, teaching for independence and phronesis is not straightforward explains Kristjánsson (2014:157) who notes that for it to happen then learners (and arguably teachers) must move beyond imitation of others to genuine self-direction, integrating ethical reasoning into their everyday choices. In my research, pupils frequently connected independence with opportunities for choice in learning, while teachers stressed the value of activities that required pupils to plan, adapt and persevere without step-by-step instructions from the teacher. These findings suggest that independence is strengthened when pupils have regular opportunities to exercise judgement in safe but challenging contexts (4.2.4.). One practical route towards this is through teaching thinking skills such as metacognitive awareness, critical thinking and creative problem-solving which has been shown through research by the Education Endowment Foundation (2021) (EEF) to support self-regulation and decision-making, both of which are essential to independence in learning. The EEF (2021) also identifies metacognitive strategies as some of the most cost-effective ways for schools to improve learning outcomes, especially when embedded in collaborative, dialogic approaches. Pupils in my research who had experience of structured enquiry and reflection often described themselves as more confident in tackling unfamiliar tasks and making decisions independently (4.2.4).

Subjective wellbeing: self-esteem, self-perception and confidence

Importantly, the literature and my findings both suggest that independence in learning is only sustainable or possible when supported by a feeling of confidence, borne out of an emotional security, for both teachers and learners. In educational psychology (Gutman and Schoon, 2013), confidence is closely connected to self-esteem and self-perception which influence how individuals approach new opportunities, recover from setbacks and interact with others (4.2.4). Gutman and Schoon (2013) identify confidence as both a driver and a consequence of resilience, noting that it can grow over time through mastery experiences, constructive feedback and encouragement from trusted adults. Ryan and Deci (2000:76) emphasise that wellbeing is sustained when pupils experience autonomy, relatedness and competence, conditions that are also fundamental to their self-determination theory picked up again as an aspect of agency in 2.4.1. Cigman (2001:562) describes self-esteem as a 'prerequisite of learning', highlighting its role in enabling individuals to envisage and then work towards their potential. She distinguishes between basic self-esteem, grounded in early experiences of love, belonging and secure relationships, and reflective self-esteem, which is shaped by a person's perception of their own abilities. Basic self-esteem functions as a protective factor, helping pupils remain motivated and optimistic even when they encounter difficulties. Reflective self-esteem, Cigman explains (2001) is by contrast, more vulnerable to fluctuations in performance or social comparison, particularly in highly competitive or test-driven environments. My findings suggest that pupils perceived that learners with a secure sense of both types of self-esteem were more willing to take intellectual risks, speak up in discussions and attempt challenging tasks (4.2.3.3).

However, the role of schools in fostering this positive foundation of self-esteem is contested. On paper, the Department for Education (2024:2) acknowledges that 'good mental health and wellbeing help children to develop, attend school, engage in learning and fulfil their potential'. It recommends a 'whole-school approach' that values diversity and promotes respect, with mental health content delivered primarily through the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum. Nevertheless, because PSHE remains non-statutory, its coverage and emphasis vary considerably between schools (DfE, 2021a). Several teachers in my research expressed concern that PSHE was often squeezed out by the demands of covering the content within the core

curriculum (4.3), or character education and compliance-focused behaviour programmes taking its place. The neuroscientists Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007:5) argue that emotional wellbeing is not an optional extra but the scaffolding on which cognitive development rests. They describe emotions as 'the shelves underlying the glassware' of cognition, without them, learning is unstable and easily disrupted. National survey data supports the relevance of this claim. The DfE's (2024a:48–9) National Behaviour Survey found that pupils' average wellbeing score in school was 6.2 out of 10, with academic pressure identified as a major source of anxiety. Over half of respondents (53%) named 'getting good grades' as a primary concern, followed by schoolwork (39%). Teachers in my research echoed this, noting that some pupils' anxiety about academic performance undermined their willingness to participate in activities that did not directly contribute to test preparation (4.3.4). Cigman (2001) builds on her theories of self-esteem by explaining that wellbeing also intersects with identity and moral agency and uses the term 'ethical confidence' to describe the ability to reflect deeply on the kind of person one wishes to be and the life one wishes to lead, independent of external approval. Pupils in my research gave examples that resonate with this idea, from wanting to be '*kind and helpful*' or '*stand up for what's right*' (4.2.3.3) even when it is unpopular. Such ethical confidence requires both self-awareness and courage, qualities that can be nurtured in classrooms where emotional safety and intellectual challenge coexist.

Finally, the literature is clear that wellbeing is multidimensional. A key aspect which emerged in my findings was the importance of being caring and kind to yourself, as well as others, which is usefully illustrated by Neff's (2003:89) extensive research on the connections between self-esteem and compassion. She explains that 'when faced with experiences of suffering or personal failure, self-compassion entails three basic components: (a) self-kindness: extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh judgment and self-criticism, (b) common humanity: seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating, and (c) mindfulness: holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them'. Neff's insight helps provide clarity about the interrelated characteristics of confidence, self-esteem and a positive self-perception identified by my research participants as necessary for feelings of emotional security and whether or not pupils are able and willing to work independently by taking risks, admitting uncertainty or acting according to their own reasoned judgement (4.2.3.3). Without this emotional foundation,

independence may be fragile, easily undermined by failure or criticism. In summary, independence in primary education is both a goal and a process. The interdependence between cognitive, social and emotional dimensions of independence mirrors the way my participants described success in life, not as a single ability, but as a blend of skills, values and dispositions applied across contexts. It requires explicit teaching of reflective decision-making skills, opportunities to exercise agency and a supportive environment that values the moral as well as practical judgement of individuals and groups. 5.4 returns to this theme when considering how curriculum and pedagogy might better cultivate independence as a lived capability rather than a compliance-based outcome.

2.2.3.2 Dispositions of the body

When running a school, a significant part of a school leader's role, which is judged through Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (Ofsted, 2019:7), is to have high expectations for learners' behaviour and conduct and apply these expectations consistently and fairly. Furthermore, in the DfE guidance on behaviour in schools (2024a), School leaders; are instructed that they should cultivate a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive atmosphere that fosters student engagement and academic success (2024a:5) and that good behaviour in schools is central to a good education and being taught how to behave well and appropriately within the context they are in is vital for all pupils to succeed personally (DfE, 2024a:5).

From a sociological perspective, Bourdieu's (1986) notion of embodied cultural capital draws attention to the way that bodily dispositions, gestures, and habits are shaped over time by social structures and, in turn, reproduce them. Within a school setting, expectations for posture, movement, voice, accent and demeanour are not merely rules for order; they are also subtle lessons in how to inhabit the body in ways that align with dominant cultural norms and in turn norms which succeed in life. These embodied habits, some legitimised through school discipline policies and some marginalised, can become and internalised part of a pupil's habitus (1.4), influencing how they are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves in contexts beyond school. Morris and Perry (2016:71) inform us that an increased focus on behaviour management by schools, which they describe as the punitive turn in school discipline, has led to an increase in exclusions and punishments, which disproportionately affect disadvantaged and minority students who do not fit easily with dominant norms. Schools cite persistent disruptive behaviour as the most common

reason for the increased levels of suspensions and exclusions (2024d:51) and the number of suspensions in primary schools have increased by 41%, from 26,800 to 37,700, in the last academic year, with the Institute for Public Policy Research (Gill et al. 2024) claiming this is disproportionately affecting vulnerable children, including those from low-income backgrounds, with special educational needs, and those experiencing mental health issues. The DfE also conducts a National Behaviour Survey which provides annual data about behaviour in schools. The most recent report explains that 84% of school leaders reported that their school had mainly been calm and orderly in the previous week, compared to 59% of teachers (DfE, 2024a:8). The difference between these percentages may be because in primary schools 86% of incidents were recorded as being due to talking in lessons, which is particularly interesting given that the teachers and pupils in my research often emphasised the value of discussion for developing the ability to succeed in life. This tension between curriculum coverage and opportunities for discussion was raised by the teachers in my research (4.3.3) and is explored further in Chapter Five.

Supporters of strict behaviour management routines in schools, sometimes described as zero tolerance, claim that they create a culture where every student knows the boundaries and understands the consequences of crossing them (Sparkes, 2024). The Headteacher Birbalsingh (Fauser, 2024) explains her approach to the strict discipline in her school, ‘our view is that if you just put children in an environment and hope they manage to swim, some will and some will not. That does not support the weakest…that is why we teach our children to always walk in corridors quietly, looking to the front and in single file’. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this could be interpreted as the explicit teaching of a particular bodily legitimacy, embedding a set of physical and behavioural norms that may be advantageous in some cultural contexts but may not reflect or value the dispositions of all pupils. However, Morris (2016:380) raises a concern that a zero tolerance or one size fits all approach fails to account for the diverse needs of students and teachers, stating that teachers report that the pressure to enforce strict behaviour policies increases their stress levels and negatively impacts their ability to build positive relationships with students. Lupton and Thrupp (2013) reported that overly strict approaches to behaviour could be a contributing factor to increases in absenteeism and exclusion rates, particularly for vulnerable children. More recently, Major and Briant (2023) have described a situation in schools where some families appear to have lost their belief that attending school regularly is necessary for their

children, and in addition to rising numbers of poor attendance, the latest figures show that over 111,000 children are now categorised as receiving Elective Home Education (EHE), so not attending school at all or only on a part-time basis. Alternatively, it could be considered that perhaps Birbalsingh is along the right lines when she says that the child who comes to us from a chaotic home is able to find order here at the school, as it has been shown that children with certain types of attachment disorder or trauma-related emotional difficulties can benefit from consistent routines and boundaries from the adults around them (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). However, Morris (2016) would argue that treating or describing disadvantaged children as a homogenous group when it comes to behaviour policies does not tackle the underlying causes of the disruptive behaviours, such as social and emotional challenges. Dix (2017:8) perhaps offers some nuance to the debate as he advocates for consistency in schools and agrees that there needs to be clear expectations for behaviour, which helps pupils know how to operate successfully in the world. However, he insists that positive behaviour in school lies in the behaviour of every adult and their ability to create a culture of certainty (2017:55), which includes emotional certainty, and not devising vast lists of rules or codes of conduct for the children to abide by. Dix (2017:8) asks why 'crush behaviour with punishment, when you can grow them with love' adding that 'visible consistency with visible kindness' allows exceptional behaviour to flourish.

The literature reviewed in this section highlights the complex interplay between embodied characteristics, personality traits and subjective wellbeing, each of which can shape and reinforce the others (Soto, 2015:50). One aspect which arose in the findings was that of kindness and caring for each other which Noddings (Stables and Semetsky, 2014:76) described as an ethics of care. Huta (2012:58) adds a further layer, suggesting that eudaimonia and its resulting wellbeing depend more heavily on parenting than does hedonia and its resulting wellbeing. This points to the importance of a child's relationships beyond the classroom, since parenting and, by extension, wider social connections can play a decisive role in enabling success in life. This significance was echoed across all participant groups in my research, leading into the next section which considers the role of relationships, social capital and social mobility in shaping pupils' opportunities and outcomes.

2.2.4 The role of relationships in success in life

The previous section considered how the 'long lasting dispositions of the mind and the body' (Bourdieu, 1986:243), including personality traits, motivation and subjective wellbeing, can shape success in life. However, these internal characteristics do not operate in isolation. They are continually shaped, reinforced or challenged through relationships at home, in school and in the wider community. Furthermore, participants in my research frequently emphasised the importance of family and supportive relationships as both indicators of success and as sources of emotional security and motivation with which they could pursue ambitious goals and imagine successful futures for themselves (4.2.2). Therefore, drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field (1.4) this section examines the literature on how social context and relational networks influence both perceptions of success and the opportunities available to achieve it. As a brief reminder, habitus refers to the enduring values, behaviours and ways of being that individuals acquire through early socialisation (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), while field describes the social arenas in which these dispositions are enacted and negotiated (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). These concepts provide a framework for understanding how definitions of success emerge from the interaction between personal dispositions, as discussed in 2.2.3, and the structures, hierarchies and relationships within which individuals live and learn. Firstly, the accounts from my participants strongly resonate with Ainsworth and Bowlby's (1991) theory of attachment, which adds a psychological dimension to Bourdieu's sociological framework. According to attachment theory, the ability to form positive relationships stems from early experiences of care and a secure emotional bond with primary caregivers. These early attachments lead to the development of an 'internal working model' that shapes how individuals perceive themselves, others, and their capacity to interact socially. Specifically, this model informs (1) the degree to which others are seen as trustworthy, (2) the extent to which the self is perceived as valuable, and (3) beliefs about one's efficacy in social relationships (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). It could therefore be suggested that a secure internal working model is therefore vital for a learner's emotional and social development, laying the groundwork for long term success and these insights suggest that success is not purely internal or subjective, but deeply relational. The theory of attachment explains that secure, trusting relationships can act as a foundation for ambition, resilience and wellbeing, while fractured or absent relationships can limit opportunities regardless of individual talent or effort. This

perspective challenges purely individualistic models of success and underscores the importance of social context in shaping outcomes and taking the literature and participant accounts together points to success in life as a deeply relational construct which is discussed later in 5.3. However, the next section explores one of the most prominent policy narratives that links education with social capital: *social mobility* and considers how this policy goal interacts with the relational and contextual factors discussed by the literature above about wellbeing and strong attachment. Section 2.2.5 examines the dominant discourse of social mobility, followed in 2.2.6 by a deeper exploration into cultural capital and the impact it has on the reproduction of certain social norms within the education system in England.

2.2.5 Social mobility as success in life

The previous section highlighted the role of relationships and social context in shaping life chances, showing that success cannot be understood purely through individual dispositions. These relational factors intersect with broader structural narratives that frame what it means to succeed. One of the most enduring and politically popular of these narratives in recent decades has been social mobility. The White Paper *Opportunity for All* (DfE, 2022b:11) places social mobility at the centre of education policy, emphasising literacy and numeracy as tools to 'turbo charge' progress up the social and economic ladder. Social mobility is defined by the Department for Education as the extent to which someone can change their social or economic status over their lifetime (DfE, 2022b:3). This policy framing casts education as a gateway to personal advancement and economic opportunity, but as the following literature shows, it rests on contested assumptions about the purposes of education and the fairness of the system in promoting such upward movement.

Firstly, the case for education as a reliable long-term engine of social mobility is increasingly challenged by a wide range of research. Starting with Ball (2017:29) and Gillies (2011:234) who argue that this vision of success is underpinned by a narrow view of education which promotes academic attainment and preparation for being part of the workforce over other purposes of education like personal development and social cohesion, a recurrent and important finding for my participants. In addition, the 'State of the Nation' report by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) (2019) which highlights persistent gaps between the poorest students and their peers at every stage of the education system. Their 2021 (SMC, 2021: vii) report also shows that disadvantaged pupils

in England are now as much as seven months behind their more privileged classmates and even those who achieve strong GCSE and A Level results do not go on to experience equal success in the workplace (ibid., 2021:40). Further still, Maslen (2019:12) adds that the use of aspiration and 'a whatever it takes attitude' as a way to describe social mobility initiatives are instead encouraging the 'cutthroat tendencies that serve the neoliberal social order' which is in contrast to Clarke (2020,283) who explains that 'existing evidence demonstrates [that] school environments that foster kindness or adopt a whole school socio emotional ethos are associated with higher academic engagement and achievement'.

McFall (2013:241) offers a further critique of the social mobility narrative, highlighting the emotional toll it can take on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thinking back to the discussion in on resilience and motivation, McFall's (2013:241) research shows that where many learners are encouraged to 'make something of themselves' and 'getting ahead' they often feel they have more to lose than their more advantaged peers if they fail due to wider societal or structural inequalities. In other words, the odds are uneven: existing social inequalities continue to limit life chances, and success cannot be reduced to 'individual agency, hard work and making the right choices' alone. This disparity can also be understood through the lens of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory where schools value and reward forms of cultural expression and behaviour aligned with middle class norms and pupils from working class backgrounds, whose dispositions and cultural resources may not align with these 'legitimate' norms, are thus disadvantaged from the outset (Dumais, 2006). As Simpson (2023) notes, such norms can render classed forms of embodiment illegible in school spaces, shaping who is seen as 'appropriate' or 'able' independent of actual competence. Finally, even when social mobility is achieved, Savage and Williams (2008:113) warn that it can come at a cost to the individual: a loss of social identity, disconnection from one's original community and the challenge of navigating unfamiliar cultural spaces, often marked by subtle exclusion and discrimination. Reay (2020) reinforces this with evidence from her research into working class children participating in 'fast track' programmes for able students. Despite their academic ability, many dropped out, not due to lack of capability, but because they felt out of place. Comments such as 'it's not my sort of thing', 'it's for posh children', or 'none of my friends go so I felt all on my own' (Reay, 2010:101) speak to a deep sense of alienation caused by the struggle to find a balance between fitting in, belonging and standing out. Unfortunately, Simpson (2023)

critiques how this alienation can be then misinterpreted by schools as deficit narratives which frame white working-class pupils as lacking aspiration rather than being structurally disadvantaged. There is perhaps a troubling paradox at the heart of current education policy. These examples suggest that efforts to promote social mobility through schooling can inadvertently undermine pupils' sense of belonging and wellbeing. As long as schools in England are expected to provide pupils with the 'knowledge and cultural capital' needed to 'succeed in life' (Ofsted, 2019), this may inadvertently encourage children to suppress or abandon their own cultural identities in favour of conformity to dominant norms. Again, demonstrating how important Bourdieu's realisation that cultural capital in education made clear to him 'the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes' (1986:243). Therefore, rather than levelling the playing field, this approach may could reinforce hierarchies by valuing only certain forms of 'legitimate' cultural capital over others and cause schools to become 'islands', increasingly detached from the communities they serve (Apple, 2012). Considering this, Martela and Steger (2016) advocate for the inclusion of subjective wellbeing as a key part of public policy making for education. Similarly, Diener and Seligman (2004) argue that success more widely should be measured not just by financial earnings or social status but also by emotional wellbeing and the quality of relationships. In summary, while social mobility remains a powerful and politically appealing narrative, the literature reviewed here suggests it is an incomplete and often misleading measure of success. Structural inequalities, cultural misrecognition, and the emotional costs of upward mobility mean that access to opportunity cannot be reduced to individual effort alone and reminds us that the forms of knowledge, skill and behaviour which are valued in the education system play a decisive role in determining life chances.

2.2.6 Cultural capital and social reproduction through education

The discussion of social mobility in the previous section highlighted how education policy often frames success in terms of moving up the social and economic ladder but that such movement is not equally accessible to all. It was also explained how Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, (1.4), offers a critical lens for examining how education systems privilege the cultural resources of dominant groups and reproduce existing social hierarchies so here I explore the literature to delve deeper into the concept of cultural capital and examine its decisive role in determining who is recognised as successful by schools.

Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, skills and dispositions valued in specific contexts, which confer advantages on those who possess them. DiMaggio and Mohr (1996:168) describe how education promotes 'prestigious tastes, objects or styles validated by centres of cultural authority' and reinforcing dominant societal values. Bourdieu (1990:8) emphasised that curricula (2.3) are not neutral but constitute a 'selection of meanings' that privilege certain forms of capital and argued that pupils who lack these forms of capital may experience symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990:9), where their dispositions and interests are devalued. Dumais (2002:45) adds that the assimilation of cultural capital depends on pupils' ability to internalise it, which is shaped by social class and home environment. Schools can thus act as 'agents of social reproduction' (Kingston, 2001:88). In other words, the 'group or class which constructs the curriculum will reproduce itself through the selection of and familiarity with the knowledge included or excluded as curriculum content. Bourdieu (1977) situates this recognition of the correct, or as he described 'legitimate' cultural capital within a wider theory of cultural and social reproduction. He suggests that the individual attributes of curriculum designers are 'transposed' through education and family from one generation to the next, ordering the world and the people within it (Shubert, 2010, in Grenfell, 2008:184). In addition, educational institutions that relate academic success or ability to forms of legitimate cultural capital are in turn reproducing these social types reproduced through the education system by dominant groups or classes (Bourdieu, 1973:487; 1986:243), which in turn normalise certain types of dominant cultural capital as ability, which 'are actually culturally arbitrary and historical' (Schubert, 2008).

Reay (2020:96) highlights how cultural capital operates within education markets to secure advantage for middle class families. Instead of promoting success for all, curricula that privilege dominant cultural capital can lead to long term self-censorship (Bourdieu, 1990:41) and self-exclusion (Bourdieu, 1990:42) among pupils whose cultural 'repertoires of practice' (Coles, 2013:56) are not recognised. Kirby (2019:21) explains that middle class pupils, socialised into school discourses of cleverness and self-regulation, are more likely to perform in ways expected by adults, while working class pupils may struggle to see themselves reflected in dominant definitions of ability. Atkinson (2020:222) argues that such systems shape children's self-concept, motivation and long-term agency, reinforcing Bourdieu's (1986) notion of symbolic violence where dominant forms of capital are misrecognised as merit. Bourdieu (1977) situated this recognition of legitimate

cultural capital within a wider theory of cultural and social reproduction. The attributes of curriculum designers are 'transposed' through education and family from one generation to the next, shaping which forms of knowledge are valued (Shubert, 2010, in Grenfell, 2008:184). Educational institutions that equate academic success with particular forms of cultural capital reproduce the social types that dominate the education system (Bourdieu, 1973:487; 1986:243). These dominant forms of capital become normalised as markers of ability despite being culturally arbitrary and historically situated (Schubert, 2008). Pupils who lack these forms of capital may be alienated, experiencing symbolic violence when their identities are devalued and their success potential is diminished (Bourdieu, 1990:9). Dumais (2002:45) and Blewitt (2010) argue that pupils' ability to assimilate cultural capital depends on class and home environment. Schools that prioritise dominant cultural capital risk becoming not transmitters of opportunity but 'active agents of social reproduction' (Kingston, 2001:88). These dynamics are visible in contemporary England: Simpson (2023) argues that white working-class underachievement reflects structural marginalisation in which the cultural resources of particular groups are systematically devalued within schooling, reinforcing cycles of misrecognition and reproduction. Furthermore, middle class children who embody dominant cultural capital may receive increased attention and higher grades regardless of actual academic ability (Xu and Hampden Thompson, 2012; Lareau and Weininger, 2003:577).

Coles (2013:55) claims that the government's reluctance to engage with the cultural histories of all participants when designing the 2013 curriculum reforms perpetuated the potential for the education system to serve a 'differentiating function' (Bourdieu, 1977:199). Reay (2004a) further argues that the assimilation of cultural capital 'marks out particular class positions' (Reay, 2004a:436) and sustains 'the structure of power relationships between classes' (Bourdieu, 1973:487). These processes become so embedded that dominant forms of capital acquire the status of societal orthodoxy, or doxa, shaping thought and action while being perceived as universal and natural (Bourdieu, 1990:40). As Kirby (2019:21) and Atkinson (2020:222) observe, this system profoundly influences children's self-concept and perceived capacity for success, embedding hierarchies of ability and worth. Furthermore, Cigman (2001:572) warns that students who fail to meet official standards may equate failure with personal inadequacy, discouraging risk taking and undermining their self-perceptions of ability or capability. Anderson (2023) and the Independent Commission on Assessment in Primary Education (ICAPE) report (Wyse, Bradbury and Trollope,

2022:34) call for strengths-based approaches to assessment that value a broader range of abilities. My research findings reinforce these critiques. Pupils, parents and teachers expressed a strong desire for official recognition of wider qualities, abilities and interests that rarely feature in statutory assessments or the core curriculum for primary schools in England. This misalignment between participant values and institutional expectations is central to understanding how current policy framings of success fail to encompass what learners and educators consider essential for a meaningful education.

The literature and participant accounts in this section underline a central tension in the current framing of success in English primary education. While policy rhetoric speaks of 'knowledge and cultural capital' (Ofsted, 2019) as a universal entitlement, in practice certain forms of cultural capital are legitimised while others are excluded. This has implications not only for equity of access but also for pupils' self-concept, motivation and long-term agency. If dominant definitions of success fail to recognise the full range of abilities and interests valued by learners and teachers, they risk alienating pupils and reinforcing social reproduction. The next section examines how knowledge and cultural capital are framed in the English primary curriculum and considers the implications of these framings for equity, inclusion and the broader educational experiences of learners.

2.3 Knowledge, capital and the curriculum

Building on the previous discussion of cultural capital and its role in shaping definitions of success, this section examines how knowledge and cultural capital have been conceptualised within curriculum theory and policy in England, and how these ideas are positioned as pathways to success in life. It situates these policy framings within wider debates about curriculum design, social justice and educational purpose, drawing on literature informed by the perspectives shared by the participants in my research (4.3). As outlined in 2.2.3 and 2.2.4 there is literature which describes success in life as encompassing happiness, fulfilment, confidence, relationships, problem solving and independence, qualities that extend well beyond the academic attainment measured through statutory testing and the National Curriculum for primary schools in England at the time of writing. This analysis therefore sets the stage for exploring the divergence between dominant policy framings of what a curriculum should include to enable success in life, and the broader

understandings expressed by pupils, parents and teachers in my research. In doing so, it addresses my first and third research questions (1.5): what models of success in life are promoted through education policy in England, and how is the role of the National Curriculum understood in achieving success in life?

2.3.1 The National Primary Curriculum for Primary Schools in England

The National Curriculum for primary schools in England includes statutory core subjects (English, maths, science) and foundation subjects (art, computing, design technology, geography, history, music, PE). Languages are compulsory in Key Stage 2 (KS2) (pupils aged 7-11) but not Key Stage 1 (pupils aged 5-7). Religious Education (RE) is required, but schools can set their own syllabus or work with the local diocese. In addition to the subjects outlined above, the curriculum guidance also suggests that mathematical reasoning. spoken language, reading, writing and vocabulary are also taught as 'integral aspects of the teaching of every subject' (DfE, 2013a:10). Positive relationships and health education is also a statutory part of the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education to 'equip pupils with a sound understanding of risk and with the knowledge and skills necessary to make safe and informed decisions' (DfE, 2021a). However, there are also non-statutory aspects of the whole curriculum which the DfE states are there to provide schools with flexibility in their delivery as part of a 'whole school curriculum' (DfE, 2013) Finally, schools are instructed that they have an overarching and 'statutory duty, as part of a broad and balanced curriculum, to promote the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils' (DfE, 2014) and, as discussed in 2.2.3.1 character education 'contributes to this duty' (DfE, 2019:4). The National Curriculum is presented as a universal entitlement, but Priestley et al. (2015) argue that its enactment is never neutral and is always mediated by teacher agency, which they conceptualise ecologically as the interplay between individual resources, cultural expectations and structural conditions. This perspective reframes curriculum delivery not as simple compliance with statutory requirements but as contingent on the conditions that enable or constrain professional judgement. As such, the capacity of teachers to align the curriculum with broader aims such as SMSC or character education depends on the scope they are given to exercise agency within policy frameworks. We are also told by Hubbard et al (2020:59-60) that a significant part of the curriculum is hidden and is generally understood as the 'untaught' component of the educational experience. This hidden curriculum conveys the implicit knowledge, norms and behaviours that are

required for success. Although Hubbard was writing about university students, it is argued that the two domains identified ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘rules of the game’ are also relevant to how school feels for primary school learners which I now explore through the literature in the next section.

2.3.2 What does school feel like for primary school learners in England

Husbands and Pearce’s (2012:12) description of the ‘complex, multi-faceted and demanding nature’ is useful to keep in mind when considering how school feels for primary school learners in England. In addition to the curriculum described above, pupils are interacting with a wide range of situations, teachers and other adults on a daily basis as well as making sense of events in their own lives connected to self-perception, friendships and family. Teachers are told by Ofsted (2019:7) to create the conditions ‘that allows the learner to focus on learning’ and deliver a curriculum that provides them with what they need to achieve ‘success in life’ (2019:6) and while curriculum content (what pupils learn) and pedagogy (how and with whom pupils learn) have dominated these policy debates, there is a growing body of literature highlighting the impact of the physical environment on both learning outcomes and pupil wellbeing in primary schools. Echoing this, the Centre for Educational Design (CED, 2025) argues that physical space can ‘influence how you feel or how effectively you can work’, a sentiment borne out in teacher and pupil findings presented in 4.3.4 and discussed in 5.1.

The current Department for Education (DfE, 2014:36) guidance offers standard dimensions for classrooms (55–62 m² for 30 pupils) and limited provision for additional quiet rooms or small group teaching spaces. While the DfE also references potential ‘habitat areas’ for outdoor learning, these are not prioritised in school design and are described as optional or ‘phased in’ with no required timescale (DfE, 2014:40). This lack of urgency gives the impression that outdoor environments are supplementary rather than integral to effective primary education. However, a growing body of research contradicts this marginal positioning of outdoor learning. Barrett et al. (2015:130) found that ‘naturalness factors’ such as light and space had the largest effect size (50%) in contributing to pupil learning. Wang et al. (2023) demonstrated that up to 2.3 hours outdoors daily can significantly improve primary-aged children’s physical and cognitive health. Barrett et al. (2015:130) also found that ‘naturalness factors’ such as light, air quality and spatial design have a disproportionately high effect on learning outcomes. Furthermore, Ardelean et al. (2021) revealed

that although 65% of surveyed teachers believe children should play outside more, only 25% said this happens for even 10% of the school day. The under-prioritisation of outdoor learning in current design guidance appears increasingly out of step with this evidence. Other scholars emphasise the emotional and cognitive value of time in nature. Richardson (2016) found that nature connection is as significant to pupil wellbeing and attainment as school attendance or life satisfaction. González and Schenetti (2022) argue that outdoor experiences build cognitive and emotional resilience, encouraging lifelong learning by helping pupils develop self-initiated inquiry and investigation skills. These insights reinforce the case for treating physical spaces, particularly outdoor areas, not as passive containers for learning but as active agents in educational experience. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the lived experience of school involves far more than prescribed content. Questions of learning environment, belonging and agency shape how learners encounter education on a daily basis. The next section turns to how knowledge and cultural capital are mobilised within the curriculum, and how these shape understandings of success.

2.3.3 Knowledge and Cultural Capital as curriculum content

As introduced in Chapter One (1.4), the policy influence of E.D. Hirsch (1983; 1987), Michael Gove (2009; 2011) and Nick Gibb (2015) has been central to shaping the current 'knowledge-rich' National Curriculum in England (DfE, 2013a). In this section, I expand that earlier discussion by engaging with the wider literature, examining how their emphasis on cultural literacy and canonical knowledge has been conceptualised, justified, and critiqued. The focus here is not only on the policy rhetoric itself but also on its implications for pedagogy and how cultural capital is enacted within primary schools.

In 2011, shortly after taking responsibility as Secretary of State for Education and responsibility for the creation of the new Primary National Curriculum, the Rt Hon Michael Gove outlined that 'the best' knowledge includes Shakespeare, Wagner and Balzac and he dismissed more popular culture as 'cheap sensation and easy pleasures' (Gove, 2011). This built on earlier promises Gove (2009) had made in a speech to the Royal Society for the Arts that if entrusted with power at the 2010 election he would overhaul the curriculum to 'ensure that the acquisition of knowledge within rigorous subject disciplines is properly valued and cherished'. Nick Gibb MP, who served multiple terms as Schools Minister (2010–12, 2015–21, 2022–24), recalled bringing with him to his first

ministerial meeting in 2010 a ‘bound copy of the Core Knowledge Curriculum’ by E.D. Hirsch, an American educator and literary critic, best known for his influential work on cultural literacy and for founding the Core Knowledge Foundation (1986). Gibb acknowledges that Hirsch significantly influenced his thinking when forming education policy in England and that for him, Hirsch is someone who ‘gets it when it comes to curriculum and pedagogy’ (Gibb, 2015). Hirsch’s (1983) key theory is called ‘cultural literacy’ and he places an emphasis on the importance of curriculum content over the ‘methods of instruction’ (Hirsch, 1983:159) suggesting that reading and writing levels will increase with a ‘common shared knowledge’ of key vocabulary and canonical texts and that this traditional culture should form the basis of a National Curriculum (1983:166). Grissmer et al. (2023:16) explain that Hirsch describes the core knowledge curriculum as a way to ‘build students’ cumulative general knowledge and their range and depth of vocabulary to boost their capacity to comprehend the world they live in’ and their general knowledge ‘comprises content about people, objects in the world, facts and meanings of words’ (Grissmer et al. 2023:16). However, this is countered by Priestley and Xenofontos (2020) who argue that curriculum making must be concerned not only with content but also with the values and pedagogical processes that shape how and why knowledge is taught which is why throughout this section I incorporate the literature outlining the purpose behind the curriculum as well as how it is delivered through pedagogy.

When setting about the task of designing a curriculum, Young (2014:71) warns us about seeing the difference between the ‘knowledge of the powerful’ and ‘powerful knowledge’, which I understand to mean the difference between the acquisition of ‘legitimate knowledge’ described by Bourdieu (2000:115) (2.2.6) and knowledge that can help a learner do something or see the world differently (Young, 2009:14). Young’s vision builds on the notion of schools as mere transmitters of subject knowledge but instead ‘encourages a diffraction between curricular and children’s knowledge’ (Kirby, 2019:28). Chiasson (2005) suggests that we should not burden ourselves with too much knowledge before we set out on a piece of learning but recognise that ‘the place from which we should set out from is exactly wherever it is we are when we do set out’ (Chiasson, 2005: 211). This learning does not happen in the absence of knowledge acquisition but instead pupils are empowered to 'value, learn and engage more deeply with curricular knowledge, as a springboard from which to transform what they know, do and can be in the world’ (Kirby, 2019:28), adding that

this would require schools to become less risk averse to children using their own knowledge as a starting point for their learning. She also heralds Michael Young (2009:15) who calls for ‘a curriculum that does not replace knowledge that pupils bring to school [but] challenges it and enables pupils to transform and extend it by engaging with new and often troubling ideas with a teacher they have learned to trust’. Young (ibid.) states clearly that schools have an important role in the acquisition of knowledge for all learners and that the knowledge learned at school needs to be in addition to what is learned at home which links to the judgements made earlier about the role of embodied cultural capital and the advantages that it can provide middle class children entering school (Reay, 2020:96). Gillborn et al., (2018:513) argue this situation in schools ignores the plural and situated nature of culture and fails to recognise the diverse funds of knowledge children bring to school. Kelly (2009:244) explains that proponents of the current knowledge based curriculum would claim that ‘the task of the school is to transmit the culture of the society... to convey what is worthwhile in that culture to all pupils’ but he explains that a flaw in this argument is it is unclear how it is agreed what is worthwhile and who would decide. Pratt (2016) adds that assessment driven teaching also distorts curricular priorities, favouring measurable attainment over creative or critical forms of knowledge. Cognitive science has also been a key influence on curriculum delivery and content, emphasising memory, retrieval and knowledge retention as central to learning (EEF, 2019). While effective for some forms of knowledge acquisition, critics such as Manyukhina and Wyse (2019; 2025) argue that this dominance marginalises pupil agency and creativity which will be explored in more detail in the next section. Biesta also (2010) warns that such approaches reduce education to ‘learning as output’, framing pupils as consumers of knowledge rather than active agents. Manyukhina, (2022:518) also states that by failing to provide room to build teaching on pupils’ individual interests, goals, and priorities, the curriculum prevents creation of learning experiences that have personal significance for children thus inhibiting the development of their agentic capacity both as pupils and as social citizens. Kirby (2019:25) adds that young children should be able to 'engage in ways that are meaningful and purposeful to them and to pursue transformation rather than simply conformity to the canon’, in direct contrast to Gibb (2016) who explained the importance he placed on pupils memorising curriculum content or knowledge so that it will be ‘in there somewhere’ for when you need it in the future. Furthermore, advocates of the knowledge-rich curriculum often draw on cognitive load theory (Kim et al, 2024);

which stresses the importance of sequencing and limiting new material so that working memory is not overloaded (Sweller, 1988; Sweller et al., 2019). This perspective has been used by curriculum policymakers in England to justify a strong emphasis on core knowledge, though critics question whether this narrow focus constrains the development of broader dispositions and skills (Biesta, 2020). Wyse and Ferrari (2015:233) similarly highlight, in their comparative analysis of European and UK curricula, that creativity is consistently underrepresented in systems dominated by prescribed knowledge and high-stakes assessment. They argue that this marginalisation undermines broader educational aims, such as fostering problem-solving, innovation and learner agency, which could be suggested as essential to success in life.

Kelly (2009:245) explains by adding that a knowledge based curriculum is often 'based on a concern with equality of entitlement' to access of a cultural inheritance 'which will promote their development as human beings' but often means that the curriculum is not grounded in learners' prior knowledge as advocated by Young or Chiasson, but instead, contains specified sets of constrained knowledge linked to assessment criteria in a narrow range of discrete subjects and mainly academic skills. Hargreaves et al., (2023:559) also explain that the dominance of certain types of knowledge contradicts the policy rhetoric about 'closing the gap' and instead entrench educational division. They conclude that without reform to the curriculum-assessment dominance then lower attaining children will continue to be denied the kinds of learning opportunities that foster full educational participation and long-term success. This concern is validated through Hirsch's dismissal of, or lack of concern about, any suggestion that bias is a negative thing by suggesting that it is necessary to include the culture from the dominant classes in society. Hirsch (1983:165) adds that 'to withhold traditional culture from the school curriculum, and therefore from students, in the name of progressive ideas is in fact an unprogressive action' explaining that 'middle class children acquire mainstream literate culture by daily encounters with other literate persons. But less privileged children are denied consistent interchanges with literate persons' and that 'the most straightforward antidote to their deprivation is to make the essential information more readily available inside the schools'. Richardson (2022) also draws us back to Arnold here by reminding us that Arnold believed that the introduction of the best was intended not to 'teach down to the level of inferior classes' instead to liberate the working classes from purely vocational

learning or as Richardson (2022) describes ‘skills for the workplace, …particular vision[s] of healthy relationships’ or how ‘to be climate activists’.

Kelly (2009:248) counters this view by explaining that one of the consequences of ‘attempt[ing] to introduce children to areas of knowledge that they find irrelevant to their own lives and meaningless in relation to their own experience and culture…thus encourages them to reject what they are offered so that it leads not to education but to disaffection and even alienation from both the content of education and society itself’. Young (2008:14) explains that the resulting curriculum is ‘not simply a selection of knowledge but a selection of knowledge that is considered powerful by those who have the power to define it’, becoming a delivery mechanism for predetermined cultural capital. Alexander (2012:504) also feared that curricula which encourage conformity ‘serve[s] as a vehicle for imposing upon the majority the values, beliefs and prejudices of an ideological minority’ which could be argued prevent other ideological minorities seeing their values, beliefs and prejudices as part of the recipe for success in life. This is in contrast to a space for human development where ‘what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among class, race, gender, and religious groups’ (Apple, 2014:63) or where, in the primary school in particular, Priestley & Biesta (2013) explain flexibility and contextual relevance are essential. Grissimer et al. (2023:49) suggest that instead of seeing the curriculum debate as either skills or knowledge a combination is perhaps best and that ‘it would not be surprising to eventually find that ‘skill x knowledge begets skill x knowledge’’. Making the case that building skills and building knowledge are both essential to learning and are more likely to be learned through interaction instead of in conflict to each other (Grissmer et al., 2023:49). Kirby (2019:28) explains that learning linked to skills does not happen in the absence of knowledge acquisition, but pupils are empowered to 'value, learn and engage more deeply with curricular knowledge, as a springboard from which to transform what they know, do and can be in the world’. Furthermore, Kohn (1997:5), when analysing what it means to be well educated explains that ‘knowing stuff may seem harmless, albeit insufficient, but the problem is that this goal, dressed up with pretentious labels like ‘cultural literacy’ has an effect on the more meaningful objectives, such as knowing how to think, act and feel in a self-reliant way. In answer to this call, it is useful to remember that knowledge as cultural capital could be broader than simply the inclusion of the ‘common inheritance’ of canonical texts. However, Coles (2013) explains that this is where the focus has

been placed by many primary schools, as well as experiences such as: visits to the theatre, art galleries, museums or listening to classical music, which are traditionally middle class (DiMaggio, 1982:199) or 'high status cultural participation' (Reay, 2004:74). Moving the literature on, Reay (2004:75) stresses that embodied 'levels of confidence and entitlement' within learners and their parents are also 'key dimensions of cultural capital across social fields'. The 'broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences' (Reay, 2004:74) which build levels of confidence and entitlement in pupils, linked to embodied cultural capital, are harder to teach. This may go some way in explaining why Gutman and Schoon (2013) found that some of the characteristics and attributes they analysed were fixed traits and only some were malleable through the use of school interventions, including socialisation.

A critique of the 'common inheritance' approach, which is said to be taken by many schools (Coles, 2013), is particularly important considering DiMaggio's research which suggests that embodied cultural capital has the most powerful currency in the achievement of educational success (1982:199). The research highlights that 'single doses' of participation in 'status cultures' (for example, visiting museums, theatres, or art galleries) as part of the process of assimilating cultural capital are normally inadequate in their influence on success at school, which is converted into success in life. It could be argued that this finding from DiMaggio (1982:199) could pose problems for schools that focus on these types of cultural capital provision as they may be wasting valuable time and resources on initiatives that will not enable their pupils to succeed in life. This assertion that the bestowing by schools of cultural capital is not proven to improve a pupil's ability to 'succeed in life' is further reinforced by Kingston (2001:88) who clearly argues that the 'acceptance of cultural capital' is widespread in schools without due attention to the 'related empirical evidence' meaning that schools are not transmitters of opportunities but become 'active agents of social reproduction'. Blewitt (2010) strongly reinforces this by explaining that even if children from different classes attend equal quality schools and begin at the same age, poor children lack most of the educational opportunities (at home) which are casually available to the middle-class child and a child with disadvantaged social or economic status can seldom catch up with an advantaged one. Dumais (2002:45) adds that for the assimilation of cultural capital to be effective, pupils 'must have the ability to receive and internalise it', and that is largely dependent on social class and habitus (2.2.5).

Yosso's (2005) theory of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) provides a powerful critique of the dominant use of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in education policy and curriculum design. While Bourdieu (1986) conceptualised cultural capital as the forms of knowledge, skills, and dispositions valued by dominant social groups, Yosso challenges the deficit perspective this entails when applied to marginalised communities. She argues that schools often misrecognise the lived experiences and knowledge forms of minoritised students, reinforcing what she calls a 'white, middle-class frame of reference' (Yosso, 2005:76). In contrast, CCW identifies six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant which are rooted in a desire to see more clearly the strengths of marginalised and working-class communities. These forms of capital are often invisible or undervalued in schools that rely on narrow definitions of success and legitimate knowledge. Instead, Yosso's framework (2005) values relational and experiential forms of knowledge, challenging educators to redefine whose culture counts. However, despite its potential, CCW has not been meaningfully adopted within policy discourses in England, which continue to equate cultural capital with exposure to elite literature, historical narratives, and 'high culture'. This risks perpetuating symbolic violence by implicitly devaluing the cultural wealth of working class and racially minoritised pupils (Yosso, 2005:75; Reay, 2017:21). Savage (2015) also claims that a lack of recognition for a more diverse range of cultural capital or following pupils' interests in curriculum design, can be detrimental to any efforts to engage young people in education and wider society. He explains that in the findings of the Great British Class Survey, cultural capital is currently changing as an increasing number of younger generations are moving away from the 'legitimate' cultures of the influential or elite individuals and institutions, claiming legitimacy for a wider range of cultural activities previously seen as outside the realm of established and acceptable cultural capital. This emerging cultural capital has 'its own infrastructure and might also be institutionalised in new professional workplaces and lifestyles which emphasise the ability to be flexible and adaptable' (Savage, 2015:113) which suggest that the cultural capital of success in life could be more closely linked to the qualities discussed in 2.2.3.

DiMaggio (1982:194), who links the power of embodied cultural capital predominantly to success in the arts and humanities, adds that the assimilation or possession of cultural capital has no impact on a child's ability in subjects like maths which he describes as predominantly requiring the acquisition of skills in a classroom and to be able to answer questions correctly (1982:194). This

distinction by DiMaggio's has been challenged by subsequent research from Lareau and Weininger (2003) who understood the different disciplines to be 'irrevocably fused' with cultural capital (Lareau and Weininger, 2003:574,580). Lareau and Weininger (2003) also return to the additional layer of complexity identified by Reay within Bourdieu's theory, that any association between cultural capital and a student's grades can stem from the tendencies of teachers to communicate more easily with pupils who embody a cultural capital that is sanctioned by the school culture (2003:574, 577). Building on this point, Reay (2017:245) states that 'the dominant curriculum in England is largely based on middle class cultural capital' and it could be acknowledged that the highlighting and dissemination of cultural capital or cultural literacy through the curriculum as a way to succeed in life is an attempt to include (or inculcate) people from non-dominant classes into the legitimate culture by giving them the membership of the literate 'club' (Hirsch, 1985:48). More recently, Major (Woolcock, 2024) has countered this by calling for a curriculum which includes the 'untold stories of the thinkers, artists, writers and scientists who have shaped our work…to demonstrate not only the challenges but also the strengths and benefits that come from starting life in less privileged circumstances', challenging the potential assumptions that role models or examples from the dominant classes always represent the 'best of what has been thought and said' (DfE, 2013a).

Notably, Sullivan (2001:909) does provide some specific guidance through her quantitative research on the impact of cultural capital on educational attainment, that ability and participation in reading develops the intellectual abilities of pupils, whereas participation in formal, high culture does not. Sullivan recognises that this formal cultural participation (visiting museums, attending the opera or classical musical recitals) serves to communicate status but that reading is an example of private cultural consumption as a means of intellectual self-development which does have a positive impact on attainment, with an implication from Sullivan that this has more worth than a public act of cultural participation (Sullivan, 2001:210). It is arguably easy to disagree with Sullivan's view here because reading is a school sanctioned cultural activity, which not all children participate in at home, and status can be transmitted through the choice of reading material. In fact, all forms of culture can be consumed privately or publicly, especially with the rise of social media and digital platforms in the 20 years since her research, where individuals can stream and share all aspects of their life or cultural consumption publicly. For example, channels like Goodreads (2025)

and LinkedIn Learning (2025) allow individuals to list publicly books read or training undertaken, contributing to a sense of hierarchy and status linked to personal intellectual development, in turn becoming a form of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990).

It could be argued that the literature analysed in this chapter does not provide a definitive reason why ‘knowledge and cultural capital’ are the key ingredients for a pupil to be able to 'succeed in life’ but rather reinforces the social and cultural reproduction theory from Bourdieu (1990). The point perhaps which needs to be considered when linking cultural capital to the curriculum, is that ‘We all have cultural capital. The question is, do we have the appropriate forms of sanctioned cultural capital’ (Shubert, 2010:197 in Grenfell, 2008). Reference should also be made here again to the Great British Class Survey (Savage, 2015) mentioned earlier which explains that cultural capital is currently changing as an increasing number of younger generations are moving away from the 'legitimate’ cultures of the influential or elite individuals and institutions, claiming legitimacy for a wider range of cultural activities previously seen as outside the realm of established and acceptable cultural capital. This emerging cultural capital has ‘its own infrastructure and might also be institutionalised in new professional workplaces and lifestyles which ‘emphasize the ability to be flexible and adaptable’ (Savage, 2015:113). It could also be suggested that concentrating on the ‘trips to museums’ or ‘canonical texts’ and not on the ‘individual’s strategic use of knowledge, skills and competence’ (Lareau and Weininger, 2003:2) will in fact maintain the inequalities within society instead of reducing them. This is argued to potentially result in children who already have advantage being best served by the education system as they have the ‘levels of confidence and entitlement’ recognised as ‘key dimensions of cultural capital across social fields’ (Reay, 2020:94).

Tramonte and Willms (2010:201) identify an alternative way to categorise types of ‘cultural capital’ by naming two types: static and relational. Static ‘cultural capital’ is symbolic of the family’s socio-economic status and their ability to access often highbrow cultural experiences and to speak and act in a way that will denote privilege and entitlement to success in life. Relational ‘cultural capital’ embodies the ‘resources and experiences of children that they can use in society to interact strategically and successfully achieve their goals’ and has a greater impact on pupils’ reading, literacy, sense of belonging at school, and occupational aspirations (Tramonte and Willms, 2010).

Therefore, when seeking to answer the question 'Why knowledge and cultural capital?' it is important to consider that if the motivation of Government and Ofsted is to enable more children to fit in with the dominant culture within society through language and dispositions, then this does raise a concern that the policy will simply risk adding to the alienation or symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000) already experienced by children who are regularly reminded by the education system that they do not fit in with the 'particular ways' of society and could affect their sense of belonging. It could be argued that if flourishing does translate to 'success in life' then perhaps it would be most effective if founded on an approach motivated by developing an intrinsic, basic self-esteem in all learners as discussed in 2.2.3.1. Tramonte and Willms' theory of static and relational capital (2010:201) also questions the effectiveness of objectified 'knowledge and cultural capital' as providing the key to fit in with the culturally elite or established society and suggests that governmental education policy should follow the evidence on the importance of a child's sense of belonging at school in relation to their ability to succeed. This suggestion is not about denying any pupil's access to highbrow, established culture but a recognition that there is a wide cultural landscape in England and that it is important not to make assumptions that the forms of culture which have been traditionally viewed as 'successful' or 'legitimate' are still as important. Instead, culture could be explored with a view to strengthening a pupil's sense of self, their own cultural legacy and their entitlement to belong in society in line with earlier work by Willms (2003) who adds that if children feel that they belong in school then they are more likely to succeed in their relationships with others and with social institutions throughout life. School belonging therefore arguably has the potential to translate into a wider sense of belonging in society where individuals can feel 'accepted, respected, included and supported' to belong and contribute to society and not just wrestle with the task of trying to fit in with or meet arbitrary criteria which may or may not recognise their abilities. (Goodenow and Grady, 1993:80, in Walls and Louis, 2023:1).

In summary, the literature reviewed here highlights that while an emphasis on knowledge and cultural capital is presented in policy as a means to raise attainment and tackle structural inequality, the forms prioritised in the National Curriculum and inspection frameworks often reflect the cultural norms of dominant social groups. This narrow framing risks marginalising other forms of knowledge, limiting curricular relevance, and constraining pupils' sense of belonging. It could be argued that if flourishing is to be understood as success in life, then policy and practice might be

most effective when motivated by the development of intrinsic self-esteem, a secure sense of belonging, and the ability to participate fully in society. This extends beyond the acquisition of sanctioned knowledge and cultural capital to include the skills, dispositions, and capabilities that enable learners to navigate diverse contexts and act with purpose. These ideas point toward the concept of agency, which emerged strongly in my participant data as a factor in how both pupils and teachers perceive success in life. The following section therefore turns to the literature on agency in education, exploring how it is conceptualised, supported, and constrained in current policy and practice, and the conditions under which it might be meaningfully fostered in schools to expand prevailing definitions of success in life.

2.4 Teaching, learning, assessment and agency

Participants in my research frequently highlighted autonomy, independent decision making, and the ability to act in line with one's own interests, values and goals as essential to success in life. This section therefore examines how agency is conceptualised in educational theory and policy, and how current structures and practices may enable or constrain it for both teachers and pupils. The discussion does not assume that agency is inherently beneficial or sufficient on its own but treats it as a significant theme that emerged in contrast to dominant narratives focused on knowledge transmission and cultural capital acquisition. Here, agency is used as a lens for understanding participants' priorities and experiences, and for considering how these align or conflict with prevailing policy frameworks. In doing so, this section contributes to the overarching research aim to examine how the primary curriculum is designed and delivered to equip all learners for success in life, and to the second and third research questions concerning how success is defined and how the National Curriculum for primary schools in England may support or inhibit it.

2.4.1 Defining agency

As Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015:30) explain, agency must be understood ecologically: it involves not just what individuals can do, but also what the cultural, structural, material and relational conditions allow or limit. In this way agency is a multidimensional concept encompassing individual capacities as well as the conditions that enable or constrain action. Biesta and Tedder (2007:136) describe agency as 'not something that people can have; it is something that people do'. This frames agency as relational and context dependent, emerging through the

interaction between individuals and their environments. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceptualise agency as a temporally embedded process, shaped by past experiences, present contexts and future aspirations, while Sen's (1999) capability approach provides a complementary lens, framing agency as the real freedom individuals have to achieve the kind of lives they value.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, Manyukhina and Wyse (2019) argue that curricula should deliberately foster learner agency by creating opportunities for choice, voice and participation in decision making. More recently, Manyukhina (2025) develops this into the concept of 'structured freedom', in which pupils exercise autonomy within supportive frameworks that also enable teacher decision making. However, philosophical traditions of equanimity and ataraxia offer a different orientation, brought to life by Nussbaum (2011:34) who terms this state of balance as a 'practical reason' as *'*being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life*'* which could perhaps be read as forms of agency in which individuals act with reflective alignment rather than reactive compliance (Hadot, 1995; Sellars, 2018). In this sense, the exercise of agency in education is not only about choice or autonomy but about developing the capacity to act consistently with one's values in conditions of constraint. While structured freedom offers an important corrective to thin notions of autonomy, it risks veering towards sanctioned compliance with institutional expectations. By contrast, the theme of equanimity that emerged when participants described success in life points to a steadiness that enables individuals to hold to their values and act congruently even within constraint, rather than simply navigating those constraints. This richer understanding aligns with Dewey's (1916) vision of education as a democratic and participatory process in which learners co-construct knowledge through meaningful experience: 'give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results'. Freire (1970) similarly emphasises education as a process of 'conscientisation', where learners critically engage with the world to transform it, rather than absorb prescribed knowledge. Hooks (1994) extends this argument, describing education as 'the practice of freedom', calling for classrooms that foster critical engagement and participation. Psychological perspectives further underscore the significance of agency for wellbeing. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which was mentioned in 2.2.3, highlights autonomy as a basic psychological need alongside competence and relatedness. When these needs are met, learners are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation,

resilience and fulfilment, qualities strongly associated with my participants' definitions of success in life. Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory similarly underscores the importance of self-efficacy in shaping individuals' capacity to act on their goals. These theories provide a basis for understanding how pupils' ability to act autonomously and purposefully is critical to their sense of success in life beyond school.

2.4.2 Teacher agency within current policy parameters

Before the 1988 Education Reform Act, teachers enjoyed significant autonomy to design and deliver curricula responsive to local contexts and community needs (Whitty, 2008). The Act marked a decisive shift towards centralisation, introducing the National Curriculum and national testing, and reducing teachers' role as curriculum makers to curriculum deliverers (Alexander, 2010). Ball (2003, 2017) argues that subsequent neoliberal reforms have further eroded professional judgement, replacing it with compliance to externally defined standards and accountability mechanisms. This performative culture, described by Ball (2017:29) as 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change', positions teachers as subjects of regulation rather than autonomous professionals.

In practice, performativity requires teachers to produce 'fabrications' (Ball, 2000), surface-level performances designed to satisfy external scrutiny rather than genuine pedagogical engagement. Perryman et al. (2023) demonstrate how teachers rehearse lessons and stage conversations with inspectors to meet Ofsted requirements (EIF, 2019), exemplifying how inspection pressures distort practice. Wyse, Bradbury and Trollope (2022) similarly show how data-driven accountability reduces teachers to 'data managers', tasked with generating quantifiable outputs rather than exercising professional knowledge. Such pressures have also been linked to teacher stress and attrition, with many reporting that their professional values are compromised by the need to demonstrate compliance (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020) and accountability (Holloway and Brass, 2018). Priestley et al. (2015) conceptualise teacher agency through an ecological model, highlighting the interplay between teachers' individual capacities, structural conditions and available resources. Their work shows that when policy and accountability regimes undermine autonomy, teachers struggle to enact practices that align with their professional values. This echoes

Gunter's (2011) argument that managerialism displaces pedagogical decision-making with bureaucratic control. In practice, teachers often comply with policy requirements despite privately rejecting or questioning them, a phenomenon Braun and Maguire (2020) term 'doing without believing'. Cotson and Kim (2023) deepen this discussion by making clear that the wellbeing and autonomy of teachers can shape the emotional life of schools, positively and negatively. Their study shows how policy enactment is characterised by pragmatic compliance, resignation and deep unease, revealing the dissonance between professional values and mandated practices. In my research, teachers articulated similar concerns, describing how curriculum and assessment structures restricted their capacity to respond to pupils' needs or pursue creative approaches, ultimately undermining their sense of purpose and wellbeing as educators (4.3).

2.4.3 Pupil agency

Manyukhina and Wyse (2025) note that current policy discourses in England give little explicit attention to pupil agency, a view echoed by Priestley and Xenofontos (2020) whose research shows that reforms since 2010 have prioritised knowledge transmission and standardised testing, leaving limited space for pupils to influence what or how they learn. Wyse and Ferrari (2015) observe that England contrasts with many other education systems around the world where creativity, critical thinking and pupil voice are embedded as core aims of education. In New Zealand, for example, the curriculum prioritises competencies such as managing self, relating to others and participating in communities (Ministry of Education NZ, 2007), demonstrating how knowledge and agency can work alongside each other. Pupils in my research often associated success with making choices, pursuing personal goals and acting in ways consistent with their values as well as developing a what Waterman (1993:678) described as 'personal expressiveness,' through activities that resonate with one's true capacities and interests. For example, one group explored the question 'Is it more important to achieve a goal or have friends?' (Enq2), recognising the potential tension between achievement and relationships. Research by Ranken et al. (2024) shows that experiential and inquiry-based pedagogies can enhance academic outcomes and personal development by increasing engagement and autonomy, an approach valued by participants in my research. Dewey (1916) argues that meaningful education emerges from learners' active participation in constructing knowledge and solving real world problems. Freire (1970) emphasises that education should be

dialogic, enabling learners to question and transform their circumstances, and Hooks (1994) advocates for teaching practices that enable pupils to take ownership of their learning.

Lawson and Lawson (2013) propose that 'agentic engagement' can support pupils' experience of 'cultural congruence', defined as the degree to which students feel their social cultural and personal identities are supported while participating (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018:458) or 'feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others' (Walls and Louis, 2023:1). Fitzpatrick (2018) adds that this framework prioritises the social–cultural realities of learners as the 'foundation of their entire curriculum instead of simply a theme or subject' (2018:458). Furthermore, a shift toward genuine learner agency requires rethinking adult–child relationships in the classroom. Garratt (2021), building on ethnographic research, challenges the assumption that adults should always occupy the epistemic high ground. She calls for educators and researchers to adopt the 'least adult role', fostering a more relational, dialogic model in which children's perspectives actively shape the learning encounter. While current accountability structures often position pupils as passive recipients of predefined knowledge, Garratt's model situates them as co-constructors of understanding within supportive structures. This resonates with Manyukhina and Wyse's (2025) vision of structured freedom and supports my argument that developing success in life through the primary curriculum depends on relationships built on trust, autonomy and shared purpose.

Although learner agency is widely promoted as a progressive educational aim, its enactment in English primary schools is often constrained by the very systems it is intended to challenge. As Manyukhina and Wyse (2019) argue, agency must be understood as socially situated, yet too often it is treated as individual autonomy exercised within highly constrained curricular and assessment frameworks. Choices offered to pupils may occur within tightly pre-scripted spaces, creating only the appearance of meaningful freedom (Biesta, 2010; Garratt, 2021). In this sense, agency can become a sanctioned form of compliance that helps children navigate systems which remain misaligned with their lived realities. The literature shows that pupil and teacher agency can be affected by many of the structural elements discussed in 2.2. These include assessment and 'datafication' processes (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017:48) as well as the focus on social mobility and social reproduction, which can disadvantage pupils whose cultural and linguistic

resources do not align with dominant norms, leading to misrecognition and deficit labelling (Simpson, 2023; Reay, 2020; Savage and Williams, 2008). Walton and Brady (2017) add that such alienation can reduce academic performance, motivation and mental health for pupils who feel they do not fit in. Biesta (2010) warns that policy rhetoric about pupil 'responsibility' often disguises a narrow form of agency in which pupils are expected to take ownership of externally imposed goals without meaningful participation in shaping them. Garratt (2016) critiques this as a form of neoliberal governance that frames agency as compliance rather than empowerment or belonging. In summary, prioritising belonging through recognition of all learners and their families, without bias or assumptions about social class, could help prevent situations in which individuals feel disconnected from their cultural background through participation in education. Pupils in such circumstances may feel obliged to leave their family behind physically or culturally to 'succeed in life' and may experience guilt that leads to lower self-esteem, depressive symptoms and withdrawal from education (Covarrubias et al., 2014); Reay (2009:1110) describes this as an out of habitus experience, where the pupil's habitus appears at odds with the institution they are part of or hope to enter. This situation persists, with Major and Eyles (2022) identifying a continuing 'desperate need' for evidence informed approaches for schools to engage with parents from all backgrounds.

2.4.4 Belonging and agency for teachers and learners

Belonging is central to this discussion because pupils are more likely to be motivated to learn and exercise agency when their voices and experiences are recognised as legitimate (Mitra, 2018:475) and they feel part of a collaborative community. Goodenow (1993) defines belonging as the extent to which pupils feel accepted, respected and included within the school environment. Walton and Brady (2017) argue that when pupils feel they belong, both they and their teachers experience reduced stress, contributing to improved achievement. Jetten et al. (2012) caution that genuine belonging involves 'being accepted for who one truly is' whereas fitting in often requires conformity to dominant norms. Walton and Cohen (2011:1447) similarly note that belonging is the experience of being connected to others and feeling that one's presence and participation matter. Wilms (2003:8) adds that pupils who feel they belong see school as essential to their long-term wellbeing, engage in academic and non-academic pursuits and maintain good relationships with staff and peers. In contrast, pupils who lack this sense of belonging may disengage from school and, in the context of my research, be less likely to succeed in life. Reay et al. (2010) show that the

experience of ‘fitting in’ or ‘standing out’ reflects the role of embodied cultural capital and can exacerbate inequalities for disadvantaged and SEND pupils. Davis (2003:38) critiques character education approaches that expect learners to model externally determined traits rather than develop values through lived experience and reflection. For teachers, a similar relationship holds, professional agency is strengthened when they feel trusted, respected by their colleagues (Sullanmaa et al, 2023) and able to adapt pedagogy to the needs of their pupils rather than being constrained by narrowly defined measures of success. Current policy structures, however, often create tensions between cultivating agency and meeting externally imposed targets. Where these tensions are not addressed, agency risks being reduced to compliance, an illusion of choice that does little to challenge structural inequities or broaden definitions of success. By considering agency alongside knowledge and cultural capital, success in life can be reframed as the capacity to act purposefully, engage critically and contribute to one’s communities. In this framing, belonging is a necessary condition for agency, shaping pupils’ engagement, wellbeing and capacity to pursue the forms of success that matter to them.

2.5 Concluding thoughts

Ofsted’s (2019:6) requirement that schools provide ‘the knowledge and cultural capital pupils need to succeed in life’ is a wide reaching yet undefined directive, shaping curriculum design, teaching practice and accountability in primary education in England. This review has examined how knowledge and cultural capital are positioned in policy and theory, and whether these concepts, as currently framed, can meet the aim of enabling all pupils to succeed in life. The literature shows that dominant interpretations of success are closely tied to a knowledge-rich orthodoxy that privileges academic attainment and culturally dominant forms of knowledge. This approach, reinforced by cognitive-science-informed pedagogies and narrow accountability measures, has narrowed the curriculum and reduced opportunities for teachers and pupils to exercise agency. In adopting Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital, policymakers have shifted it from a critical sociological idea to a mechanism for reproducing dominant cultural forms, often overlooking the diverse knowledge, experiences and resources that pupils bring to school. In contrast, the findings of my research (Chapter Four) indicate that pupils, parents and teachers hold broader and more relational understandings of success, emphasising happiness, independence, problem-solving and

strong relationships. These perspectives align with theories of self-determination, which highlight autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and suggest that the ability to act purposefully and in line with one's values is as important as academic achievement. Yet current curriculum structures often limit the forms of autonomy and intentional action valued by participants.

This literature review has also shown that belonging is a necessary condition for agency, influencing both engagement and wellbeing. When pupils and teachers feel recognised, respected and able to participate in shaping their learning, they are more likely to engage critically with knowledge and contribute to their communities. By considering agency alongside knowledge and cultural capital, success in life can be reframed as more than the acquisition of sanctioned knowledge. It becomes the capacity to navigate diverse contexts, make informed choices and sustain a sense of purpose over time. These insights, taken together, respond to the aim of this research: to explore how the primary curriculum is designed and delivered to equip all learners for success in life. They also address the research questions by highlighting how official narratives of success are constructed and enacted in schools, how these narratives compare with the perspectives of pupils, parents and teachers, and where points of convergence and tension emerge.

Chapter Three: Methodology, Research Design and Analysis

3.1 Introduction

The following chapter outlines both my theoretical framework in 3.2 and in 3.3 the methods used to gather and analyse the data. Section 3.2 introduces the theoretical framework that underpins my study: a pragmatic phenomenology designed to help me uncover meaning and construct a rigorous and useful analysis of the data.

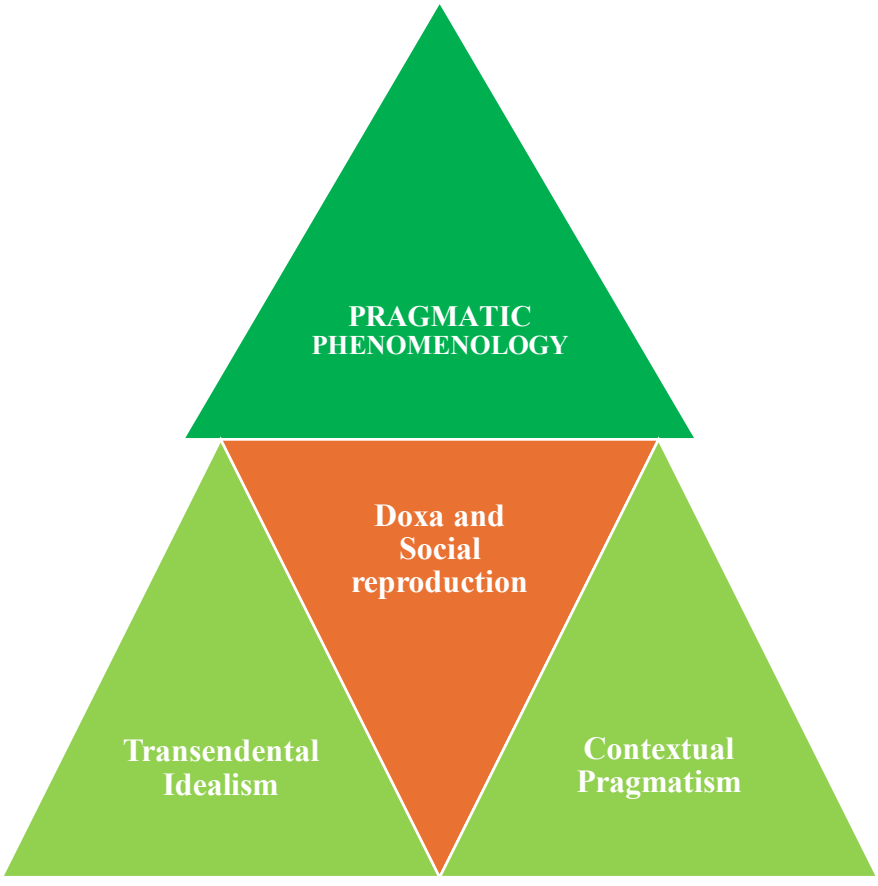

Figure 1: Pragmatic Phenomenology: Theoretical Framework (Moses, 2025).

Figure 1 illustrates how I have adapted phenomenological principles to create an approach that is both philosophically grounded and practically responsive to the primary school in England, linking directly to the structure of this chapter. My pragmatical phenomenological approach combines elements of Husserl's transcendental idealism (3.2.3) and Dewey's contextual pragmatism (3.2.4) to consider the phenomenon of 'success in life' within the broader sociological structures examined by Bourdieu's theory of doxa and cultural capital (3.2.2) in search of a dynamic equilibrium between the ideal and the real (3.2.5).

Once the rationale for this framework has been established, Section 3.3 turns to the research design. This begins with a description of the ethics rationale and processes for my research (3.3.1) and then the sample and participant overview in 3.3.2, before outlining the three-stage process of data collection: Stage One, acknowledging and transcending the natural attitude (3.3.3); Stage Two, contextual pragmatism (3.3.4); and Stage Three, finding the essence of dynamic equilibrium (3.3.5). Section 3.4 then details the analytic procedures used to interpret the data, and Section 3.5 offers concluding reflections on the methodological approach. Together, these sections provide a coherent account of how the research was framed, conducted and analysed, ensuring transparency and rigour in the exploration of the central research questions in 1.4.

3.2 Theoretical framework – finding meaning

3.2.1 Reminder of key concepts

As introduced 1.1, when encountering this statement from Ofsted (2019:6) I wanted to find a way to understand the key concepts outlined as well as their implied causal relationships: 'curriculum', 'all learners' 'knowledge and cultural capital', with the ultimate aim being the achievement or acquisition of 'success in life' through a school curriculum in England. Here is a brief reminder of the spark for my thesis:

Leaders take on or construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life (Ofsted, 2019:6).

3.2.2 The theoretical problem – doxa and social reproduction.

When starting on my research, I became aware through the literature in 2.2 that there were many ways in which people might view the concept of success in life. Duckworth et al. (2012:1) describe that there are two sides to the concept of success, namely, subjective, how we 'think and feel about our own lives', and objective which is 'how we stack up to others according to widely held standards'. Hughes and Sharrock (1997:30) echo this to say that it is reasonable to suppose that research about a subject as human as the success of one's life is likely to elicit subjective or 'entirely relative' viewpoints running the risk of the findings being speculative or too varied. This view of subjectivity is well regarded by many aspects of social research, yet I continue to be reminded of the fact that the term 'success in life' is used by Ofsted (2019:6) as an outcome for something as specific as curriculum design, and not as a throw away phrase in a speech or essay. Therefore, due to the undefined and potentially ambiguous use of the term success in life by Ofsted (2019:6) I feel that it is necessary for my research to seek as dispassionate, clear and unbiased a view of the phenomenon as possible so that it can be of use to future curriculum designers. This desire led me to consider if it would be more appropriate to seek a positivist stance for my research so that I could find out if there is any 'permanence, durability and independence from human volition' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997:30) to the characteristics of 'success in life' and whether it was possible or not to ascertain any 'objective truths or ubiquitous traits' about success in life that curriculum designers could use as aims or objectives of the primary school curriculum in England (Duckworth, 2012).

My reading then brought me to Atkinson (2020:19) who cautions against a positivist methodology for social research, as he reminds us of Bourdieu's theory of doxa, which explains that what we may think of as common sense, or a universal understanding of a phenomenon, is the product of all sorts of unconscious drives and complexes leading us to interpret our experience of the world in certain ways. This caution from Atkinson (2020) chimed with my sense that there may be another dimension to the concept of success in life in the form of an acceptance by individuals of the way things are in society and in schools as being normal for everyone, and that this 'misrecognition of forms of social arbitrariness' as common to all people 'creates the unformulated, non-discursive, yet internalized' environment within a school that is not right for all learners (Deer, 2008:120). Furthermore, I also understand this to mean that doxa has the potential to influence how

people define success in their own lives, in contrast with the unwritten environment - what makes them feel like they have success in their lives (or their ontology), compared to what they know (their epistemology). Is this perhaps the unspoken message of what success represents in the society which has produced the National Curriculum for primary Schools in England?

Therefore, I wanted to find out if the participants felt that their version of success could be or was legitimate, another term from Bourdieu introduced in 2.2.5, in its own right, regardless of whether or not it matched up to what they knew as the established notions of success discussed in 2.2.1. Therefore, within the parameters of my theoretical framework the way I wanted to work with the participants could be viewed as representing an intertwining of my epistemology and ontology. This is because their understanding of what exists (ontology) or how they see 'success in life' operating in the world is built through how they perceive and reflect on their own success in life (epistemology). Consequently, I wanted to gather the unadulterated perceptions of people currently in receipt of the primary school curriculum about the nature of success in life and their views on the role of the National Curriculum for primary schools in England in achieving it. My framework is also guided by my recognition and acknowledgement that the individuals taking part in this project were not only participants of a research study but also participants in the phenomena being investigated (success in life and the primary school curriculum) so it was essential to me that their unique perspective and experiences would not be treated as 'less rational' (Denscombe, 2002:78) than my thinking as the researcher and therefore ought not to be interpreted significantly, which will be explained more thoroughly in 3.4 Analysis.

For my theoretical framework to work and for this research to be most effective in offering new insights on the concept of *success in life* it became necessary to find a way to help the participants to move beyond Bourdieu's notion of doxa (Deer, 2008 in Grenfell, 2008:120) which represents 'what is taken for granted' by dominant parts of society. This framework could provide the space for the research participants to question the 'unquestioned because it [currently] lies beyond any notion of enquiry' (ibid.). Deer (2008) explains that Bourdieu described doxa operating beneath the level of critical reflection; people act within it without conscious awareness, believing that the way things are is simply the way things should be. In turn, doxa then shapes one's behaviour and perceptions through the internalisation of certain dispositions and one's social position in society

(referred to as habitus by Bourdieu) and outlined in 2.2.3, that is the embodied cultural capital that a child may acquire at an early age from their homelife. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). We are also reminded here that in 2.2.6, DiMaggio (1982:199) describes embodied cultural capital as the most powerful currency in the achievement of educational success. The characteristics of certain types of habitus, described as 'middle class' by Reay (2020) then can become the doxa or the deeply ingrained beliefs, norms, and values that are accepted as natural or self-evident within groups of people throughout society. These assumptions can also then lead to an unconscious feeling by policy makers about anything that is not 'middle class' as being felt as somehow illegitimate or in need of 'cultural capital'. This is exemplified by the conflation of the descriptor 'working class' with 'disadvantaged' by the DfE when presenting evidence to the House of Commons Education Committee in 2021 (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2021) (2.3.1). Furthermore, I wanted to find a way for the participants of this research (who can also live within the realm of doxa without questioning it - because it forms the implicit, unquestioned background of their social world) to transcend any biases they might hold that could influence the negative and positive views they may have about their own ability, and potential to succeed in life.

The concepts of doxa and habitus are not new, and it could be argued that a link can be made from them back to Aristotle's concept of habit or ethos **(**Kenny, 1995) which deemed that much of human behaviour is guided by our habitual and repeated actions or experiences, or what Bourdieu may call embodied cultural capital, that shape how we interact with the world. Therefore, it is recognised that the individual perspectives and experiences provided by my research participants could well be tied up with social constructs and each individual's experience, potentially undermining any claim of the objectivity of this data. As discussed in 2.2.3 a possible alternative to teaching cultural capital, Aristotle saw the attribute of phronesis, or practical wisdom and understanding, as being key to someone who could achieve success in life, and this refers to the ability of an individual to act wisely in particular situations by drawing on experience and understanding. It is the reflective capacity to deliberate and make judgments about the right action, regardless of external pressures. Therefore, the problem posed for my methodological framework was to find a way to transcend the pre-reflective or habitual understanding of 'success in life' and to 'investigate the phenomenon free from any external interpretation or suppositions*'* (Gearing, 2004:1436).

When considering the best way to capture perspectives and experiences in this way, my initial thought is one of interpretivism as Denscombe (2002:18) informs us that it is the approach used to capture a social reality that is 'constructed and interpreted by people'. Interpretivism is described as a philosophical approach that embraces the understanding by research participants of social phenomena through their subjective meanings and interpretations within their social context (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009:6). It focuses on 'what is meant by seeing' (ibid.) and highlights that our understanding of phenomena cannot always be captured by quantitative or positivist approaches but is 'perspectival' (ibid.) which means it is inseparable from the human participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations, viewing reality as socially constructed and subjective. However, it was still uppermost in my mind that I did not want to wrongly interpret the views of my research participants due to my own doxa, and I did not want to do what I critique as the government's approach of making assumptions about people different from myself.

Denscombe (2002:74) explains that one aspect of interpretivism called phenomenology 'offers an alternative to positivism' without losing rigour or 'simply seeing the social world as totally individual things' (Denscombe, 2002:80). To assist with the consideration of whether or not it is possible to find one objective definition of success in life or whether only varied and subjective definitions are possible, I also bring in Gallagher and Zahavi, (2020) who explain a specific approach to phenomenology, called transcendental phenomenology, originated by the German philosopher and mathematician, Edmund Husserl. Transcendental phenomenology asks us to recognise that research findings or the 'ingredients of thinking' do not need to be either 'singular or universal' but can be both (Husserl, 2013:11). Husserl described his approach as a 'new philosophy' which is designed to help us find the truth, or 'genuine philosophical insights' (2013:43) into ideas or experiences, called phenomena. Farrell (2020:1) deepens this description by adding that Husserl's philosophical framework is 'at once a philosophy, a perspective and an approach to research' which could provide a coherent flow for my work from the theoretical methodology into practical research methods and analysis. Hughes and Sharrock (1997:136) describe this approach as not positivist but also not abandoning the 'quest for the indubitable grounds of knowledge'. Husserl created his phenomenological framework as a way to isolate the 'invariant features and structures' (Brooks, 2015:642) of phenomena and to describe these as precisely as possible so that a clear and unblinkered view could emerge as a 'noninterpreted basis

for knowledge' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997:137). I understand this to mean that by using Husserl's transcendental phenomenology I may be able to find some universal or perhaps as Duckworth (2012) describes, 'ubiquitous' characteristics of success in life that resonate with most of my participants, at the same time as allowing for the emergent or unexpected descriptions to arise. Denscombe (2002:14) adds that this approach can enable researchers to discover the 'underlying, fundamental aspects of experience' that 'lie at the very heart of human experience' which he describes as universal, different to the positivist endeavour of identifying a singular, objective truth or 'factual knowledge'. Sinha (1963:562) adds that Husserl's claimed that his phenomenology was 'genuine positivism' in which an observer can be objective through phenomenological reduction is what makes his approach distinctive. This is a view which is reinforced by Luft's (2004:224) use of the term 'Archimedean point' describing Husserl's approach of a theoretical vantage point which seeks yet accepts the unattainable nature of an objective view (or detached perspective) of reality in the endeavour of finding a comprehensive understanding or evaluation of a phenomenon. Therefore, after careful consideration, I have decided to adopt Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as the central plank for my theoretical approach, described by Giorgi (2012:4) as 'a frame of reference for studying human (experiential and behavioural) phenomena' that would be both a 'rigorous and non-reductionist' means of investigating the inner world of my research participants, their subjective experiences and perceptions on the concept of success in life.

3.2.3 Transcendental idealism

The section, identified in Figure 1 as *transcendental idealism* reflects the clear-eyed and unbiased approach to understanding phenomena advocated by Husserl. Here, I introduce two central themes of his phenomenology: the *natural attitude* and *phenomenological reduction* (Husserl, 2013:9). Both are relevant to my theoretical framework and my aim to find a methodological approach that allows pupils, parents, and teachers to freely explore the concept of success in life. Through this understanding, I aim to reflect on the role of the English primary school curriculum in supporting learners to achieve success and contribute new knowledge on the subject.

First, Husserl's concept of the natural attitude refers to the unreflective way individuals engage with the world, accepting experiences and perceptions as 'unquestionably real' (Husserl, 2013:9). It could be argued that in education, the natural attitude manifests as the standardised structuring of

systems and practices, assuming that established curricula and methods are valid, or legitimate to use the term from Bourdieu, and should be transmitted without question. This could result in a conventional approach that emphasises knowledge transmission or ‘economic competitiveness’ (Ball, 2017:14) over critical inquiry or challenging the assumptions that shape educational practices. Husserl's second concept, reduction, offers a way to transcend this natural attitude, fostering a more reflective and open-minded approach that encourages deeper engagement with the learning process. In planning this research, it was crucial not to reinforce pre-existing notions or suggest that participants should reach a singular 'correct' answer about success in life. This research aims to enable participants to break free from societal structures and describe the phenomenon without being influenced by the 'orthodoxy' of success, as highlighted by Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2008:76; Bourdieu, 1973). Bourdieu’s theory of doxa or what is taken for granted and unquestioned aligns with Husserl’s natural attitude, both of which can legitimise arbitrary knowledge and perpetuate inequality. Husserl’s phenomenological reduction seeks to overcome these preconceptions by setting aside 'all the convictions we have been accepting' (Husserl, 2013:6). Through bracketing, the researcher or the participant temporarily suspends natural attitudes and biases, approaching experiences with open-mindedness (Giorgi, 2011). This shift in focus allows the researcher and participants to reflect on their consciousness rather than external objects. The transcendental nature of this reduction enables the study to capture the raw and essential aspects of the participants’ perceptions of success in life (Giorgi, 2011; Butler, 2016; Stolz, 2023). The next stage, eidetic reduction, seeks to uncover the essential characteristics of a phenomenon through imaginative variation and intuition. By employing eidetic reduction, Husserl aims to identify the universal structures within experiences, moving beyond real-life manifestations to understand deeper truths. This process is integral to my research design and is detailed further in 3.3.3.

Importantly, this Husserlian method allows for first-person perceptions that are not influenced by my own experiences with the primary school curriculum. Luft (2004:198) stresses the uniqueness of Husserl’s approach, which goes beyond philosophical expression to transcend the everydayness of thinking about phenomena (Luft, 2004:204). Husserl's transcendental reduction is a key component of his philosophy, aimed at uncovering the essence of conscious experience. By employing this method, he reveals how phenomena are constituted in consciousness, independent of external realities and later in 3.3 I explain how I integrated this theory into my research design through questionnaires, concept games, and collaborative enquiry. Finally, it is essential to

acknowledge the caution from Cassell et al. (2018) that phenomenological insights, in isolation, may yield abstract or idealised definitions. Luft (2004) also reminds us that phenomenological reduction is not a permanent state but a continual oscillation between being in the world and reflecting on it. The next section reconciles Husserl's reduction, which aims for simplicity, with the complex realities of the English primary school system.

3.2.4 Contextual pragmatism

To counter the critique that Husserl's phenomenology elicits to abstract a definition (Cassell et al., 2018) the question arises then, how to engage with Husserl's theoretical approach which encompasses a philosophical and 'positivist-like' rigour but also offer solutions relevant to the ongoing lives of the research participants and future recipients of the primary school curriculum. I now call on Giorgi's (2012:11) guidance that when using Husserl's phenomenology, researchers should adopt the perspective of the discipline they are studying. In the context of my research, this would be an appropriate pedagogical or sociological attitude which acknowledges the elements of phenomenology outlined above but also the critiques which call for a balancing between ideal and real visions of reality. Therefore, here I will explain why I have decided to adopt what Cilliers and Preiser (2016:210) describe as a 'complexity attitude' when approaching my research which they state enables an individual or society to re-examine the 'way in which we conceive of [and] determine the nature of our institutions, and thus of the world we live in'. By doing this I want to recognise that the creation of a primary school curriculum in England with the aim of helping children achieve success in life is a complex phenomenon which is not simple or static. However, I also want to make clear that complex does not mean complicated, and they differ significantly in their nature and implications.

First, I borrow Semetsky's (2008:84) useful definition that 'complexity theory is a conceptual framework used for the purpose of analysing the behaviour of systems that consist of a large number of interacting components'. It could be argued that there is complexity not just at the policy or curriculum level of Primary education in England but throughout the system: within classrooms, individuals and groups. In the English education system, there is a tendency to simplify complex concepts or subjects to make them more easily digestible and manageable for students as discussed in 2.3. This simplification often leads to the perception that complexity is equivalent to complication, where intricate topics are reduced to bite-sized extracts, linear, or standardised

formats. It could be argued that National Curriculum structures, standardised testing in KS2, and prescribed teaching techniques (Rosenshine, 2012) often prioritise breaking down complex ideas into more straightforward, manageable components, sometimes oversimplifying or omitting interconnections between concepts. Furthermore, the pressure on teachers to adhere strictly to a prescribed National Curriculum (DfE, 2013b) and meet specific performance targets might limit their ability to delve deeply into complex topics or explore tangential aspects that could enrich students' understanding and their enjoyment of their job. It can also prevent teachers from developing and benefiting from a 'complexity attitude' where a recognition of difference is a positive thing and instead of focusing on a child's deficiency it builds stronger relationships between pupils, teachers and the whole school community (Freire, 1993; Kohn, 1997). Furthermore, Page and Sidebottom (2022) encourage us to remember that school is a multi-sensory experience encountered by teachers as well as pupils, whose movement can be hindered and 'pre-scripted via direct instruction classroom routines' (2022:6).

Therefore, I wanted to find a key contributor to the field of education as my guide for this complexity approach and found guidance from Biesta (1994:105) who states that Dewey's viewpoint should be used as a 'framework ...to envisage education' (ibid.) in a way that was not 'fixed and static'. Instead, Biesta saw Dewey as a framework for a pedagogy for 'communicative action' (Biesta, 1994:106) where we are conscious of the many influences, including their past and present, on people's subjectivities and perceptions when entering into the field of education. John Dewey, an American, empirical philosopher and educational reformer, developed his pragmatic approach to philosophy and psychology which focused on the experiential and contextual nature of reality, centred around the idea that reality is not fixed and static but rather dynamic and continuously evolving through human experience and interaction. Dewey's pragmatism provides the sector with a specific approach (recommended by Giorgi), through dialogue and reflection, to ensure that the philosophical definition identified is useful and relevant to real life experiences and situations of the research participants (Dewey, 1916).

Before explaining my reading of Dewey's approach as a dynamic framework 'which stresses the interconnectedness of knowledge, social environment and experiences' with which to view education, I will spend a moment to share the insight from Trotter (2016:30). Trotter (ibid.) asserts that the very 'motor' that drives the thought of both Husserl and Dewey is the firm belief that

‘subject cannot be fundamentally separated from object’. Trotter (2016:31) explains that both Husserl and Dewey are critical of traditional forms of dualism which separates subjective and objective aspects of human experience and advocate for a more holistic understanding. In doing so they argued against reducing human experience to distinct, isolated elements, but instead advocated for a recognition of the complex interrelated nature of experience that constitutes the essence of both philosophy and science. Trotter (2016:32) continues by saying that a synthesis of Husserl’s theoretical enquiries with ‘ordinary life-experiences’ would, according to Dewey, render them ‘more significant, more luminous and make our dealing with them more fruitful’. Furthermore, Trotter adds that Husserl asserted that this approach to phenomenology allows us to once again ask the proper questions ‘questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of human existence’ (Trotter, 2016:32). It could also be suggested that the adoption of Dewey’s pragmatism to supplement my use of Husserl’s phenomenological methods provides an accessible way to operate the potentially remote or alienating phenomenological devices of reduction, bracketing and imaginative variation (Garrison and Shargel, 1988). Pragmatism can serve as a philosophical programme for social research, regardless of whether that research uses qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. As a new paradigm, it replaces the old philosophy of knowledge approach which understands social research in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology. This claim to be a new paradigm rests on demonstrating the broader value of pragmatism as a philosophical system, along with its immediate practicality for issues such as research design (Morgan, 2014:1045).

Returning to the need for an understanding of complexity as a key part of my theoretical framework, Davis and Sumara (2010:856) suggest that 'the project of education is among the most complex of human enterprises’ as it involves a wide range of interests and motivations, including, 'individual interest, social need, disciplinary diversity, cultural self-perpetuation’. Here I will explain further why and how I take this recognition of Deweyan complexity as the ‘phenomenological attitude’, prescribed by Giorgi (2012:11), which drives the theoretical framework of my research and my recognition of the inherent dynamism, relational essence, and holistic implications of primary school education in England. Cilliers and Preisner (2016:12) challenge us to use complexity to explore and ‘influence the manner in which we act and live in the world’. Cilliers and Preisner (2016:17) add that complex phenomena cannot be given ‘simple descriptions’ but instead call for a ‘diversity of methods and interventions’ (2016:17) which are sensitive to the context within which they operate. Complexity theory seeks to comprehend how

these systems self-organise, adapt, and evolve over time, often exhibiting patterns, feedback loops, and behaviours that are unpredictable or difficult to anticipate due to the interconnectedness among their components. Rather than focusing solely on reductionist approaches that break down systems into their constituent parts, complexity theory emphasises the holistic examination of interactions and relationships within systems, recognising the inherent uncertainty, nonlinearity, and the potential for surprising outcomes that arise from the collective behaviours of these interconnected elements. Morin (2001) reminds us that understanding complexity involves acknowledging the dynamic nature of these systems, including education, and appreciating the often-unforeseen consequences of their interactions, offering insights into the behaviours and patterns that emerge from the complex interplay of numerous components.

David and Sumara (2010:857) provide an educational lens for this attitude by explaining that an acceptance of complexity provides an opportunity to 'open up conversations about rethinking the pragmatics of teaching'(ibid.). Therefore, I will now explore how I deepen my use of transcendental phenomenology by adopting Dewey's approach to pragmatism and explain how his philosophical framework provides me with the conceptual ability to adopt the complexity attitude to examining the primary school curriculum and its ability to provide leaners with what they need to succeed in life (Dewey, 2010). Firstly, Dewey's philosophy stresses the interconnectedness of knowledge and experiences (Trotter, 2016:27) and he believed that learning is not isolated but occurs within a broader context, emphasising the interconnectedness between the individual learner, the social environment, and the world around them. Complexity theory acknowledges the adaptability and evolution of systems over time which is also emphasised by Dewey for learning environments as he advocated for educational settings that allow for experimentation and adaptation based on the changing needs and experiences of learners. Dewey also stressed the significance of connecting learning to real-life situations and 'solutions to real problems' (Trotter, 2016:27) which links back to 2.3 which suggests that to enable education to be adaptive, teachers should be trusted and be able to trust themselves to continually assess and modify their teaching methods to meet the changing needs of students and the society they live in. Dewey also advocated for dialogue, reflective thought and collaboration between teachers and learners in the classroom (Dewey, 2010) and promoted teachers acting as facilitators who guide learners' enquiries and explorations with an emphasis on social interaction and collaboration in learning, linking with Cilliers and Preisner's (2016:210) call for a re-examination of the 'way in which we conceive of

[and] determine the nature of our institutions, and thus of the world we live in'. Semetsky (2008:84) adds that complex systems are 'first and foremost relational' and that these communicative actions (Biesta, 1995) act in a non-linear manner. Nonlinearity means that there is not always a clear relationship between cause and effect or inputs or outputs within the system and that 'a single cause may...lead to a multiplicity of effects; conversely, a single effect may be produced by a multiplicity of causes' (Semetsky, ibid.). Semetsky (2008) explains that both Dewey and complexity theorists accept and recognise non-linear processes within systems, wherein small changes can lead to significant and unpredictable outcomes. Dewey's pragmatism emphasises that learning is not a linear progression but rather involves complex interactions and varied pathways. This approach is described by Simpson (2018:57) as allowing a 'world-in-process' which is emerging through the 'interplay between thoughts and action' to emerge. It also reinforces Finlay's (2012: 173) description of Husserl's phenomenology as 'more than a method, phenomenology demands an open way of being, one that examines taken-for-granted human situations as they are experienced in everyday life, but which go typically unquestioned'.

Furthermore, Luft (2004:204) explains that Husserl's method of reduction allows a move away (albeit temporarily) from the unquestioning natural attitude which could prevent us from 'being blind to the correlativity of world and experience' and allow a greater adherence to 'the subject-relatedness of all experience' (Luft, 2004:204). The process of phenomenological inquiry, as well as the subsequent reflection by research participants, also resonates with Dewey's belief that reflection entails reviewing past experiences to extract meaningful insights, which serve as valuable resources for engaging with future experiences (Dewey, 1938:87). It is envisaged that my participant responses will likely include both data of sense and data of consciousness as participants communicate their direct perceptions of the world along with self-reflective perceptions of their cognitive processes (Perry, 2013:268). The organisation of these theoretical frameworks into practical research design is explained in greater detail in 3.3.

Finally, complexity theory within the context of education emphasises the significance of recognising the context of learning (Morin, 2001:49) which supports Dewey's philosophy that learning should be relevant and meaningful to students' lives. Dewey emphasised the importance of the relationship between the individual and their environment, asserting that individuals construct their understanding of the world through active engagement with their surroundings that allow

students to explore different approaches and solutions to problems (Dewey, 1997). Dewey believed that knowledge and meaning are not detached from experience but are shaped and reconstructed through ongoing interactions and problem-solving in real-life situations (Dewey, 1938:75). In the context of education, Dewey's theory aligns with educational approaches that emphasise problem solving learning which allows children to explore, discover, and learn by doing (Dewey, 1938:75; Morin, 2001). This approach fosters critical thinking and creativity which were discussed earlier in 2.3.1 as key elements to being successful in life. In essence, both Dewey's educational philosophy and complexity theory share common ground in recognising the dynamic, interconnected, and adaptive nature of learning environments and systems. They both emphasise the importance of considering the whole system, context, and the interactions within it to understand and facilitate effective learning processes. Cilliers and Preisner (2016:18) encourage us to use complexity theory to 'engage…through reflection and a change of approach on what it means to be human' or as David and Sumara (2010:286) describe a function of the education system is 'humanity's efforts to situate itself in the more-than-human world'.

Reference to 'what it means to be human' (Cilliers and Preisner, 2016:18) or the 'more-than-human world' (David and Sumara, 2010:286) also brings to mind the work of Murris (2016) and Page and Sidebottom (2022) who advocate for a post-human approach to education and childhood. This approach to education allows for a recognition of the child, or learner in this context, as a 'subject acting in the world' (Murris, 2016:187) instead of as a passive 'person acted upon by others' (ibid.). This recognition of a child as a 'social person in their own right' (Murris, 2016:187) also brings to mind Dewey's commitment that education is 'a process of living and not a preparation for future living' (Dewey,1938) which I understand to mean that education should be a continuous, experiential process, mirroring the ongoing and evolving processes of feedback found in the nature of life itself. Page and Sidebottom (2022) support this approach by calling for 'a shift from learning-as-cognition to a focus on connections between humans and non-human others…and a recognition that other-than-human agents are always present in processes of learning'. When I am considering this approach, I am again reminded of Dewey, who asks us when considering the shape of education to 'think about natural development of an infant' and to find 'conscious and deliberate' ways to do what nature does (Dewey, 1938:74) or as Page and Sidebottom (2022) advocate, a move from the primacy of the written and spoken word to the re-emergence of the embodied self. I am not here going to provide an analogy between the education system and the natural world but

through the acknowledgment of complexity as the lens through which I frame my theory, I am acknowledging that the achievement of success in a person's life is more than the inclusion of certain separate elements or component parts, instead the sum of the interaction and relations between these elements (Cilliers and Preisner, 2016:120), operating in a stable and resilient way that looks to the future (Plekhanov and Rogacheva, 2019:1).

There are some differences between the two philosophers, Husserl and Dewey, that are important to acknowledge here. For example, Dewey emphasised the interconnectedness of thought, action, and experience whereas Husserl sought to explore the structures of consciousness and subjective experience in a more systematic and rigorous way, focusing on description and analysis. Interestingly, however, Gallagher and Zahavi (2020:170) assert that Husserl believed his transcendental approach was not only compatible with the empirical realism of pragmatism but that he thought the 'latter requires the former'(ibid.). Garrison and Sharbel (1988:240) add that 'both Dewey and Husserl are empiricists, but of very different kinds', Dewey is experimental, and Husserl is radical, influenced by early pragmatist William James, who in turn influenced John Dewey. This suggests that working with both philosophies will enable me to dynamically balance the individual experience with an objective observation of it. Next, I also think it is useful to take on board Stawarska's (2009) critique of Husserl's approach, which outlined the need for phenomenology to be dialogical to be effective. Recognising the relationship between the 'I and you' within a dialogical phenomenology, Stawarska (2009:71-72) stated that 'speaking and listening to one another in face-to-face contexts may help to subvert the rigid regiments…between the "powerful" and the "powerless" individuals or groups' and Bourdieu's recognition that phenomenology was relational (Atkinson, 2020). This contribution from Stawarska also suggests the additional need to acknowledge and respond to the extent to which this 'personal perspective' is linked to the invisible doxa identified by Bourdieu (Deer, 2008) which can influence a person's perspective of their place in society. Bourdieu's approach of methodological relationism is also relevant here through its affirmation of 'the primacy of relations' (Wacquant, 1989:15). In particular, Bourdieu wants us to acknowledge the complexity and dynamic nature of social phenomena, in particular the relationships between and within his key theories of field, habitus and capital which are woven throughout this thesis (Wacquant, 1989:16) and that these social entities are not static but evolve and change through their relational interactions over time. Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) critiqued the notion of complete objectivity in

social research, suggesting that researchers cannot be entirely detached observers and should critically analyse their own subjectivity and its potential impact on their work. Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the internalised dispositions shaped by one's social environment, played a crucial role in his reflexive sociology. He highlighted that researchers' habitus influences their interpretations and understandings of the social world, urging them to reflect on these predispositions (ibid.)

In the same way that Husserl requires researchers and participants to use bracketing, Bourdieu emphasised the need for social researchers to be aware of their own positionality, biases and assumptions that might influence their research. He argued that researchers' backgrounds, social positions, and personal experiences shape their perspectives and interpretations of social phenomena. By bracketing effectively, I am therefore examining my preconceptions of the phenomenon success in life and taking notice of Bourdieu's assertion that his approach to research was ultimately reflexive and that his 'a theory of practice' was intended as a practical model. and not simply a theoretical model. This is exemplified by the quote 'The main thing is that they are not to be conceptualised so much as ideas…but as a method…My method is a manner of asking questions rather than just ideas' (Bourdieu, 1977). Robbins (2006) explains that Bourdieu invites researchers to 'decide deliberately and reflexively how to deploy his concepts'. Therefore, I will return to Bourdieu's reflexive sociology when explaining my research design in 3.3.

3.2.5 Dynamic Equilibrium

Here we discuss how the final stage of my pragmatic phenomenology brings the research participants and researcher back down to earth so that the diverse range of views unearthed through the research process can made relevant to the field of my research participants. Giorgi et al. (2017: 179) explain that this stage is vital as it enables 'the phenomenologist [to seek] a result that is more stable to communicate to other researchers. Therefore, when trying to find a way and make sense of the various objective, subjective, natural and relative perceptions from my data gathering, it is important to me that all of these positions are recognised whilst also acknowledging that this diversity is a key characteristic of the complexity of life, which, when in balance, does not settle in one place or another, but finds a dynamic equilibrium capable of regulation, feedback and adaptation. For this new understanding to be useful and contribute to a learner's ability to achieve success in life, then the phenomenologist, researcher and research participant, need to find a way to balance their engagement and disengagement with either the transcendental or natural state. It could

be argued that this ontological approach of finding knowledge and understanding about the concept of success in life by moving dynamically and with awareness is not the difference between engagement and disengagement with the world but instead 'turns out to be precisely the way to fully come to understand' a phenomenon (Luft, 2004:220) and to build a more transparent and equal future where individuals are aware of how and why they want to engage with the world.

To achieve this balance, I will now introduce another concept in Husserl's approach which is called 'enworlding' (Luft, 2004:219). Enworlding is the process where the participant of phenomenological reduction, who has achieved a transcendence of the 'everydayness' of the natural world can now see clearly the previously invisible nature of everyday life – called the lifeworld by Husserl (Luft, 2004; Giorgi, 2012). Perhaps this is also going some way to fulfil the hope from Arnold that 'we can see things as they really are' (Richardson, 2022). Achieving this balance between engagement and disengagement with either the transcendental or natural state is crucial for transcendental understanding, gained through phenomenological reduction, to contribute meaningfully to an honest description of success in life. However, Luft (2004:219) explains that for reduction and 'enworlding' to work then there then needs to be a process where the research participants can find a 'way back into the natural attitude, without, however, forgetting its transcendental origin' (Luft, 2004:219). Dewey's insights on epistemology resonate well here, emphasising that the object of knowledge exists within the operation of knowledge and as part of an experiential realm (Trotter, 2016). Dewey's pragmatism transitions the new understanding of the concepts 'success in life', 'curriculum' and 'all learners', achieved through phenomenological reduction, back into the field of curriculum design and delivery (Trotter, 2016:30).

By consciously examining the primary school curriculum, my theoretical and methodological approaches aim to empower the participants with a deeper understanding of how deep self-reflection and enquiry can be powerful tools for personal transformation. This newfound awareness is intended to help them make more informed decisions in their lives, akin to what Husserl describes as the phenomenological epoché or reduction (Giorgi, 2012). This process does not require individuals to doubt or negate all their intentions and convictions but rather helps them become cognisant of the hidden structures that influence their choices (Grenfell, 2008). Furthermore, the process of phenomenological reduction and the shift away from the natural attitude by research participants resonates with Dewey's (1933) philosophy that reflection allows

individuals to reflect on their past experiences and extract valuable insights that serve as intellectual capital for navigating future experiences effectively. Simpson (2018) highlights that pragmatic reflection enables participants to navigate through an experimental attitude of inquiry and construct emergent futures. Dewey (1933:118) continues 'reflection is an active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it leads'. Alternatively, Cersosimo (2020) describes pragmatism as a way to offer knowledge and hypotheses about reality and individual representations of realities (Simpson, 2018:54; Cersosimo, 2020:4). In conclusion, this methodological framework does not want to solely gather the views of children, their parents and teachers about the concept of success in life, but to explore the relationship between their reflection (on a phenomenon) and their ability to transform their social context (Cersosimo, 2020). Feilzer (2010:1) describes this as a 'continuous cycle of abductive reasoning while being guided primarily by the researcher's desire to produce socially useful knowledge'. Dewey described his approach was to provide 'solutions to real problems' (Trotter, 2016:27) and my intention is that my theoretical framework and the research methods described in 3.3 will resonate with the lives of the recipients of the primary school curriculum in England and their visions for their future success in life.

Dewey's pragmatism is useful for the process of 'enworlding' as he notes that 'all of the rivalries and connected problems of epistemology or understanding how we come to knowledge about a phenomenon, 'grow from a single root' namely, 'the assumption that the true and valid object of knowledge is that which has being prior to and independent of the operation of knowing' (Trotter, 2016:29). In other words, the process of my pragmatic phenomenological enquiry into the phenomena of success in life should result in the research participants being able to move forward with a greater understanding and sense of purpose about how to operate within the real world but with a greater depth of understanding about how they want to achieve their philosophical goals. For Bourdieu a theoretical framework should be driven by the idea that active participation in the research process can lead to increased awareness and consciousness among the research participants regarding how they can shape their paths to success in life (Wacquant, 2004). This approach aligns with Bourdieu's exploration of the interplay between cultural reproduction and transformation, as discussed by Reay (2020). In this context, it refers to the distinction between children merely replicating the existing societal culture and their capacity to transform their own evolving cultural capital through deep thinking, reflection, and collaboration with others.

Therefore, the last stage of my research is where 'one must describe the essence or invariant characteristic of the object with the help of the method of free fantasy variation', otherwise known as imaginative variation (Giorgi, 2017: 178), and its deployment will be explained in 3.3.4.

3.3 Research design

Here, I will outline how I designed and conducted my research and further show how it is in line with the pragmatic phenomenological framework outlined in 3.2**.** The data gathering for my research followed a 'dynamically, iterative process' (Finlay:2012) across a period of two academic years (June 2021-June 2022), delving deeper into the phenomena of *success in life*, *knowledge and cultural capital as curriculum* and the idea of *all learners* (1.1). The process for the data gathering is illustrated below in Figure 2 below where the pupils and parents first completed a questionnaire so that they could share their views about success in life and the primary school curriculum both now and in the future, without any interaction or influence from me. In Stage One, I then worked with the pupils to delve deeper into the phenomena through philosophical enquiry and worked with the parents to delve deeper through unstructured interviews. Throughout the process, the teachers took part in semi-structured interviews, which followed a series of questions (designed to reflect the questions in the questionnaire taken by the parents and pupils) so that they could philosophically examine the key phenomena for my research of *success in life, curriculum* and *all learners* thoroughly and deeply.

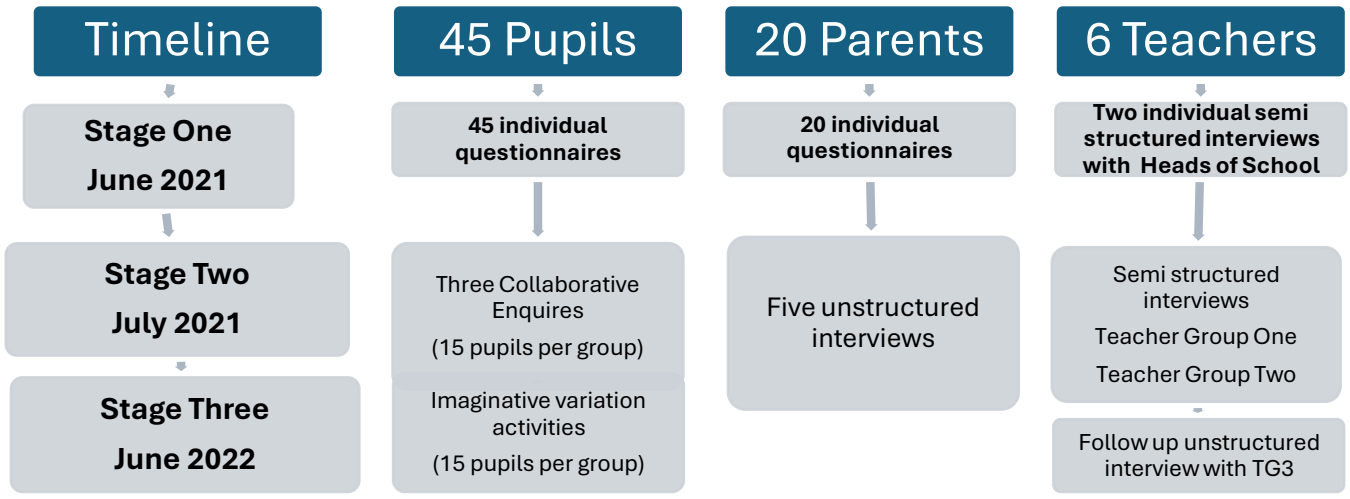

Figure 2: Pragmatic Phenomenology: Data gathering process (Moses, 2025)

Although I adopted a carefully thought-out process for the data gathering stage of my research design, it is important to also take note from Finlay (2012:173) that 'phenomenology demands an open way of being' and that each stage of my research informed the next, demonstrating my reflective practice in action, 'I thought, and I rethought. I acted, and I observed at the same time... I was myself a thinker and learner' (Mohr, 2001:34). I acknowledge that my professional identity as a former primary teacher and Headteacher shaped both the questions I asked and the ways I interpreted participants' responses. Having worked in schools for almost two decades, I carry embedded assumptions about good teaching, effective leadership, and successful learning. These assumptions, while deeply informed by experience, may also have led me to privilege certain narratives or overlook others. To address this, I incorporated deliberate reflexive practices, including dialogue with academic colleagues and practising teachers, which helped to surface and interrogate my influence rather than attempt to eliminate it. To achieve this approach, I relied on two key terms from Husserl's theory of phenomenological reduction which are relevant to my rationale for proceeding in this way.

Firstly, Husserl coined the term noesis as a description of the conscious act of observing and thinking about a phenomenon, beyond the natural attitude (3.3.2) but importantly Husserl added to his theory, the concept of 'noema' which is in recognition that there is normally a range of possible meaningful content which can be attached to the phenomena being observed and not only one characteristic (Husserl, 2013). I understand this to mean, that whenever a phenomenon is observed there are several definitions which can be attached to it and significantly Husserl observed that noesis does not normally identify all possible noema of a given phenomenon and that a further step, called imaginative variation, needed to happen to fully understand the essence of the phenomenon (Rasmussen, 2010:556). I also rely on Dewey's assertion that the most effective way for 'inciting thinking' (Laverty, 2016:1030) is to involve students in 'purposeful activities that 'suggest and prepare for succeeding activities' (Kirkpatrick, 1918:12 in Laverty, 2016:1030).

Therefore, the different stages to this research were designed to allow for a deepening of focus on the phenomenon of success in life through 'qualitative or descriptive methods' (Zeni, 2001, xiv) where the research participants build on their initial noesis and look at the phenomenon from 'several different angles and directions' (Rasmussen, 1998:556). This approach sought answers to

my second and third research questions (1.4), listed below, with a view to solving the 'professional problem' (Zeni, 2001, xv) of what primary pupils in England should learn to succeed in life:

> **Q2**. What are the perceptions of pupils, parents, and their teachers in English primary schools of what constitutes 'success in life'?
>
> **Q3**. What are the perceptions of pupils, parents, and their teachers in English primary schools of the role of the English primary curriculum in achieving 'success in life'?

3.3.1 Ethics

My methodology received approval from the University of Cumbria Research Ethics Committee on (date) and was conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association's guidelines (BERA, 2018). Ethical considerations informed the design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings, ensuring that reflection on ethics was not an afterthought, but a central thread woven throughout the research process.

All participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured at every stage. Teachers and parents received detailed information sheets outlining the study's aims, their rights to confidentiality and withdrawal, and the ways in which contributions would be used. Written consent was obtained prior to interviews and focus groups. For pupils, information was presented in age-appropriate form. While parental consent was required, children were also asked for their assent and reminded that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw at any time without consequence. This dual process reflected a commitment to treating children as participants in their own right rather than as passive recipients of parental permission. When handing the data, an anonymisation system was employed: PA for parents, TG for teacher groups, H for headteachers, and P for pupils. School names and locations were removed, transcripts were checked for identifying details, and direct quotations are presented only with codes. Audio recordings were used solely for transcription, with access restricted to me as the sole researcher. Data management complied with GDPR (2018) and university policy. Digital files were encrypted and password-protected, while hard copies of consent forms were kept in locked storage. Data will be retained for the duration of the dissemination of this research and then securely destroyed. The study was designed to pose minimal risk to participants. Activities took place in familiar school settings at convenient times. Teachers and parents were reassured that the research was not evaluative of their

practice or family choices. For pupils, enquiry-based tasks encouraged participation and dialogue without pressure, reducing potential anxiety and creating conditions where children felt able to express their views openly.

Ethics also extended to relational dynamics. As a former teacher and school leader, I was aware that I may occupy a position of authority that could shape participants' responses. Pupils may have perceived me as a teacher figure, while teachers could have regarded me as a potential evaluator. Following Garratt (2021), I recognised that power in research is negotiated rather than fixed, and I adopted a reflexive stance to minimise imbalance. Cassidy (2017) reinforces this position by emphasising the democratic value of philosophical enquiry with children, which treats them as epistemic agents and disrupts traditional hierarchies of authority. These insights shaped my practice: I positioned myself as a listener rather than an evaluator and employed facilitative methods that foregrounded pupil voice. In line with BERA's (2018) principle of beneficence, I also sought reciprocal value. Teachers received anonymised summaries of themes for professional reflection, while pupils benefited from enquiry activities that supported oracy and metacognitive development. The ethical framework therefore combined procedural safeguards (consent, anonymity, data security) with reflexive engagement with power, positionality, and reciprocity. In doing so, it aimed not only to meet formal requirements but also to enact respect, care, and mutual benefit in practice. The following section now builds on this ethical foundation by outlining the sample of schools and participants, providing the context for understanding how the findings were generated.

3.3.2 Sample and participant overview

To enhance the depth, richness and transferability of the research, this section provides a detailed account of the school settings and participants. This follows Younas et al. (2023), who recommend qualitative studies provide 'contextualised' and 'relational' accounts so readers can situate findings within their environments. In this spirit, the settings and sample are presented not as neutral backdrops but as meaningful contexts shaping participants' experiences and perspectives.

The sample was selected to capture a range of perspectives on 'success in life' while retaining the phenomenological depth appropriate to qualitative design (Negrin et al., 2022). Hammersley (2013:42) stresses that researchers must consider 'the range of variation in orientation to be found even within a single society'. Guided by this, I conducted the study in two state primary schools in

Greater Manchester, both part of the same multi-academy trust but with differing demographics and locations. School A had a significantly higher proportion of pupils in receipt of the pupil premium grant than the national average of 21% (DfE, 2012; Ofsted, 2024e). School B's proportion was just below the national figure. Together, the two sites represented both higher-than-average and more typical socio-economic contexts, ensuring findings reflected a spectrum of family circumstances. This decision was made primarily because I wanted to 'capture all that is relevant about the actions and responses of the people being studied' (Hammersley, 2013:41) and provide myself with the opportunity for differences to emerge, if they exist, between these groups. Despite these differences, both schools shared a strong commitment to enquiry-based education and to supporting pupil development beyond academic attainment. This common ground created environments in which pupils, parents, and teachers were encouraged to reflect on learning in ways that extended beyond test results, and where dispositions such as confidence, adaptability, and wellbeing were valued alongside academic achievement. This alignment did not erase differences between the two contexts, but it provided a productive lens for examining how success was understood and enacted in everyday school life.

Pupils

There were 45 pupils in total in my sample, and they are identified in this Table 1 and the following pages of this chapter as 'P' plus a number 1-45 which was allocated randomly. If the school was in receipt of the pupil premium grant in recognition of this pupil, then I have added PP after the number and if the pupil has Special Education Needs, then I have added SD after the number. Although one of the schools in my research was much higher than the national average of 21% for pupils in receipt of the pupil premium grant (1.3) levels of pupil premium at the second school were lower which means that this sample is representative of the national average in England at the time of writing this thesis. If the contribution was made by a pupil during a collaborative enquiry, then it is coded Enq1, Enq2 or Enq3 and the snapshot of the enquiries can be found in Appendix E.

P1	P6	P11	P16	P21	P26	P31	P36	P41PP
P2	P7	P12	P17	P22PP	P27	P32	P37	P42PPSD
P3	P8	P13	P18	P23	P28	P33	P38PP	P43PP
P4	P9	P14	P19PP	P24	P29	P34	P39PP	P44PP
P5	P10	P15SD	P20	P25	P30	P35	P40PP	P45PP

Table 1: Coding of pupil participants

Parents

There were 20 parent participants in total in my sample, and they are identified in this Table 2 and the following pages of this chapter as 'PA' plus a number 1-20. There were two opportunities for parents to take part in my research, the first was a questionnaire, which is represented here as (Q) and the second opportunity was an unstructured interview, represented here as (I). The parents who took part in both has (QI) after their number.

PA1 (Q)	PA8 (Q)	PA15 (Q)
PA 2 (Q)	PA9 (Q)	PA16 (Q)
PA3 (Q)	PA10 (Q)	PA 17 (QI)
PA4 (Q)	PA 11 (Q)	PA18 (QI)
PA5 (QI)	PA 12 (Q)	PA19 (QI)
PA6 (Q)	PA13 (Q)	PA20 (Q)
PA7 (Q)	PA14 (QI)	

Table 2: Coding of parent participants

I chose not to ask parents for standardised demographic information such as education level, occupation or ethnicity during recruitment or data collection. This decision was informed by a desire to resist reinforcing pre-existing social categories and assumptions about participants' cultural or social capital (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *doxa*, the 'taken for granted' assumptions that structure social perception, I sought to avoid imposing

classificatory hierarchies at the outset. As Bourdieu notes, ‘What is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying’ (1977:167), and such categories often operate as silent structuring devices in educational research. Rather than reproduce normative assumptions, which frequently reflect middle-class, racialised and gendered ideas of value and success (Rollock, 2019:22; Archer et al., 2018:450), I aimed to create space for parents to articulate their understandings of educational success without being positioned in relation to dominant metrics of worth. This approach was also pragmatic and context-sensitive: the schools participating were broadly representative of national averages for socioeconomic disadvantage, which provided a sufficient marker of structural diversity.

My stance was grounded in a Husserlian, transcendental phenomenological approach, which prioritises openness to participants’ meaning making. Drawing on Husserl’s concept of epoché, the suspension of the ‘natural attitude’ and its uncritical acceptance of social categories (Husserl, 1970:110), I resisted filtering parental narratives through predetermined classifications such as class, qualification, or employment status, instead attending to their lived experiences on their own terms. As Husserl explains, the phenomenological reduction ‘leads to a new dimension of experience, the transcendental’ (1970:135). Vagle (2014:67) reminds us that inquiry demands reflexivity rather than detachment: ‘Rather than seeking objectivity through detachment, the researcher must attend to their involvement in meaning-making through intentional bracketing’. By not collecting demographic data that might anchor interpretation in deficit-based or normative lenses, I sought to remain attuned to the specificity and richness of parental perspectives, unmediated by assumptions of value. This decision also reflects an ethical commitment to valuing the experiences of those who are often misread or marginalised in educational discourse. Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth (2007) have shown that working-class parental perspectives are frequently interpreted through a middle-class lens that renders them lacking or misguided. Similarly, Reay (2004:435) warns that educational research must avoid universalising dominant understandings of capital, noting that ‘different forms of capital are not uniformly distributed, nor are they always visible or valued in the field of education’. While this approach meant the sample was self-selected and detailed demographic analysis limited, it was appropriate for a project concerned with how success is understood and narrated across diverse life experiences. Some parents voluntarily shared information about education, career or personal circumstances through open-ended responses, especially when discussing qualifications and success.

Table 3 below captures the self-identified demographic characteristics that were offered, as well as whether the participant's child was in receipt of Pupil Premium funding or identified as having SEND. These latter indicators were used only to contextualise responses in line with national averages.

Parent Code	Self-identified demographic characteristics throughout questionnaire	Pupil Premium	Child with SEND
PA1 Q	Female. Left college, travelled, started family and business.	Yes	No
PA2 Q	No demographic identifiers provided	No	No
PA3 Q	I do a job I love. Without qualifications I wouldn't have been able to do it.	No	No
PA4 Q	Respondent: Medical doctor; degree and A Levels. Described her husband: no A Levels, successful businessman.	No	No
PA5 QI	Female. No other demographic identifiers provided.	No	Yes
PA6 Q	No demographic identifiers provided	No	No
PA7 Q	No demographic identifiers provided	No	No
PA8Q	I couldn't do the job I wanted to do without my qualifications.	No	No
PA9 Q	No demographic identifiers provided	No	No

PA10 Q	Married and educated to GCSE level; successful in high-level management roles.	No	No
PA11 QI	Female. Qualifications enabled accountancy career. Described her husband as unqualified but successful businessman.	No	No
PA12Q	No demographic identifiers provided	Yes	No
PA13 Q	Degree level education. Currently part time in a supermarket by choice to support family.	No	Yes
PA14 QI	Female. Did not get qualifications past college. Currently working as school caretaker.	Yes	Yes
PA15 Q	No demographic identifiers provided.	No	No
PA16 Q	No demographic identifiers provided.	No	No
PA17 QI	Female. Primary school teacher; required degree.	No	No
PA18 QI	Male. PGCE. Currently works in a KS4 specialist provision.	No	Yes
PA19 QI	Female. Degree in Education with Drama.	No	Yes
PA20 Q	No demographic identifiers provided	Yes	Yes

Table 3: Demographic characteristics self-identified by parent sample. (Moses, 2025).

Teachers

A total of six teachers participated in this research project. Four were classroom teachers, interviewed in two small groups, and two were headteachers responsible for curriculum, each interviewed individually. Teacher participants were purposively selected for their direct involvement in curriculum development, pastoral School leadership and/or whole school strategy. All had a minimum of five years' experience in teaching and worked in schools that served contrasting but complementary contexts. Due to workload pressures, the teacher participants did not complete the questionnaire initially offered; instead, all opted to engage via interviews. This choice aligns with the flexible, participant responsive nature of qualitative enquiry. Recognising the importance of relational context (Younas et al., 2023:4), I remained reflexive about my own positioning throughout the research. As a former Headteacher, I was aware that my professional background may have shaped the dynamics of the interviews. For example, in teacher discussions, participants sometimes employed familiar professional language or sought implied agreement, drawing on shared educational values. These relational dynamics were noted in my reflective journal and revisited during the analysis phase to ensure that interpretation was grounded in participant meaning rather than researcher assumption.

Teacher Group 1 – TG1	Teacher Group 2 - TG2	H1	H2
Teacher A - TG1A	Teacher A - TG2A	Headteacher 1	Headteacher 2
Teacher B - TG1B	Teacher B - TG2B		

Table 4: Coding for teacher participants (Moses, 2025).

3.3.3 Stage One: Acknowledging and transcending the natural attitude

In this section I outline the way I used Husserl's transcendental phenomenology to elucidate differences to the nature and depth of this consciousness presenting themselves as different attitudes: natural and phenomenological as discussed in 3.2.3. Husserl (2012:51) described the natural attitude or 'standpoint' as the way in which all human beings experience the world on a daily basis, through our senses and experiences, 'whether or not I pay them special attention' and is a way of thinking which has 'nothing of conceptual thinking' (Husserl, 2012:51). This notion of the

natural attitude then evolved through Bourdieu's theory of doxa, introduced in 2.3.3, and could be said to also take us back to Dewey's pragmatism (1933) and subsequently Lipman (2003), who described a pre-reflective state which can promote conformity and passivity amongst students and advocated for the need to use reflective thought in education as a key component of thinking well (Rodgers, 2002). Rodgers (2002:845) clarifies that reflective thought, as Dewey conceived it, is not merely 'thinking back on experience' but a meaning-making process that moves the learner from one experience into the next with 'a deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas.'

The characteristics of the 'the inherent, unreflective' natural attitude (Husserl, 2013:9) from which the participants and I started this research included an acceptance that the National Primary Curriculum in England (DfE, 2014) was what the pupils would learn as part of their education in England and the inclusion of 'knowledge and cultural capital' as key ingredients needed to succeed in life (Ofsted, 2019). This natural attitude also included that range of experiences and attributes that I outlined in 1.2, as well as those that the pupils, parents and teachers brought to the research from their everyday lives. The questionnaires for the pupils and parents were designed to capture the participants' natural attitude, their immediate, unreflective perceptions and experiences. However, it was inevitable that completing the questionnaires would involve some degree of reflection as participants considered their responses. Therefore, I acknowledge that the questionnaires do not completely capture the natural attitude but are more likely to bridge the gap between the natural attitude and early reflection, providing insights into how participants begin to consciously engage with their experiences while maintaining an element of spontaneity.

Acknowledging the natural attitude of the pupils and parents

The data gathering started with a questionnaire to the parents and pupils of Year Five, the penultimate year of primary school in England. The pupils were encouraged to complete the questionnaire on their own with no conferring between pupils as I wanted to gather as 'unadulterated' view as possible on the concept of 'success in life' or as Bentz and Shapiro (1998:196) describe, how the participants 'think and feel' about their lived experience 'as free from the constructs of the intellect and society as possible'. I used open-ended questions and provided space for the pupils to write as well as draw, which I thought would spark the imagination and work well with children who may not be used to sharing information in this way. This approach resonates

with Cassidy's (2017) emphasis on creating spaces for children's voices to be heard. The questions in the pupils' questionnaire were designed to be iterative. The first question discussing the concept in its broadest sense: How would you describe success in life? and the last, asking the pupil to imagine themselves in a hypothetical future: How will you know if you have achieved success in life when you are older? (Pupil questionnaire available in Appendix A)

At the same time as I visited the participating schools to facilitate the Year Five pupils' completion of the questionnaires, I also provided a link to an online questionnaire for their parents to complete as I felt that the parents might be able to provide another important viewpoint of the primary school curriculum in England and its role in giving pupils what they need to succeed in life. This invitation was sent to all parents of Year Five pupils, and their participation was self-selective, 20 parents completed the questionnaire and seven offered to take part in a follow up semi-structured interview (Appendix B). Questionnaires, often associated with quantitative research (Denscombe, 2002:23), can be valuable tools for collecting data from large and diverse groups, however, even though my sample size was not large, I wanted to use them so that the participants had a chance to provide me with their insights without having met or worked with me. To a certain extent I was trying to capture their natural attitude before the main body of the data gathering began so that I had a stimulus for the subsequent interviews and enquiries. However, I did not want the next stage of this research to simply ask the same thing as the questionnaire so the information gathered here needed to be 'distinct from that which could be obtained from interview' (Denscombe, 2007:155). Smyth (2017:2) alerts us to the perception that questionnaires are often thought of as 'rather simple', but I wanted to make sure that my questionnaire felt simple or easy to complete whilst still gathering everything I wanted. To achieve this, I kept the number of questions to a minimum and avoided any assumptions or technical language in the text. This was partly to put the participants at ease instead of facing an overwhelming barrage of questions but also to reinforce my role as not being the expert and that this questionnaire was the first step on our shared journey of discovery. I did not want the questionnaire to 'change people's attitudes or provide them with information' (Denscombe, 2007:153) so the questions were open-ended but identical for each participant which allowed participants to provide personal and nuanced responses (Denscombe, 2002) on their own terms but in a way that would give me some consistency to the data analysed (Denscombe, 2007:165). The questionnaire for parents was online which gave them the option to remain anonymous but also to complete it in their own time. This anonymity was intended to

provide a space for the parents to express their thoughts and feelings more freely than they might in a face-to-face interview or in person at school, where they may feel under pressure to provide the 'right answer'.

My position in the research: the complexity attitude in action

As a philosophical and phenomenological researcher, my positionality is intrinsically entwined with the essence of the research process (Finlay, 2012:173). Central to my approach is the acknowledgment that my background, experiences, and beliefs inherently influence the way I engage with and interpret the phenomena under investigation (Husserl, 2012). Finlay (2012:175) describes a situation where she advocates that the phenomenological researcher is curious and passionate about the chosen research project but that they must also 'be open to the phenomenon—in order to go beyond what they already know from experience or through established knowledge', which I understand to be the move from the natural attitude to a conceptual one (Husserl, 2013). That is to say, as advised by Olsen (2000:356) that 'before you begin any study, you must stop and think about how you came to be interested in the topic of study' and what your experience may or may not bring to the process and findings and notes that a researcher's standpoint 'requires self-consciousness about how the fate and choices in your life have positioned you in the world and with whom you have been positioned'. This awareness and consciousness required by a phenomenological researcher is described by Gearing (2004:1429) as a process called epoque or phenomenological bracketing, which enables the researcher to examine a phenomenon without the unconscious influence of bias (Gearing, 2004; Denscombe, 2002). I recognise the significance of continuously examining and understanding my own subjectivity in relation to the research and that the use of phenomenological bracketing is intended to allow me to approach the phenomenon – success in life – without the baggage of my positionality but in a spirit of 'non-interference and wonder' (Finlay, 2012:175). As part of this process, I step aside (albeit temporarily) from the subjective, interpretative experience of the natural attitude to a position described by Dahlberg (2006:16) of 'non willing' and by Finlay (2012:177) as 'active waiting' or disciplined 'dwelling with'.

While acknowledging that bracketing can never be ideal or perfect Gearing (2004:1439) adds, that it is a useful and dynamic approach while warning that the term bracketing has 'increasingly become employed in qualitative research' which has run the risk of the process being 'superficial or

vague', therefore, it is imperative that I am clear about why and how I use bracketing as part of my research design both as a term and as a process. In my mind and through my reading (Finlay, 2012; Ahern, 1999, 2023, Gearing, 2004, Husserl, 2012; Giorgi:2008, 2012), bracketing is different to reflexivity, although reflexivity is the first step on the path to 'developing an understanding that is faithful to the phenomenon, regardless of the idiosyncrasies of researchers' (Ahern, 1999:407). Reflexivity, like bracketing, explores the dynamic situation a researcher finds themselves in of wanting to know and understand the world, whilst being conscious about the potential influence on their research of their 'being in the world' (Aguas, 2021:1). Here, Gearing (2014) helps by explaining that bracketing allows these idiosyncrasies to be set aside or suspended, beyond the reflexive acknowledgement of them, so that 'fresh impressions' can be formed of the phenomenon without interference or interpretation, leaving the way open to 'investigate the phenomenon…free from any external interpretation or suppositions' (Gearing, 2004:1436).

Alongside my search for the phenomenological attitude, it is useful to note that Ahern (1999:408) does acknowledge that subjective experience can sometimes be beneficial to qualitative researchers and in my case, I have extensive experience of working with the primary school curriculum in England and the types of participants in my sample: pupils, parents and teachers. This experience was useful as it gave me a certain legitimacy when approaching the schools to request their participation with the research. However, it was my experience as a teacher practitioner and trainer informed by the use of philosophical and collaborative enquiry designed by Lipman (2003) which enabled me to conduct the research phenomenologically as I was able to effectively facilitate collaborative dialogue, ask open questions, listen as an 'interested co-enquirer' (Benjamin and Echeverria, 1992:71). Finlay (2008:1) also acknowledges this creative tension between subjectivity and objectivity within the role of researcher and this guided how I 'deliberately and reflexively' strived to mitigate the influence of my biases by embodying an open approach of sliding between 'bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight' (Finlay, 2008:1).

My ethical stance

Another key benefit and rationale for including collaborative enquiry, as the pragmatic ingredient of my phenomenological data collection is that I could remain neutral to the discussion as the facilitator whilst utilising an effective and 'child friendly' way to record children's perceptions about 'success in life'. The skill of facilitation within qualitative research requires creating an environment conducive to philosophical exploration and critical thinking among participants as well as 'commitment to documenting complexity' (Hammersley, 2013:44) and it meant that I was less likely to simply gather arbitrary speculation from the participants that was potentially not useful to finding the purpose and truth behind the discussion (McCall, 2010:97).

The first role of facilitator is to establish a non-judgmental space where participants feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, opinions, and questions freely through an atmosphere of mutual respect, active listening and constructive challenge in the spirit of seeking justified truth and evidence (Gardner, 1996; Fisher, 1995; Lipman, 2003; McCall, 2010). Facilitation enabled me to develop a phenomenological attitude as I am required to place the most importance on time spent trying to understand the 'world from the perspective' of the participants and gather 'rich and detailed descriptions...of people in action' rather than 'counts or statistical relationships' (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004:69), right answers or confirmation for my own opinions and ideas.

In my role as facilitator, I introduced the philosophical concept of 'success in life' through the wide range of definitions provided by the pupils in their questionnaires. Drawing on the community of inquiry methods laid out by Lipman (2003:20) influenced by Dewey, that pupils should 'investigate problems and engage in inquiry for themselves', I facilitated the pupils' enquiries using probing questions to stimulate critical thinking and deeper exploration of ideas (Fisher, 1995). As a facilitator I guided the discussion without imposing my own opinions, allowing participants to lead the conversation. This technique, described by Gardner (1996:5) as scholarly ignorance, of not imparting my own views but allowing space for the participants of the enquiry to formulate the parameters of the discussion, its objectives and aims, meant that I have kept or bracketed my own position out of the data gathering (Senge, 2003; MacGilchrist, 2004). Finally, another reason for deciding to utilise this method of philosophical collaborative enquiry, described more fully in 3.3.4 as it was already an established part of the pedagogy of the two participating schools (influencing

my decision to approach them) and I felt it would be expedient for getting to a deeper discussion about the concept of 'success in life', without the need to train them in the techniques needed.

In the previous paragraphs I have shown how I have converged the philosophy and practice of Husserl and Dewey through embodiment of the theoretical framework into the design of the research gathering through philosophical enquiry. This approach also resonates with my understanding of Bourdieu (1977) who advocated for a reflexive sociology not only in the researchers' self-awareness but also in the methods and theoretical frameworks used. He encouraged critical reflection on how chosen methodologies and theories might shape and constrain the research process and outcomes. Robbins (2006) tells us that Bourdieu invites researchers to 'decide deliberately and reflexively how to deploy his concepts' and that Bourdieu explained that his 'method is a manner of asking questions rather than just ideas' (Bourdieu, 1977).

3.3.4 Stage Two: Contextual pragmatism

Here I explore the data gathering techniques which I used to build on the questionnaires completed by the pupils and parents in stage one of my data gathering, introduced in 3.3.2. Firstly, collaborative philosophical enquiry with pupils, Then, unstructured interviews with the parents and semi-structured interviews with teachers, all with the aim of finding responses to the second and third research questions for this thesis listed below:

Q2. What are the perceptions of pupils, parents, and their teachers in English primary schools of what constitutes 'success in life'?

Q3. What are the perceptions of pupils, parents, and their teachers in English primary schools of the role of the English primary curriculum in achieving 'success in life'?

Collaborative philosophical enquiry and semi-structured interviews

On the day following the completion of the questionnaires, I returned to each school and provided the same group of pupils with the keywords which they had provided as answers to the first question 'How would you describe success in life?' The pupils then worked together to order these key words and phrases on a 'concept line' to show which ones they thought were most and least important to the concept of success in life. We then used this activity as a stimulus for a philosophical collaborative enquiry which Gardner (1996) describes as a democratic way to reflect

and enquire with young learners and empower pupils to actively participate in shaping their educational experiences instead of what Gardner (1996:5) describes as the 'unreflective mob getting their way'. By involving pupils in the research process through collaborative enquiry I was hoping to foster a sense of agency and ownership by the pupils, of the research question but also to further deepen their confidence to discuss complex concepts which are relevant to their future academic journey and later lives (Lipman, 2003; Gregory, 2009).

Dewey (1938:18) asserted that instead of using education to 'prepare the young…for success in life by means of acquisition of organised bodies of information' that we should recognise the importance of communications which 'expand, enhance, solidify, and deepen their shared meanings' (Laverty, 2016:1030,1039). A key influence for using these techniques is the work of Alexander (2004) who promoted the used of dialogic approaches, where pupils and teachers work together through dialogue, for intellectual and social development. To this end it can be argued that Alexander was influenced by Dewey's philosophy that 'meaning is never wholly in the mind, but unfolds in and with others' (Laverty, 2016:1038) and that 'language contributes to configuring our human way of life' (Dreon, 2009:115 in Laverty, 2016:1038). To this extent, at the heart of collaborative enquiry lies the notion of social constructivism, which emphasises the importance of social interactions in knowledge construction. Hammersley (2013:120) explains that this is because it encourages the research participants to not simply provide information or 'recycle and rework adult talk' (Hammersley, 2013:120) but to move towards co-construction of a vision of success in their own real lives and futures. This also enables participants to build a relationship between 'reflection and transformation' of their social context (Cersosimo, 2020). Jacobs (2013:351) takes this idea of self-reflection further by explaining that phenomenological reflection can change one's life to the point where a 'simple return to the life lived before this reflection becomes impossible'. In the same vein that Socratic philosophy advocates an examined life and individuals thinking for themselves (Lipman, 2003:257) this process advocates working together 'as a collaborative group', instead of 'in a group', where pupils can co-construct meaning, challenge assumptions held by others and themselves and explore alternative perspectives which they may not have considered given their life experience so far. As pupils exchange ideas and knowledge, they not only learn from one another, but it can also provide the freedom to reflect on their own views more deeply or as Cassidy and Mohr (2020) explain 'explore, refine and articulate one's conceptual understanding of the world'. Whilst recognising that it can be difficult to be aware of our natural attitude as it is

all encompassing and all we know, Jacobs (2013:353) encourages the individual to use phenomenology as a way to perceive 'what normally goes unseen' (2013:354) and perceive the difference between 'what appears and the way in which it appears to me' (2013:354). From a phenomenological perspective, the collaborative enquiry or dialogue used in this research resonates as a research method as it focuses 'on the experience rather than on what the person thinks or feels in isolation' which maintains the centrality of the 'holistic appreciation of the experience that is always at once embodied, cognitive-affective, relational, and social' (Finlay, 2012: 181). Therefore, my approach to collaborative enquiry is phenomenological as it provides a freedom for the participants to explore how things are (i.e. what are the established notions of success in life) and how things are for me (how they define success in life). Although the creators of Philosophy for Children, Lipman and Sharp (Tibaldeo, 2023) do not refer to Husserl and phenomenology, they took inspiration from Socrates and the dialogical tradition, as well as Dewey whose pragmatist theory advocated enquiry. Oliverio (2012:55) describes Lipman's approach of using philosophy as a classroom tool which enables dialogue and conceptual thinking as 'going beyond Dewey in a Deweyan way'. Lipman built on Dewey's clear view that the 'unspoiled attitude of childhood, marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination, and love of experimental inquiry, is near, very near, to the attitude of the scientific mind'. I understand this to mean that Dewey and consequently, Lipman both believed that it was possible for young students to rigorously discuss big conceptual or philosophical problems – not despite their age and relative inexperience but in most cases because of it (Lipman, 2003). This type of enquiry is also founded on the notion that pupils can ask questions about philosophical concepts and do not need to be provided with questions to discuss (Lipman, 2003).

It was important to me from a pedagogical perspective that the pupil participants created the questions that they wanted to discuss, following the stimulus of the questionnaire, not only to ensure greater engagement in the task but also to reinforce their role as valuable philosophers who could discuss big ideas and inform phenomenological research in their own right. Moreover, collaborative enquiry provides pupils with authentic learning experiences, bridging the gap between theory and practice and helping pupils increase active citizenship and participation in society. This approach was advocated for by Dewey and articulated by Lipman (2003) as 'listening to one another, learning from one another, building on one another's ideas, respecting one another's points of view, and yet demanding that claims be warranted by evidence and reasons'. Cam (2008:24,

2013) explains that philosophical enquiry about 'life in general' has the potential to take children to a level of understanding where knowledge and facts are combined with awareness, attitudes, and the ability to reason, necessary to operate in a changing and increasingly global society and 'make a significant difference to the kind of society in which we are able to live'. Despite its many benefits, collaborative enquiry is not without its challenges, and the process requires skill and practice. There can be logistical issues as the pupils need to be able to sit in a circle and move around and this can be compounded by varying levels of ability or willingness by the pupils to participate (Gardner, 1996; Murris, 2001; Sharp, 2008; Laverty, 2017). The two schools that took part in this process were experienced at working in this way which meant that these concerns were abated to a certain extent. Many of these potential issues can also be overcome through skilled facilitation which ensures that pupils feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute and wards against unequal participation by pupils, dominant personalities and unhelpful conflicts of opinion (Gardner, 1996, Lipman, 2003; Fisher, 1995). Another concern raised relates to power differentials within groups, which may influence decision-making processes and marginalise certain voices – another area which requires a vigilant facilitator. It was vital that I created an inclusive space where diverse perspectives could be heard and respected and that individual accountability for views is strengthened (Dewey, 1933, Gardner, 1996). A snapshot of the collaborative enquiries can be found in Appendix E.

Interviews with parents and teachers

Alongside the collaborative work with the pupils, I also interviewed six teachers and five parents in the search for an understanding of 'success in life', 'curriculum' and 'all learners. I used a semi-structured approach with the teachers, with an unstructured interview in Stage Three (3.3.4) and an unstructured interview with the parents. The rationale for these different approaches is mainly a pragmatic or realistic one. Firstly, the parents had already completed the questionnaire providing a certain degree of information and reasoned that the interview could provide an unstructured space within which to focus on the area or areas most important or relevant to them. In this way the interviews with the parents were most closely aligned with the pupil enquiries, with my role being facilitatory and providing an encouraging space for the parents to talk, without any bias or assumptions from me.

On the other hand, the teachers had not completed a questionnaire, and I wanted to make sure that I gathered as comprehensive as possible a set of data from these participants, leaving an unstructured space in the final Stage Three interview, conducted a year later. Alvesson (2011:53) explains that the type viewed as interesting for qualitative research is the semi-structured interview as it allows for a more varied response to come to the fore. Bevan (2014:137) tells us that interviewing is a common method used in descriptive phenomenology but one that is rarely prescribed or explained, perhaps because of an assumption that all researchers will know how to conduct an interview as they will see it is a type of conversation (Laverty, 2016:1030). In general, a semi-structured interview means that there are themes to be covered, but in a relatively broad and flexible way. Denscombe (2007:174) adds that interviews are useful 'when the researcher wants to gain insights into more complex or subtle phenomena to those which can be sought through a questionnaire' which is why I gave the parents the option for a follow up interview.

One of the primary benefits of semi-structured interviews is their flexibility (Alvesson, 2011). Unlike structured interviews, where questions are fixed and standardised, semi-structured interviews allow for a more fluid conversation. Researchers can adapt their questions based on the responses of participants, delving deeper into areas of interest and exploring unexpected avenues. Bevan (2014:137) adds that the philosophical approach to phenomenological interviewing, emphasises freedom for the interviewee to bring up what they see as relevant for deeper exploration. The relatively low degree of structure in the interviews I conducted, meant that it was easy to encounter 'new and unexpected views' (Alvesson, 2011:52) about the concepts 'success in life' and 'curriculum' but ran the risk of interviewees 'pulling in different directions', due to the potential expansiveness of the subject of success in life. I needed to find a way between providing space for wide ranging, reflective thought and avoiding too many conflicting or tangential lines of enquiry. Alvesson (2011:53) explains this tension as making sure emerging themes do not sacrifice the ability to obtain responses to the research questions, making the findings 'irrelevant or unproductive' (2011:53). To address this issue, I made sure that the interview questions were limited in number which provided the space for reflection, but each participant was asked the same questions, providing something to compare between the different answers.

It was also a pragmatic decision to use interviews instead of collaborative enquiry with the teachers as they were split across two sites (I was advised by the schools that bringing the teachers to one place would have hindered participation). However, I was able to conduct two of the interviews in small groups which was as close to collaborative enquiry as I could get given the circumstances. The teachers worked closely together so were accustomed to speaking in front of each other. However, for the parents who volunteered for a follow up interview to their questionnaire, I conducted these separately as I felt that was most likely to elicit honest and relaxed responses. Alvesson (2011:33) explains that interviews are increasingly recognised as complex situations which include gaining the complete cooperation of the interviewees (Alvesson, 2011:33). He also warns against assuming that anything that is said by an interviewee is 'how it is' (Alvesson, 2011:35) but that the reflexive and philosophical aspects of interviewing need to be remembered. I wanted to avoid 'interview talk', which could be relatively superficial, and get to the essence of the concepts (Alvesson, 2011:36) which is why I adopted a philosophical and facilitatory stance – I sought to portray that I was enquiring alongside them, without giving my opinion away or leading them in anyway. Denscombe (2007:176) also reminds us that this flexibility enables researchers to capture the complexity and depth of participants' perspectives and that ‘there is more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest’ and expressing themselves in their own words. This conversational approach can help participants feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives, leading to more candid and insightful responses within a framework which maintains the integrity of the situation which is more than a casual conversation (Denscombe, 2007:173). A snapshot of the interviews with parents can be found in Appendix F.

3.3.5 Stage Three: Finding the essence of dynamic equilibrium.

As introduced in 3.2, Giorgi et al. (2017:178) explain that the third and final step in the phenomenological process is where ‘one must describe the essence or invariant characteristic of the object with the help of the method of free fantasy variation’, otherwise known as imaginative variation. This step is introduced due to the acknowledgement that the philosophical enquiry stage may elicit ‘so diversified’ a range of views that can understandably cause ‘the phenomenologist [to seek] a result that is more stable to communicate to other researchers’ (Giorgi et al., 2017:179).

Therefore, one year after the initial questionnaires and collaborative enquiries, I presented the pupil participants with their initial questionnaires and invited them to reflect on what they had written

and annotate anything they wanted with a different coloured pen. The added benefit of this final stage of the data collection was to enable yet another opportunity for reflection, and a chance for the individual teachers and pupils involved in the enquiries or interviews to revisit their thoughts. To achieve this deepening of thought I created an activity within the spirit of Husserl's imaginative variation, where this collection of 'content' for the phenomenon 'success in life' was examined in detail to encourage the participants to look again at the phenomenon 'success in life' and identify its essential features which retain or reveal the essential nature of the phenomenon. Bevan (2014:142) tells us that imaginative variation can also provide a dynamic dimension to the phenomenological interview, which I then used with two of the teachers at this later stage. Giorgi et al. (2017:179) explain that if the phenomenon under investigation 'collapses' as a result of the variation 'then it can be claimed that the dimension is essential for the phenomenon to appear as it really is'. This approach involves systematically altering various aspects of a phenomenon in the imagination while holding certain elements constant. Through this process, I aimed to discern the invariant features that define the essence of the phenomenon – success in life - and to gain a deeper understanding of this complex phenomenon by exploring different subjective dimensions and perspectives – including providing a challenge to any of my own residual biases which had escaped the initial epoque. Significantly, however, I also wanted to find out if there were inherent features that all the participants could agree on as a 'truth' as described by Duckworth (2012) that could be attributed to the phenomenon success in life and as a creative tool for generating hypotheses and insights about the phenomenon for the education sector. By exploring different scenarios and possibilities, I was hoping that I could formulate new ideas and hypotheses about the nature of success in life in relation to the National Curriculum for primary schools in England. The process of imaginative variation designed by Husserl requires the following three steps, alongside which I have outlined how I used these steps to complete this final the data gathering stage of my research:

1. Start with an actual imagined instance of a phenomenon – I placed the words Success in Life in the middle of a table where the pupils stood in small groups.

2. Vary the phenomenon imaginatively – I provided the characteristics of success in life that the pupils had provided during the first two stages of the research on separate pieces of paper and asked the pupils to work together to place these characteristics around the words

success in life, using the proximity of the word to the phenomenon as an indication of its importance to the invariant nature of success in life.

3. Identify the essential characteristic which cannot be removed for the phenomenon of success in life to remain itself – once the pupils had finished placing the words I then facilitated and recorded a discussion amongst the pupils to remove the characteristics which were not 'essential' the phenomenon of success in life. The process of variation then continued until the following final question to the pupils: What is the one characteristic which you cannot remove for success in life to keep its meaning?

The imaginative variation was recorded to allow for analysis of the data at a later stage and allow myself, as the facilitator, to remain in the present moment of the activity instead of taking notes or interpreting comments. In conclusion, this approach was designed in this way to help myself and the participants move closer towards co-constructing a vision of success in life, using reflective thought as a 'a tool for prediction, action and problem solving rather than something that aims to merely describe, represent or mirror reality' (Cersosimo, 2020:2). At this stage of the project, I also revisited the teachers from earlier in the process, and asked them to reflect on what we had discussed in the first interview and to consider: *What is the one characteristic which you cannot remove for curriculum to keep its meaning?* This discussion was also recorded and is coded TG3 in the findings.

3.4 Analysis

In my search for an appropriate analytic method for this phenomenological research, I first examined Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach widely used by phenomenological researchers and psychologists since the mid-1990s, particularly in health and social sciences (Willig, 2008). Although my analysis sits within the interpretative paradigm, I concluded that IPA was not the most effective way forward. I wished to avoid assuming the role of 'expert' for myself as researcher and instead to enact the role of co-enquirer and facilitator (Lipman, 2003), consistent with the 'complexity attitude' outlined in 3.2.4 and with my broader commitment to learner agency within curriculum and pedagogy (Manyukhina and Wyse, 2019, 2025; Manyukhina, 2025).

I acknowledged Hammersley's (2013:45) reminder, drawing on Denscombe, that 'any intellectual analysis entails some abstraction and some movement away from the purely phenomenal' and that 'any researcher is caught between equally impossible ideals, on the one hand seeking to portray the world as it is in all its diversity and complexity and on the other rendering it down into some coherent and stable representation'. However, I was also in agreement with Willig (2008:63) that interpretative approaches can sometimes raise ethical concerns about the 'imposition of meaning and giving/denying voice to research participants'. I therefore aimed for analysis that would 'enrich the research by generating insights and understanding' (Willig, 2008:64). In this respect I found resonance with Qutoshi's (2018:215) description of Husserl's phenomenology as a way 'to educate our own vision, to define our position, to broaden how we see the world around', and with Perry's (2013:276) reflection that each participant perspective contributed to a 'cumulative expansion of [her] own horizon'. This stance also aligns with a Deweyan, pragmatic orientation to inquiry as reflective problem-solving within experience (Kayukov, 2016:764) and with an autonomy-supportive ethos that values relatedness and competence in dialogic work with children (Ryan and Deci, 2000:76).

For these reasons, I adopted the philosophical analytic techniques used by Husserl (Doyon, 2018; Husserl, 2013). This approach seeks to describe and analyse subjective experiences as they appear in consciousness, without presuppositions or interpretations. It allowed me to include 'substantial verbatim excerpts' (Reid et al., 2005:105) and 'illustrative quotations' (Willig, 2008:64), thereby invoking 'a sense of discovery rather than of construction' (Willig, 2008:70). I also drew on Sanders' (1982:432) reminder that philosophy must begin with a 'maximum of problems and a minimum of assumptions'. Accordingly, I strove to avoid making descriptions or assumptions about the pupils in line with the official labels provided by government (such as 'disadvantaged' or 'SEND'), since I felt that this could run the risk of colluding with implicit assumptions about which children are in need of 'knowledge and cultural capital' and which are not (Ofsted, 2019). This caution is consistent with critiques of misrecognition in schooling, whereby embodied dispositions are read as deficits (Simpson, 2023) (2.2.6).

Therefore, to ensure trustworthiness in my data, I adopted a systematic audit trail from data generation through to synthesis. Each transcript, drawing and written response was logged and coded in a consistent format, with reflexive memos attached at each stage. Initial readings focused

on pattern scanning: noting discrete meaning units or details without imposing premature categorisation. These were then clustered into situated themes which captured participants' own language. In the next phase, I engaged in imaginative variation myself, testing alternative groupings and deliberately seeking negative cases that challenged any early assumptions. Throughout this process, I maintained a separate reflexive diary. Before each analytic pass I revisited these notes to surface prior assumptions and to practise bracketing, in line with the phenomenological attitude described in Section 3.3.3. After each coding cycle I re-read the raw data to check that interpretations had not drifted from the participants' words. This recursive movement between data, reflection and data helped reduce confirmation bias and functioned as a researcher-side metacognitive routine (EEF, 2021), supporting disciplined reflection on how judgments were formed.

Triangulation was achieved both across participant groups and across data forms. Pupil, parent and teacher accounts were compared to identify convergences and dissonances. Written responses, oral dialogue and visual artefacts were also analysed alongside one another. Where themes recurred in more than one medium, these were treated as more robust invariants. Thick description was preserved by embedding verbatim quotations and illustrative figures (see 4.2-4.4). Credibility was further strengthened by returning to the analysis at intervals of several weeks, enabling me to re-encounter the data afresh. This temporal distancing is consistent with Husserl's call to 'return to the things themselves' and provided opportunities to test whether emergent categories retained salience beyond the immediate analytic moment. Transferability is supported by the detailed contextual information given in Chapter Four and the explicit coding framework presented in 3.3.2. Together, these strategies established an audit trail that allows readers to trace the movement from participant voice to phenomenological synthesis or as described by Giorgi (2006) the Husserlian method of transforming 'meaning units' into phenomenological expressions. Giorgi (2006) also advocates the use of free imaginative variation, or eidetic reduction, as an integral part of analysis. My approach diverged slightly: I applied imaginative variation not only during analysis but also as the concluding stage of data gathering. In the discussion (Chapter Five), I then present a synthesis (Schultz and Cobb-Stevens, 2004) generated from my own imaginative variation of the data. Figure 3 outlines this analytic pathway step by step, showing the movement from raw data through meaning units to phenomenological synthesis.

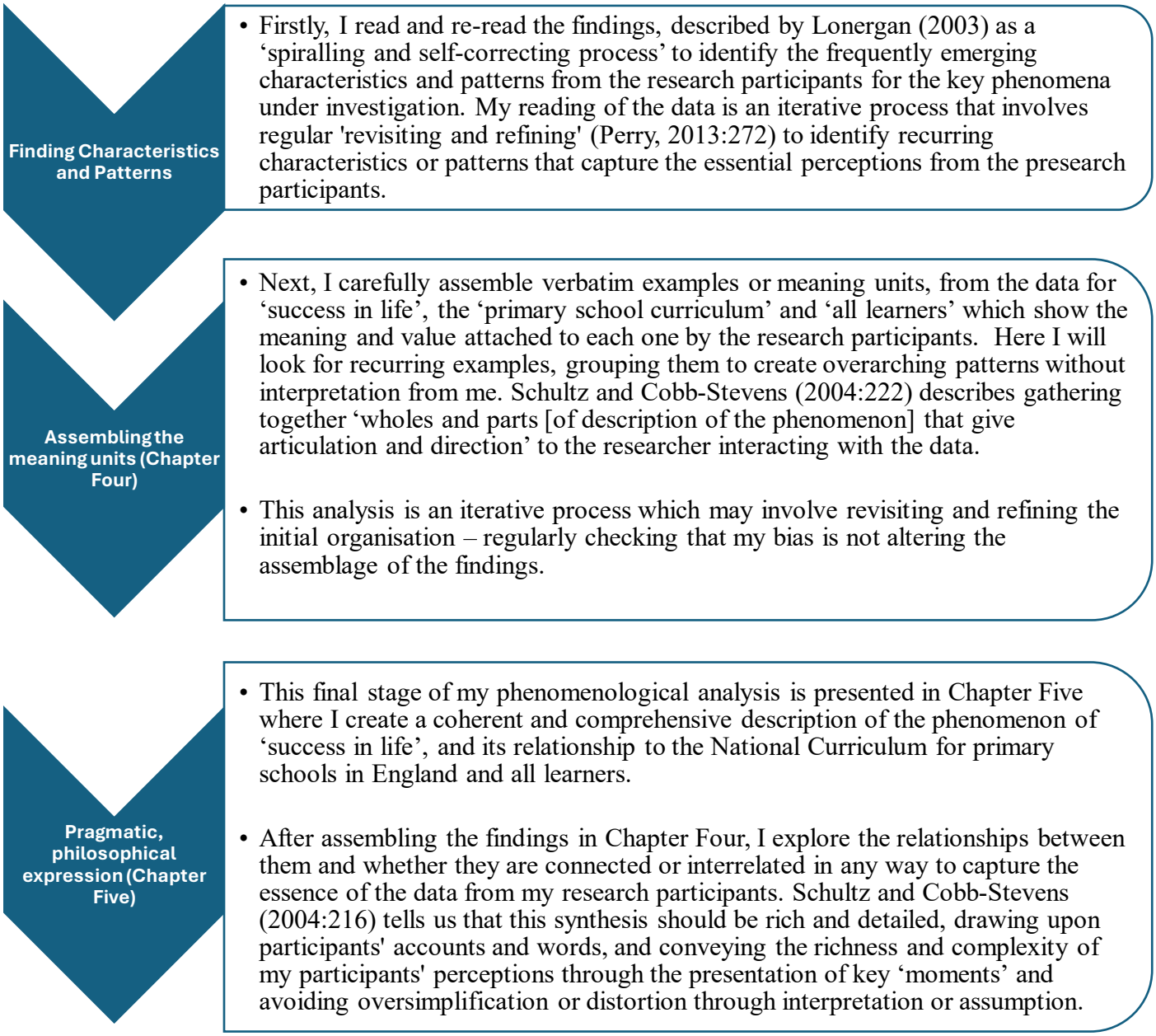

Figure 3: Pragmatic Phenomenology: Analysis process (Moses, 2025)

Finally, as I analysed the data, my cognisance of how easily my prior experiences as a school leader could shape the way I coded and interpreted participants' accounts caused me to regularly return to the transcripts to ask: *Am I hearing what they meant, or projecting what I would have meant in their place?* This process helped me stay open to multiple interpretations and to question the language of educational success as it emerged from the data, rather than relying on familiar professional discourses.

3.5 Concluding Thoughts

The aim of this chapter has been to establish both the philosophical grounding and the practical procedures that shaped my research. In bringing together Husserlian phenomenology and Deweyan pragmatism, I have constructed a pragmatic phenomenology that is sensitive to both the philosophical ideals alongside the lived experiences of participants as well as the educational contexts in which those experiences are situated. This hybrid framework acknowledges that phenomenology's search for essences must be balanced with pragmatism's insistence on usefulness and applicability to the relevant fields, particularly when addressing questions of curriculum and success in life.

While acknowledging that I must not interpret the data gathered according to my own opinion or biases, I look to Lonergan for a useful dose of realism, who insists that it is important and probably unavoidable for the researcher to use his or her own judgement in careful analysis of a text (Lonergan, 2003:175 in Perry, 2013:267). Lonergan also describes this process of analysis as a 'careful process of reading and re-reading data, thoughtful reflection and integrating responses into high level synthesis'. For Lonergan, objectivity is to be found in 'authentic subjectivity', that is, being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible (Lonergan, 2003:265 in Perry, 2013:274) instead of a complete absence of engagement by the researcher and who they are. Finlay (2014:125) adds that it is not possible to be fully objective but that phenomenological researchers are 'open and fully attentive and not objective and disengaged'. Finlay (2014:125) further explains that even though the natural attitude may be 'put out of play' during the method of data collection, this does not mean that the researcher cannot derive meaning from the findings. I understand this to mean that the researcher is not simply a passive receptacle for the data. Instead, Finlay (2014:124) argues that the researcher pushes away any 'certainty that someone has a certain meaning' and avoids making assumptions about what is or may be said. Giorgi (2006:308) reminds us that 'it is

often the case that seemingly irrelevant statements end up providing nuanced, but important, senses to the major significant statements', adding depth and texture to the analysis. Such reflections guided my approach to reading and re-reading transcripts, attending to both the central and the peripheral as part of a coherent interpretative process (Giorgi et al., 2017).

The methodology outlined in this chapter has sought to demonstrate how a pragmatic phenomenology, situated within the context of primary education, provided both a philosophical grounding and a practical structure for data collection and analysis. By combining transcendental insights with contextual pragmatism, the approach allowed for attention both to participants' lived experiences and to the wider social and policy structures shaping those experiences. The three-stage research design ensured that data were gathered in a way that acknowledged the complexity of meaning-making while remaining sensitive to the realities of school life. With these methodological principles in place, the next chapter turns directly to the voices of pupils, parents and teachers. Chapter Four now presents the findings of the study, showing how participants themselves defined success in life and how their accounts reveal both shared meanings and distinct emphases in relation to curriculum content, pedagogy and wider educational aims.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of my empirical research into how pupils, parents and teachers perceive the concept of *success in life* and the extent to which the English primary curriculum is seen to or could support this aim. Following the phenomenological orientation set out in 3.2, the findings are presented as a series of 'wholes and parts' as Moran (2000:14) describes when he explains phenomenology's method of 'moving from particular structures back to the whole and vice versa' reflecting the ways in which participants' perspectives revealed both shared or broad meanings as well as distinctive emphases or detail. I present my findings in the participants' own words, drawing on the 'verbatim examples' or 'meaning units' (Giorgi, 2006). My handling of the findings involved repeated reading of the transcripts to identify recurring characteristics and patterns (Perry, 2013:272), while attending to statements that might at first seem peripheral but add nuance or challenge assumptions. I have worked to combine the 'wholes' and 'parts' of the data, presenting specific details in charts or tables where appropriate and using narrative synthesis where participants' contributions are best understood in their integrated form.

As outlined in 3.2, the study is underpinned by three theoretical anchors. Husserl's phenomenology directs attention to the essential meanings expressed by participants about the phenomena under discussion (3.2.3). Pragmatism highlights the educational significance of making sure that my findings offer insights for the real world of primary school education in England (3.2.4). Finally, Bourdieu's (1986) sociology provides a critical lens and a reminder for examining how these meanings are shaped by the unequal distribution of capital. Taken together, my theoretical framework enables this chapter and subsequent analysis to foreground participants' voices while situating their accounts within educational practice and wider societal structures. The findings draw on data generated through pupil surveys, collaborative philosophical enquiries, parent questionnaires and interviews, and teacher interviews, providing a multi-perspectival view of how success in life is conceptualised and linked to primary schooling in England (3.3).

This chapter is organised into the following sections. 4.2 examines all participants' definitions of success in life, identifying the characteristics, qualities and elements they associate with it. These findings are explored through the lens of Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, highlighting the extent

to which economic, social, and cultural capitals are understood as relevant to the phenomenon of success in life. Section 4.3 the focuses on the findings related to the primary curriculum and pedagogy, considering what pupils should learn and how learning should take place if it is to provide all learners with what is needed to succeed in life. Section 4.4 addresses the question of assessment within primary schools and explores the perceptions of my research participants about whether all learners have the same chance of success in life, exploring assessment practices and its impact on perceptions of disadvantage, success and failure. The chapter concludes in 4.5 by synthesising the findings and identifying essences that underpin the analysis in Chapter Five. Now I turn to the question of what it means to succeed in life.

4.2 What does it mean to succeed in life?

Informed by Ofsted's (2019:6) use of the term *cultural capital* as a key element of the curriculum's role in enabling pupils to *succeed in life*, this section takes that policy framing as a starting point for organising and interpreting my qualitative data. As explained in the introduction to this chapter, I draw on Bourdieu's (1986) three forms of capital, economic, social, and cultural, as an analytical lens for exploring participants' definitions of success in life and the qualities, skills, and resources they associate with it. This framework provides a structured way of examining how different kinds of capital are recognised and valued and offers a point of comparison between participants' perspectives and the use of the term *cultural capital* embedded in education policy discourse in England. At the same time, I remain mindful of Giorgi's reminder that phenomenological analysis must not exclude 'seemingly irrelevant statements' which may reveal important nuances (Giorgi, 2006:308) so for this reason, I identify contributions from my participants in 4.2.4 that resist neat placement within Bourdieu's typology which could perhaps lead the way towards an deeper understanding of the phenomenon of success in life from my research participants perspective. In the meantime, the presentation of findings begins here with a focus on economic capital in 4.2.1, social capital in 4.2.2 and cultural capital in 4.2.3, taking into account its objectified (4.2.3.1), institutionalised (4.2.3.2) and embodied (4.2.3.3) forms.

4.2.1 Economic Capital

Bourdieu (1986:3) defines economic capital as that which is 'immediately and directly convertible into money' and 'may be institutionalised in the form of property rights'. It has a transactional quality, concerned with the acquisition of material security, paid work, and goods that sustain or signal a particular standard of living. In analysing my data, I coded references to economic capital where participants explicitly mentioned money, jobs as a source of income, possessions tied to wealth, or the ability to afford necessities such as food, housing, and transport. A snapshot of the pattern of responses is provided in Table 4 below and the detail is discussed subsequently

Participant group	Essential characteristics of economic capital within participant responses	% of responses
Pupils	Money Jobs as income Possessions tied to wealth Sufficiency (enough to cover cost of living)	22%
Parents	Money/possessions as comfort or security, but not as a symbol of life success.	9%
Teachers	Financial security as enabling experiences, recognised but questioned as a dominant goal.	N/A (qualitative emphasis)

Table 5: Research participant references to economic capital (Moses, 2025).

Among pupil participants, 22% of responses in the survey referred to aspects of economic capital when describing success in life. These ranged from straightforward mentions of '*money'* (P37), '*a good job*' (P6), or '*not being rich but having enough money to survive and support you and your family*' (P40), to more elaborate accounts combining financial stability with relational and lifestyle aspirations. For example, P27 wrote: *'A good family, a nice home and some very good friends and a decent car'*. Similarly, P20 emphasised balance rather than accumulation: *'To be comfortable and happy with enough, but no more, of everything'*. This theme of *enough* was debated at length in the second collaborative enquiry, where pupils wrestled with the relativity of sufficiency: *'We kept fighting over how to describe "enough money" because we know that we need enough money to survive. But it's not specifying that you have enough money to survive. It could be enough money to buy a mansion or enough money to buy the basics' (*Enq2*).* Such exchanges reveal not only an

awareness of economic realities but also a critical engagement with the tension between needs and wants. Some pupils expressed aspirational visions that combined wealth with enjoyment: gaming rooms, sports cars, or '*a secret bunker*' (P9, P2) yet even these were often linked to wellbeing and relationships rather than wealth alone. For instance, P11 imagined both *'enough money to pay bills, food and tax'* and a '*dog named Coconut, a hot tub, and a flower field*'. Across responses, economic security was presented less as an end in itself and more as a foundation for living a good life. My parent participants made far fewer references to economic capital in their survey and interviews, with only 9% of questionnaire responses linking money directly to success. Where they did, it was framed as a means to an end: *'I think [money and possessions] make life easier and more comfortable'* (PA8). Others stressed that financial stability alleviates external pressures but does not define success: *'Money means financial success, not life success'* (PA5QI). In the interviews, parents reflected critically on materialism. As one parent explained, '*success comes from happiness in what you do'* and *'how you live and not from possessions'* (PA2Q). PA1 observed: *'We are taught that the more money and possessions you have the happier you are, but I find this not to be the case. I've gone from having nothing to having money and a successful job, and at that time I was at my unhappiest'.* PA2 similarly noted: *'We live in a very materialistic world, but possessions should not show that you are successful, and neither should money. Success comes from happiness in what you do and how you live'.* These accounts underline a consistent theme: money matters for security and comfort, but an overemphasis on material gain is perceived as corrosive to wellbeing and ultimately, success in life. Teachers acknowledged the role of financial stability but situated it within a broader framework of life experience and personal outlook.

One headteacher commented: *'I like to have the comfort of knowing that I can afford things and get or give yourself different experiences. That's what life is made up of; you look back at your experiences and memories and learning from them'* (H1). This echoes Dewey's (1938) view of education as the cultivation of meaningful experience and interaction, while also pointing to the practical necessity of resources to enable such opportunities. Another headteacher drew attention to the way systemic narratives emphasise economic goals: *'We do reference a lot being able to have a good job and being comfortable… because that's the system that's built around us, and maybe that is also the cultural direction'* (H2). Here, financial success is acknowledged but subtly critiqued as a product of policy and cultural emphasis rather than an unquestioned truth. In essence, across

pupils, parents, and teachers, economic capital was recognised as important but insufficient as a definition of success in life. Pupils emphasised sufficiency, having 'enough', while often combining financial stability with relationships, enjoyment, and wellbeing. Parents highlighted its role in easing pressures but resisted materialism as a dominant value in the concept of success in life. Teachers were pragmatic, recognising both the necessity of financial stability and the limitations of equating it with life success or happiness.

4.2.2 Social Capital

Bourdieu (1986:249) described social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'. In other words, it is the value that comes from relationships, networks and connections. Unlike economic capital, which can be measured more directly, or cultural capital, which can be formalised in objects or qualifications, social capital rests on trust, belonging and the capacity to draw on others for support or opportunity, exemplified by '*helping others in the community*' (PA16Q) or '*working together so everyone does well*' (TG2B). In categorising my participants' perspectives, I coded references to family, friends, peer groups, role models, and community ties as examples of social capital. These were present in all participant groups as shown in below though with different emphases which outlined in more detail below.

Participant Group	Number of mentions	Percentage of Total
Pupils	59	32%
Parents	17	30%
Teachers	14	28%

Table 6: Frequency of references to social capital across all participant groups. (Moses, 2025).

Among my pupil participants, social capital was the most frequently mentioned form of capital. Within these findings, different categories could be distinguished, as shown below in Table 3:

Characteristics of social capital	**Number of Responses**	**Percentage of Total**
Friendship and peer support	21	25%
Family and close relationships	18	22%
Networks, role models and influence	12	14%
Community, helping others, belonging	8	10%

Table 7: Subcategories of pupil responses coded as social capital (Moses, 2025).

Pupils frequently framed family as the foundation of success, exemplified by the drawing from P15SD in Figure 4 below '*I'm going to make a happy family and happy children'*. P27 linked the notion directly to stability: '*If I know I came back to a loving family and friends, a nice home and car, and enough money to pay bills, food and tax then I have reached success in life'*. For others, friends were equally central. P21 defined success through relational qualities: '*friendly, happy, playful and encouraging*' while P22 insisted: '*to be successful you must be proud and happy*'. Pupils also debated the importance of role models and influence. In Enq1, one pupil warned that '*if you have a goal, but you get it by hurting people, then that's not real success*', while another reflected on the dangers of relying too heavily on others: '*you don't need to know anyone, you just need to work hard, you need to have passions for what you do*' (P16) and as another put it: *'If you're confident, you can stand up for your friends when someone's being mean'* or '*not giving up when it's hard'* (P17). Contributions also extended beyond family and friends to community and belonging, as in P20's call for schools to act as '*a community*' through '*group activities to gain social qualities… and student transitions to learn about different cultures and religions'*.

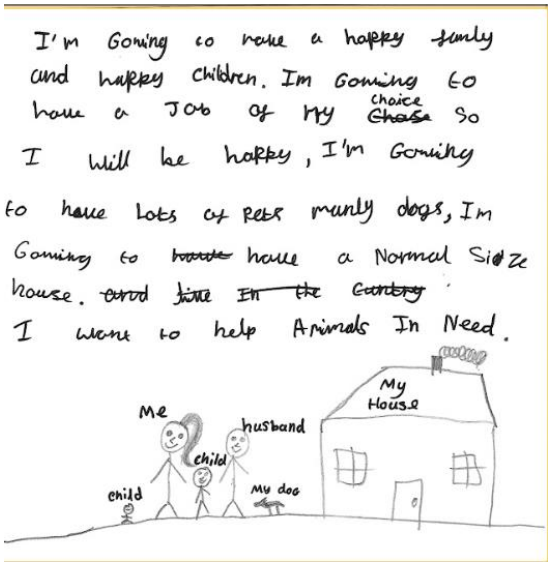

Figure 4: How I will know if I have achieved success when I am older (P15SD)

Parents' responses placed similar weight on the importance of social capital, 30% of responses, with a focus on family, but often with a stronger emphasis on the sustaining role of encouragement and love. Parents similarly described how children's kindness with others was rooted in their own sense of security, with PA19QI reflecting: *'If a child feels good about themselves, they don't need to put others down, they can actually lift others up'* (PA19QI). Teachers reinforced this link, with TG2B noting: *'The children who are happiest in themselves are usually the ones who show the most care for others'* (TG2B) PA4 stated: '*support financially and emotionally, being loved and cared for is more important than anything else*'. PA13 echoed this: '*feeling as though there are people spurring you on and willing you to be successful is wonderful and will make a person naturally want to do more and achieve more*'. At the same time, parents acknowledged that negative family experiences could hinder success, with PA1 candidly noting that '*I found myself very disheartened listening to negative people*'. Teachers, meanwhile, recognised both the enabling and exclusionary sides of social capital. H1 stressed the importance of supportive relationships for developing confidence: '*you look back at your experiences and memories and learning from them*'. TG1B emphasised agency within networks: '*if you want to be successful, it's not just going to necessarily land on your doorstep; you're going to have to do something about it*'. However, H2 was more cautious, pointing to the unfairness of access: '*we do reference a lot being able to have a good job and being comfortable… because that's the system that's built around us, and maybe that*

is also the cultural direction'. This acknowledges the way schools often reproduce, rather than challenge, the advantages of certain networks, perhaps reinforcing Bourdieu's (1986) (2.2.5) observation that social capital is not evenly distributed but shaped by access to networks and recognition, offering both opportunities and exclusions. In summary, when taking all the responses about social capital, my participants' accounts illustrate both consistency and variation. Pupils highlighted friendship and family support, parents stressed family encouragement and emotional backing, while teachers acknowledged the systemic role of networks and the potentially unfair advantages of advantageous connections who can provide shortcuts into work or opportunities.

4.2.3 Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1986:241) identified cultural capital as what 'makes the games of society', the resources, dispositions, and competencies that operate beyond simple economic exchange. He outlined three forms: objectified cultural capital (tangible cultural goods that can be owned, displayed, or transferred), institutionalised cultural capital (formal recognition of competence through qualifications and titles), and embodied cultural capital (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, developed over time through habitus) (1.4). These forms are interrelated: the ownership of cultural goods may reflect embodied dispositions, and qualifications may both depend on and reinforce certain ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving. In my research findings, responses from pupils, parents, and teachers touched on all three forms of cultural capital. Table 8 below summarises the distribution of references across the groups.

Form of Cultural Capital	Pupils	Parents	Teachers
Objectified (tangible goods, possessions, material assets)	8%	9%	5%
Institutionalised (qualifications, credentials, recognition)	8%	60%	42%
Embodied (dispositions, behaviours, emotional and social skills)	59%	65%	68%

Table 8: Distribution of responses across the three forms of cultural capital (Moses, 2025).

4.2.3.1 Objectified Cultural Capital

Objectified cultural capital comprises tangible goods that embody cultural value, such as books, artworks, instruments, or technologies and represented the smallest section of responses from my participants. Among pupils, 8% of responses referred to possessions, often houses, cars or specific items, like a hot tub, that signalled a comfortable life. These items were rarely presented in isolation, but as part of a broader picture of stability or relational wellbeing. For example, one pupil explained success as *'a good family, a nice home and some very good friends and a decent car'* (P27). Others described multifunctional characteristics of 'objects' like *'a dog because they make you happy'* (P17) or identified symbolic objects of achievement such as *'a gold medal, football World Cup'* (P3) or *'a decent house and clothes'* (P17). Parents were less likely to highlight possessions, with only 9% doing so, and typically framed them as enablers of leisure, comfort, or security. As one noted, *'money and possessions don't equal happiness, but they do make life easier'* (PA8) but the pupils often coupled these objectified elements with friendship, family or happiness in their definitions of success in life. Parents and teachers likewise downplayed the importance of material items. PA8 remarked that *'the majority of items in life are not required or needed'*. H1 described how modest activities, as opposed to canonical activities like visiting a museum or art gallery, such as '*What counts as cultural capital might be different in a different school… it might not be visits to the museum; it might be eating in a restaurant, going to the countryside, a trip to feed ducks… it does need money to buy these opportunities*' (H1) could generate cultural capital by enriching vocabulary, stimulating curiosity and building confidence. The class teachers similarly made few direct references to material goods except valuing tidy and cared-for school environments (TG2B).

4.2.3.2 Institutionalised Cultural Capital

Institutionalised cultural capital, most visibly qualifications, was consistently acknowledged yet treated with caution in my findings. Sixty per cent of parents explicitly mentioned qualifications as potential pathways to success, often drawing on personal experience. PA9Q saw them as *'a passport to success… they open doors'*, another parent reflected: *'I am a medical doctor so required a Degree and A levels… My husband has no A levels and is a successful businessman'* (PA4Q) whereas PA14QI countered that *'certificates and qualifications aren't everything'*, citing her choice to prioritise family life over credentials. Teachers articulated both necessity and

limitation. TG1A explained: *'You will have a higher chance of achieving your dream job with qualifications… [but] if you don't achieve those goals, it does not mean you aren't successful'*. H2 likewise recognised exams as providing opportunities but worried that credentials could obscure broader skills and wellbeing. In this sense, qualifications were viewed as stepping stones rather than endpoints with teachers acknowledging the importance of qualifications for certain careers, while cautioning against a narrow equation of qualifications with life success. One teacher explained: *'you will have a higher chance of achieving your dream job with qualifications… [but] if you don't achieve those goals, it does not mean you aren't successful'* (TG1A).

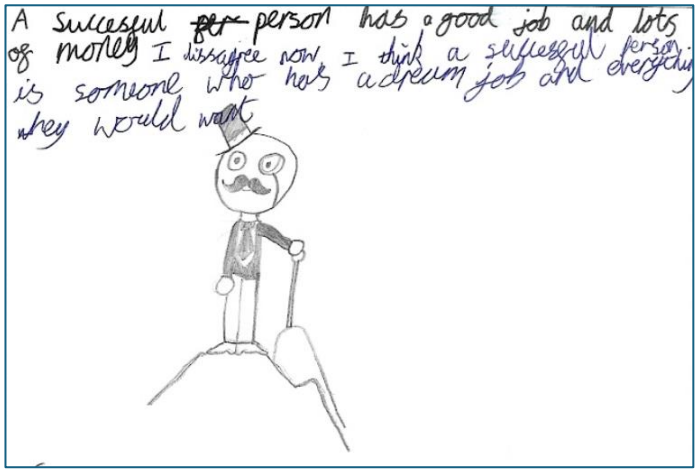

Figure 5: Reflection on the definition of success in life (P6)

Pupils mentioned qualifications less frequently (8%) but often described specific careers that implied a pathway of study, such as *'paediatrician'* (P41) or *'architect'* (P12). Several emphasised fulfilment: *'having a job you love'* (P2). Several pupils noted that school success is often measured by tests, though they did not see these as reflective of what mattered most to them exemplified by P2 who explained *'it's the teachers who care about the tests, not us…tests don't tell you if you are kind - SATs are for the school, not for me'* and instead said that schools should be *'funny, loving, kind'* places. Another pupil added, *'You don't get a certificate for being nice, but you do for spelling'* continuing *'I like learning but not SATs, they just make me feel nervous'* (P18). This scepticism about testing was shared by parents often spoke of balance in terms of wellbeing: *'there's no point in pushing for grades if your child is anxious and can't sleep'* (PA15) and teachers who expressed similar concerns: *'I worry about children who hit targets but are unhappy. That's*

not success, that's a system out of balance' (TG1). When thinking about their futures, one pupil's explanation in Figure 6 shows a strategic approach to achieving the future she wants for her life, explaining '*I would like to be an anaesthetist when I am older but in the five years training, I will be a party planner'* (P11), not to mention her dreams of a dog, hot tub, flower field and balloon arch.

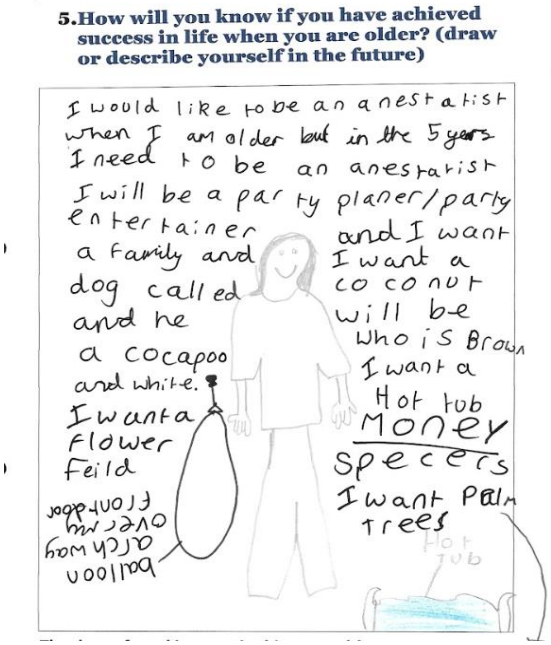

Figure 6: How I will know if I have achieved success in life. (P11)

4.2.3.3 Embodied Cultural Capital

Embodied cultural capital emerged as the most prominent form across all groups, referred to in various forms by 59% of pupils, 65% of parents, and 68% of teachers (Table 8). Pupils frequently highlighted values and dispositions such as happiness, kindness, and perseverance, with P35 explaining '*happiness is essential; without it, you are not motivated*' (P35/3). Importantly self-compassion was also important to my participants with one pupil explaining: *'You have to be nice to yourself if you get something wrong, otherwise you just feel rubbish and stop trying'* (P15) and another '*trying again even when you get it wrong'* (P33). Relational qualities were also emphasised, including being *'friendly, happy, playful and encouraging'* (P21). Another pupil emphasised kindness, stating simply: *'It's about being kind to people because if you're not kind then no one will*

want to be around you' (P22). Another reflected: *'Helping others makes you feel good inside, like you've done something that matters'* (P19) and PA12 linked success to the capacity to act responsibly: *'it's about making choices that don't just help yourself but also help others'* (PA12). Teachers observed that compassion was not only morally desirable but practically necessary for classroom life. TG1 explained: *'Children who can see when someone else is upset and go over to help, those are the children who hold a class together'* (TG1). Parents too valued compassion as central to success, with PA12 noting: *'If my child grows up to be kind and thinks about other people, I'll see that as success, more than any grade'* (PA12).

Parents echoed this emphasis on dispositions, describing success as rooted in kindness, empathy, and self-belief. As one explained: *'a good attitude, a genuine positive attitude is critical… a poor attitude affects your mindset'* (PA16Q). Another underlined the role of communication: *'communication skills are essential… they can achieve success measured in monetary units but can also bring about change'* (PA18Q). Teachers also stressed behavioural and emotional dispositions. One headteacher described the importance of *'manners… knowing how to behave and react in different situations… how to communicate and how to use language'* (H1). Others emphasised resilience, motivation, and resourcefulness: *'enthusiasm, self-motivation, wanting to listen, wanting to question, being resourceful and resilient'* (H2). At times, they debated conformity versus resistance: *'you have to be able to conform to fit in'* (TG1A) contrasted with *'those that rebel against the norms… can go on to be extremely successful'* (TG2) as well as also acknowledging that *'the children who struggle most are often the ones trying to live two different lives, one at home, one at school'* (TG2). Parents echoed this orientation towards dispositions. PA16Q argued that *'a good attitude, a genuine positive attitude is critical'*, while PA18Q stressed that *'communication skills are essential… [they] can achieve success measured in monetary units but can also bring about change'*. Several parents linked such traits to adaptability across contexts. PA11QI, for instance, noted that children needed to *'speak about [subjects] in ways that would make sense to other people'*, framing communication as both a practical and social resource. Teachers, too, consistently elevated dispositions. H1 described the goal as *'enrichment of language and enrichment of learning… enrichment of the arts'*, positioning these as preparation *'to be able to navigate society'*. TG2B similarly reflected, *'if you can't function in society, then you will not be successful in life'*, placing dispositions above tested knowledge. These accounts indicate that while embodied cultural capital dominated across participants, institutionalised and objectified forms

persisted as gateways to opportunity and certain credentials, knowledge and experiences still functioned as *'*keys to the club*'*, advantaging some pupils while excluding others. Several teachers made this explicit, pointing to how affluence, travel and enrichment outside school could position children more favourably within the system. Yet participants also challenged the notion that cultural capital, as currently defined in policy, could ever be equitably distributed or straightforwardly delivered through curriculum provision. For parents in particular, the significance of qualifications and possessions was consistently reframed in terms of wellbeing, adaptability and relationships. This suggests that success could not be reduced to the transmission of sanctioned knowledge from school to child. Rather, it sharpens the question of who currently holds the best chance of success in life, illustrating how cultural capital, as enacted in classrooms and families, both reflects and resists the structures of social reproduction introduced in 2.2.6 and discussed later in Chapter Five.

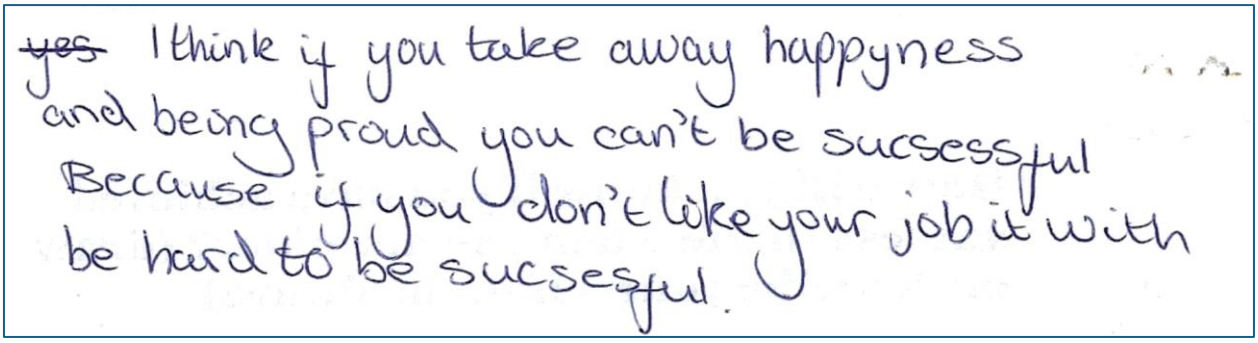

Figure 7: An invariant features of success in life: Happyness (P10/3)

When the parents and teachers when asked *How will you know if your child/pupil has achieved success in life in the future*? Teacher TG2B imagined one sign of success in life as '*for example, if going into the park a child holds open the gate for another child or a parent'* plus showing '*respect for the environment and respect for other citizens, for example, putting things in bins and not swearing or shouting*' (TG2B) and another teacher suggested that pupils capable of success in life '*would tell you that they had ongoing projects outside of school. They might be raising money for charity by a cake sale'* (TG2A). Some of the pupils also mentioned types of citizenship which they thought would embody a person who had achieved success in life in the future. One pupil explained that *'helping in the garden made me feel proud because it was for everyone, not just me'* (P31). Parents described the same dynamic in everyday terms: *'success is when my child learns something at school and comes home and uses it to help around the house or with their younger brother'*. P7

told me that his first thought about success was to '*make a difference in life*' which a year later he elaborated by saying that he thought the invariant characteristic of success in life was to '*make an impact on the world and make change*' and P25 made a link between confidence and fairness, *'If you believe in yourself, you can say when something isn't fair'*. Fairness also came from P28 who said *'if you win by cheating, it's not really success'* and from parents who highlighted integrity: *'my child needs to know they can live with their choices. That's more important than money'* (PA4).

PA19QI said she would recognise success in life in her child kin the future as '*the ability to be adaptable and resilient to whatever life throws at you… in a relaxed and happy way'.* The essence of future success for their children is often linked by parents to being happy with the chosen path in life, with one parent stating, *'Happiness in the path they have chosen.'* (PA2Q). Financial stability and the ability to build great experiences also play a role, as one parent noted, *'They'd be happy with their lot and would hopefully have enough money to build some great experiences.'* (PA3Q) with another parent adding, *'Their fulfilment encompassing personal pride, happiness, wealth, emotional wealth. Impact on society.'* (PA4Q) and *'If they are happy and doing something they enjoy which also brings financial stability.'* (PA5Q). Settling into life and fulfilling potential are also key indicators of success in life for my participants. One parent shared, '*If they were happy and settled*' (PA8Q) Another added, '*If they are happy, settled, fulfilling their potential, doing something they love, are a decent person*.' (PA9Q). Parental support and the pursuit of dreams was also seen as crucial, as one parent expressed, '*If he was happy, tried hard, followed his own dreams being supported as best we can*.' (PA Q) The simple measure of happiness is reiterated, '*That they are happy*.' (PA12Q), '*By being the best person they can be*.' (PA12Q). Enjoying their job and being self-sufficient is important too, '*They would be happy doing a job they were good at and enjoyed and could provide for themselves*' (PA15Q). Thinking about how they would know if their child was currently successful, joy and positivity of children were seen as indicators of success, '*my daughter's laughter, positivity, sense of humour, confidence and love shows me that she is doing well. She loves school, her friends, she loves her life*.' (PA16Q) as well as their behaviour '*If she is happy, treats people with respect, has a group of close friends, enjoys life, and makes the most of every opportunity!*' (PA17Q). Ultimately, love and happiness are the core of success in the eyes of the parents, '*The only thing I would want for my children is to know they are loved. If they are happy within themselves and have the means to have shelter and food - they have been successful!*' (PA18Q) Despite differing views on wealth and status, the importance of happiness and resilience

is clear, '*I know my son has different views and he currently sees wealth and status symbols as being important; ultimately, I know he has a big heart and the key thing to him is making people around him happy, go on to have fantastic times and experience success in whatever they see that as… not be restricted by my viewpoints!*' (PA18Q).

When talking to the first teacher group (TG1) they believed that success in life is significantly an ability to *'accept and be happy with themselves'* and that children should have the *'basic skills of maths and English so that they have the opportunities to get the knowledge for whatever they need for their job and the social emotional skills they need to communicate well and be happy'*. Teacher A from the first teacher group (TG1A) viewed success as a subjective and personal concept and stated that *'if you're happy and not always wanting whatever's just out of reach'* then you are successful which was echoed by P11 who explained that it was essential to believe in yourself '*because even if you have succeeded in life, you won't recognise it and you will always want to improve yourself more*' (P11/3), and Pupil 19 added that constantly searching for success may cause regrets and '*if you are regretful all the time, you will never be happy*' (P19PPG). These points of view seem to challenge notions of success being achieved solely by reaching economic or status goals and implied that our perceptions of our success are vital to us being happy. TG1A then shared a personal anecdote about her sister to illustrate this point, explaining that despite having a *'nice house, cars, and children who've done well academically'*, she perceived herself as unsuccessful because she was no longer in a high-status job. TG1A suggested that perhaps a person's perception of success can fluctuate based on their *'life experiences and personal aspirations'* and further emphasised that a person's outlook on life can play a significant role in achieving success in life, using the metaphor of a *'glass being half full or half empty'.* Having experienced severe unhappiness in the past, TG1A explained that she now found her current situation to be *'amazing'*, and that she was doing the job that she always wanted to do, making clear that personal fulfilment was a key indicator of success for her instead of material wealth, strengthened by the first Headteacher who identified '*personal fulfilment - by achieving what you want to achieve, not just in your career but also on a personal level as well*'. When presented with so many mentions of happiness it reminds me of section 2.2.3 and I will discuss further in Chapter Five how happiness relates to the primary school curriculum and experience in England. Interestingly, the two teachers in TG1 also discussed what they thought the pupils would say if they were asked what the meaning of success in life was. TG1A was very clear that he thought '*they wouldn't associate being*

successful with being happy (TG1A)'. He felt that the pupils would value highly '*becoming highly paid so that they could buy X, Y, and Z'* (TG1A). TG1B added that '*how many parents would actually say, you know 'as long as you're happy and you are content and have everything you need in life, the rest doesn't really matter'? I mean that's not the kind of conversation to have with your children, is it?*' These points will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five as they differ from what the pupils and parents did in fact say in their questionnaires, interviews and collaborative enquiries.

Before moving onto the next section, I pause to take note of a debate which came up between the teachers about whether successful people tend to conform to societal norms or not. TG1A said that *'you have to be able to conform to fit in. Whether or not that's once you get into a workplace or you get into a social group or anything else you want to do, you have to be able to modify and conform to be successful'* (TG1A) linking to the literature from Bourdieu outlining embodied cultural capital in 2.2.3. Teacher TG1B then added that she had no desire to 'fit in' with the dominant classes, adding '*I don't think I am unsuccessful just because I might feel out of place if I went to mix with Boris* [the current Prime Minister] *and his cronies'* finishing off by saying that '*society does have a lot to answer for by dictating/suggesting what is success in life'* acknowledging that *'when school values match family values, children feel stronger. When they clash, children feel torn'* (TG2). This notion that you need to conform to succeed was also challenged by TG2 who put forward '*I'm thinking of the likes of those that rebel against the norms and can go on to be extremely successful'.* Furthermore, one of the parents, was fairly dismissive of the need to conform adding that she would want her children to *'be true to themselves*' because '*behaving or speaking as another won't be success*es' (P19) however, one thing to consider is that this parent is part of the established middle classes so perhaps not aware of her advantage. TG1B offered a pragmatic viewpoint where an individual who had the ability to adapt to situations could use that as a way to succeed in life instead of simply conforming with societal expectations '*perhaps it is easier to use actions to your advantage when you know what it is you want to be successful in, for example, if I wanted to be a successful lawyer, there's a certain way I would act (TG1B).*

In contrast, Headteacher One (H1) introduced an interesting perspective of embodied cultural capital by talking about the life she might have had if she had not been so focused on academic

pursuits. She said that she wished she '*had been braver on her year abroad from Uni as she loved languages'* but that she did not know how to '*stay away from home'* (H1) which she attributed to her background; *'I'm a typical you know, from a working-class family. I never saw my dad; he was working long hours. My mum worked, you know, she had a job as well as bringing us all up',* suggesting that she was experiencing what Reay describes in 2.4 of 'shock of habitus', also described by TG2 that *'when we ask children to act one way in school and they see the opposite at home or on the street, they feel split. That's when behaviour problems start'* which will be discussed further in 5.3, but in the meantime I also consider that there may be another way of looking at this as explained by Parent 11 who explained that *'I want my child to see the same values of fairness and respect in school that we teach at home'* (PA11). This also reminded me of the feeling described by PA14 where both she and her son felt that higher education was not for them, despite being academically able to enter that field. She was visibly upset when she described her son as '*really confident as a child, you know, happy and bubbly...but going up to high school was a massive, struggle for him as he couldn't express himself'* as well as the observations she had of her daughter whose behaviour changes when she goes to school '*She is full of it when she's at home. Yeah, you know, she'll dance for us, and she sings songs to us. But when she's at school, she just really lowers. I really wish I knew why she is not able to be herself in school*' (PA14QI). Both of these contributions reminded me of the literature about symbolic mastery and symbolic violence (Atkinson, 2020:221) so will be picked up later in Chapter Five.

In summary, across all my participants, cultural capital was strongly associated with embodied qualities of attitude and behaviour, exemplified by P19 who explained that *'you can be really clever but still not be happy or kind'* and *'it's no good being good at sport if everyone thinks you're mean. You need to be the same person in all parts of your life'* (P23). TG1 who voiced similar concerns: *'we're told to give children cultural capital, but it often feels like ticking off visits to museums rather than building their confidence to navigate life'* (TG1). While parents and teachers acknowledged the importance of institutionalised capital for specific pathways, they consistently reframed its significance in terms of motivation, adaptability, and personal fulfilment. Pupils, meanwhile, linked success to a sense of happiness, relationships, and equilibrium or peace of mind. This could suggest that while Bourdieu's typology helps to categorise responses, it does not fully capture the way participants viewed success as dispositional and context dependent. In particular, it also doesn't fully capture the embodied attitudes to learning that my participants perceived an

individual with the capacity to achieve success in life would possess which I will now present below.

4.2.4. Characteristics of effective learners

While my research participants valued knowledge, they consistently framed it as most powerful when combined with transferable habits of mind and the confidence to apply learning in new contexts, with significant overlaps with the embodied characteristics presented in 4.2.3.3 but worthy of a brief focus here. When speaking about the curriculum, participants from all parts of my sample rarely separated 'what' from 'how'. Subjects were almost always linked to the capacities like confidence, adaptability, creativity, fun and perseverance that they could nurture through affective and effective learning experiences '*without happiness, you can't really do anything because if I'm not happy, I struggle to learn*' (P22PP) and collaborative working with others. For pupils, success in life was not only about mastering content but about developing the personal resources through a mixture of hedonic and eudaimonic happiness to be an effective independent learner. Pupils described hedonic happiness as '*talking and playing with friends*' (P44PP), '*mixing with people*' (P24) and being with those who are '*friendly, happy and playful*' (P35). They also spoke of its relationship to eudaimonic happiness, as in P39PP's reflection that '*happiness is what keeps me going; without it, achievements feel empty*'. Pupils also frequently highlighted how happiness linked to confidence, communication and kindness. P45PP emphasised *'staying positive'*, P31 valued *'asking for help when you are struggling'*, and P21 described success in terms of being *'friendly, happy, playful and encouraging'*. Many pupils and parents also described the importance of learning to question and argue as part of good communication. They saw activities like collaborative enquiry, debates and discussions as ways to develop *'socialising skills'* (P39PP), *'being able to put up a good argument'* (P40PP), and *'polite disputing'* (P34). For P30, it was about the freedom to *'ask lots of questions'*, while P37 believed such practices could *'help people be happier in the future'*. These comments show that pupils connected learning directly to social and emotional growth as well as intellectual development. The collaborative enquiries (covered in more detail in 4.5) reinforced these themes, with debates over whether happiness or achievement mattered more with several pupils across the two schools concluding that *'being happy with yourself'* was the ultimate marker of success in life.

One headteacher explicitly connected these characteristics to the Early Years Foundation Stage framework arguing that dispositions should be carried forward throughout primary education as part of teaching, learning and assessment: *'Those characteristics, making links, being creative, concentrating, they're not just for the early years. They're the habits you need all the way through, because they're what make the knowledge stick and be useful later'* (H1). She contrasted these lasting qualities with the focus on factual recall prevalent in later primary years, which she described as more easily lost, especially following COVID-related disruption: *'Knowledge fades if you don't use it… but if you can persist, be creative, make those links, you can pick the knowledge back up again'* (H1). H2 identified *'enthusiasm, self-motivation, wanting to listen, wanting to question, being resourceful and resilient'* as qualities that schools should cultivate. TG1B framed success in terms of agency: *'If you want to be successful, it's not just going to necessarily land on your doorstep; you're going to have to do something about it'*.

Pupils, parents, and teachers did not see skills and knowledge as opposing categories. Instead, they consistently described forms of learning in which the two were intertwined. Pupils wanted subjects that developed their character, confidence, and curiosity; parents and teachers stressed the importance of transferable dispositions that enable children to apply knowledge in meaningful contexts. The curriculum, in their view, was not a binary choice between content and skills, but a means of developing capacities that make knowledge both useful and life-enhancing. One of the key characteristics of effective learning that pupils described were perseverance and confidence as central to success. P18 explained that *'when you struggle you will make it if you have faith and believe you will make it then you will make it to the top and have success'*. P16 valued opportunities to learn in ways that encouraged curiosity and persistence: *'Have fun with learning so that we want to carry on with it and ask lots of questions'*. For others, success meant being willing to try, even when mistakes were likely. One pupil stressed resilience and agency: *'if you fail, you try again'* (P39PP) and that *'you need to have faith in yourself because if you keep saying you're not good enough then you'll never get better'.* P45PP added that to be successful you need to *'ask for help when you are struggling with something'* another emphasised the importance of a positive attitude and self-perception: '*doing things wholeheartedly with determination and telling yourself you can achieve things'* (PA15).

Parents often emphasised attitudes and dispositions in addition to academic content. PA16Q described *'a good attitude, a genuine positive attitude'* as critical, while PA19QI stressed the need to *'think, reason and challenge yourself'*. PA18Q highlighted the role of communication: *'Communication skills are essential… [they] can achieve success measured in monetary units but can also bring about change'*. PA19QI linked adaptability with curiosity, praising the ability to *'think, reason and challenge yourself whilst also having a curiosity to learn more'*. PA17QI suggested that while the basics of reading, writing and maths were necessary, they should be balanced with qualities such as *'caring and sharing [as] a vital part of school life'*. Teachers also spoke about learning dispositions as essential outcomes. TG1A said pupils should *'have a go, not be scared of getting things wrong'*, while TG2B emphasised the importance of *'taking risks and learning from mistakes, not just giving the right answer'*. TG3 observed that the current curriculum could be *'very restricted and restrictive for non-academic children'*, with the effect of limiting the development of persistence and confidence. The imaginative variation activity carried out with pupils and discussed in more detail in 4.2.5 reinforced these emphases. When asked to identify the features of success that could not be removed, they consistently prioritised perseverance and adaptability. One pupil described success as *'being able to pick yourself back up again'*, while another reflected that *'if you don't have happiness you won't want to carry on with the rest'*. For these pupils, dispositions such as resilience, curiosity and the ability to recover from setbacks were seen as essential. Parents and pupils also linked learning dispositions to emotional wellbeing and relationships. PA11QI emphasised communication skills, wanting her child to *'speak about [subjects] in ways that would make sense to other people'*. Taken together, participants consistently described effective learning not only in terms of subject mastery but also as the development of enduring qualities such as persistence, creativity, adaptability, confidence and kindness. These were presented as outcomes of schooling in their own right, and as capacities that would help children sustain learning and success in the longer term.

Children definitely need the basic skills of reading, writing and maths but not necessarily to the extent at which the National Curriculum states. Other than that, a wide range of activities, subjects and skills need to be learnt - history, geography, PE, DT, art... all the usual things. I also believe that caring and sharing is a vital part of school life, (although this also needs to be addressed at home! Children need to learn how to get on with each other, how to act in certain situations and how to treat people with respect. They need to be provided with a wide range of both academic and non-academic skills - cookery, basic mechanics maybe...things that provide all children with achievement!

Figure 8:What my child should learn at school (PA17QI)

The emphasis participants placed on dispositions such as creativity, problem-solving and the ability to make connections could be said to demonstrate a broad understanding of what it means to learn and operate in the world successfully. These characteristics were seen as enduring capacities that travel with pupils beyond specific lessons or subjects, offering a form of preparation for life that knowledge alone could not secure. Yet participants were also acutely aware that such qualities are not always captured within formal systems of recognition which will be revisited in 4.4.

4.2.5 Beyond the established capitals: Cross-cutting responses that resisted categorisation

This section presents the cross-cutting perceptions of success in life which were evident across pupils', parents' and teachers' contributions to my research and demonstrated an element of nuance or complexity in their make up, resisting neat categorisation within economic, social, or cultural capital, yet providing a useful insight into the affective, relational and dispositional qualities that my participants associated with success in life. Presenting them here offers both a shared foundation across participant groups and a rationale for my later argument in 5.7 that primary education requires a more systemic, integrated approach to the design of curriculum. The largest group of my pupil participants consistently located success in terms of affective and relational experiences as previously outlined in 4.2.2 and 4.2.3. Almost seven in ten (68%) highlighted happiness and joy as defining features of success, often represented visually through smiling figures or explicitly described in writing. Over half (54%) associated success with friendship and reciprocity, emphasising the centrality of caring relationships. Responsibility (41%) and independence (37%) also featured prominently, with pupils linking success to the ability to make good choices about their lives. Around a third (29%) connected success with contribution to wider society, including kindness and helping others (Table 1Table 9).

Element of success in life	% of responses	Illustrative quotes from my data
Happiness and joy	68%	*'Being happy with what you have';*
Friendship and reciprocity	54%	*'Having good friends who look after you'*
Responsibility	41%	*'Do your bit for your family', 'Look after others'*
Independence	37%	*'Stand on your own feet' 'Make your own choices'*
Contribution	29%	*'Helping the world' 'Being kind makes you successful'*

Table 9: Cross-cutting perspectives in pupils' descriptions of success in life

This complexity is vividly illustrated in pupils' own representations. For example, in Figure 10 one pupil described success in life as revolving around enjoyment and friendship: '*being happy and having friends is the most important thing*'. Their drawings below (Figure 10) place smiling figures at the centre, surrounded by qualities such as kindness, being yourself, and enjoying '*life as it is'*, signalling the centrality of positive self-perception and belief. Aligned with these contributions could be the perception from P14 that *'success is being happy with who you are and not pretending to be someone else'* while P22 offered that *'if everyone was treated fairly then more people would feel successful'* (P22).

Figure 9: Pupil representations of success emphasising happiness and quality of life (P14, P22).

Similarly, P15SD emphasised independence and responsibility: '*believing in yourself*', '*being kind'* and '*support from family and friends'*. Their representation (Figure 10) framed success in terms of

'*support from family and friends*', '*being smart*' as well as trying '*hard for what you want*', echoing Aristotelian notions of flourishing through virtue and collaboration. Another pupil (P39PP) drew themselves (Figure 10) surrounded by imagined future achievements, '*having a job they enjoy'*, '*reading all the books in the world*', correcting mistakes, and, most importantly, '*being happy*'. This vision combined ambition with an insistence that happiness is the ultimate criterion of success.

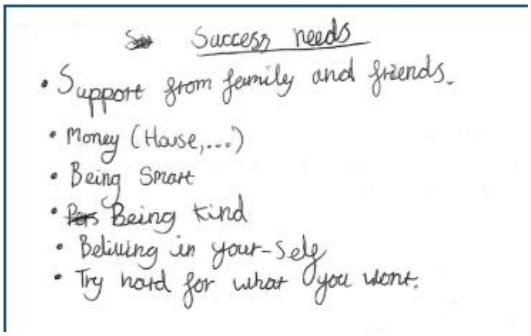

Figure 10: Pupil representations of success in life (P15SD) and (P39PP/3)

Parents' definitions overlapped with those of pupils as almost two-thirds (62%) described happiness as essential, while 49% also emphasised the ability to cope with setbacks and keep going.

Element of success in life	**% of responses**	**Illustrative quotes from my data**
Happiness and wellbeing	62%	*'If my child is happy and secure, that's success'*
Adaptability	49%	*'Coping with setbacks and bouncing back'*
Values and kindness	43%	*'Being respectful and treating others well'*
Independence	36%	*'Being able to stand on their own and make choices'*
Opportunity	31%	*'Having chances to do what they want in life'*

Table 10: Cross-cutting perspectives in parents' descriptions of success in life (Moses, 2025).

Values and kindness were noted by 43% of parents' responses, often expressed as respect and empathy. Independence (36%) and opportunity (31%) were also cited, pointing to the importance of children being able to make choices and effectively access their futures (Table 10).

Teachers' responses were shaped by their daily professional encounters with pupils. Confidence was the most prominent theme, cited by nearly three-quarters (74%), with enjoyment of learning following at 58%. Social skills were emphasised by just over half (53%), reflecting teachers' concerns with pupils' ability to collaborate and build relationships. Responsibility (47%) and aspiration (42%) were also frequent, suggesting that teachers associate success with dispositions that combine personal drive with social contribution (Table 11).

Element of success in life	% of responses	Illustrative quotes from my data
Confidence	74%	'*Children who can put their hand up and have a go*'
Enjoyment	58%	'*Loving learning and being curious*'
Social skills	53%	'*Being able to get on with different people*'
Responsibility	47%	'*Taking ownership of their work and behaviour*'
Aspiration	42%	'*Having goals and believing they can achieve them*'

Table 11: Cross-cutting perspectives in teachers' descriptions of success in life (Moses, 2025).

Taken together, these findings highlight the need not just to be happy but to hold hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives in dialogue: happiness without responsibility risks superficiality, while responsibility without joy risks alienation. The data suggest that even primary pupils are capable of articulating this balance, implicitly if not explicitly, and that pedagogy should make space for such integrated understandings. These cross-cutting findings were further reinforced by the imaginative variation activity which was conducted a year after the main phase of data collection (3.3.5). This delay provided temporal but also reflective distance and allowed pupils to revisit earlier ideas with fresh perspective. The activity was rooted in Husserl's phenomenological method (3.2.3), which seeks to uncover the *essences* of a phenomenon: those characteristics without which the phenomenon would be fundamentally altered. In this case, the aim was to test whether pupils could

distinguish between features of success in life that might be stripped away without loss of meaning for the phenomenon, and those elements that remained indispensable to it. Working in small groups, pupils re-examined their earlier contributions and debated which aspects of success in life were non-negotiable. This process culminated in individual written or visual statements that synthesised their thinking as exemplified by the statement in Figure 11who stressed the importance of being happy regardless of economic capital.

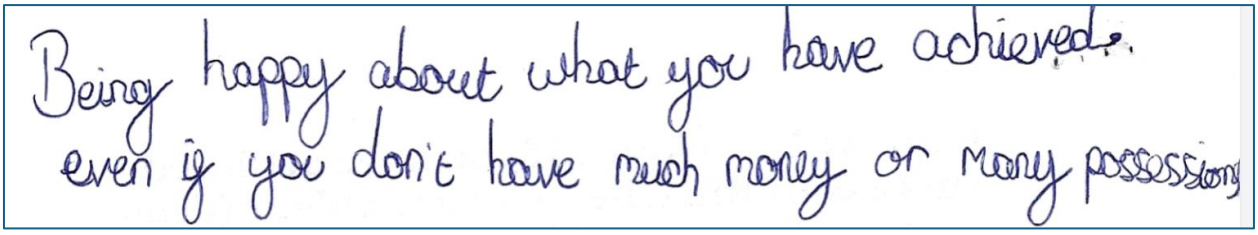

Figure 11: The invariant characteristic of success in life (P39PP)

The imaginative variation stage also involved a final interview with the teacher groups, all together. When grappling in this final interview with identifying the essence of success in life one teacher described *'acceptance with what I've got, not in a giving up, know your place type of way, but in a calm way'* (TG3) was central to their own sense of success. A headteacher drew this out further: *'if school is only about grades, then we are not preparing children for life. Success is knowing yourself and having the strength to stick by your values'* (H2) with P15 explaining *'it feels like success when you don't have to pretend'*. Taking together these later accounts from the pupils suggest that for many participants, success was not simply a matter of achieving externally defined outcomes but of pursuing goals congruent with one's values and relationships. They highlighted success as: an **internal state of alignment with what and how learning is experienced** (happiness and self-acceptance), an **ethical orientation** (doing what feels right, treating others and nature well), and an **assertion of freedom and agency** (resisting imposed expectations and taking purposeful or meaningful action).

Therefore, the analysis of my findings revealed six *essences* of success in life: happiness, compassion (for self and others), support from family and friends, basic needs, adaptability and the freedom to follow one's own path. Table 12 below summarises these six *essences* and provides illustrative pupil quotes:

Essence of Success	Illustrative Pupil Quotes
Happiness and peace of mind	*'To be happy and have everything you want' (P2); 'Being happy with what you have' (P4); 'Being happy about what you have achieved' (P31); 'If you are happy in life, then you are successful' (P43PPSD)*
Compassion for self and others	*'Feeling good in yourself' (P6), 'Proud of what you've done' (P12); 'Being proud of yourself inside, even if no one else notices' (SC2); 'Loving yourself for who you are' (P30)*
Support from family and friends	*'Spending time with my family' (P16), Having good friends who help you' (P19PP); 'Having people around you who care' (P22PP); Friends can help you achieve your goals' (CE1)*
Basic needs as preconditions	*'Enough food, water and a roof over your head' (P20/3);'A nice home and enough money to pay bills' (P27), Enough money to survive, not too much, not too little' (CE2)*
Adaptability and learning from setbacks	*'Picking yourself back up' (P17), If you fail, you try again' (P39PP),'Learning from your mistakes' (P38PP)*
Freedom to follow one's own path	*'Following your own dreams' (P15SD),'Doing what feels right to you' (SC1); Not letting others tell you who to be' (P44); Being yourself and not copying others' (P33PP)*

Table 12: Essence of success in life as perceived by my research participants (Moses, 2025)

These six *essences* were not presented by pupils as discrete or isolated, instead, they were woven together in ways that resisted neat categorisation. For example, happiness was often described as dependent on supportive relationships, while adaptability was linked to having secure relational foundations as well as basic needs being met such as food, clothing and shelter which together created a strong sense of belonging. This interconnection reflects the phenomenological insight that essences are relational as well as individual. The discussions also revealed a refusal by the pupil participants in my research to accept conventional hierarchies of success. Several pupils argued that wealth, possessions, or external validation could not be central markers: as one explained, *'it's about doing it in a way that feels right to you'* (Enq1). Another insisted that *'You need to feel proud*

of yourself inside, even if no one else notices' (Enq2), rejecting the notion that recognition by others is the ultimate measure of achievement. Pupils often articulated success as an *internal state* rather than an externally recognised status. One explained: *'if you are happy in life, then you are successful'* (P43PPSD), while another stressed: *'you need to feel proud of yourself inside, even if no one else notices'* (SC2). Several positioned the concept of authenticity as a guiding principle: *'being yourself and not copying others'* (P33PP) and *'if you don't believe in yourself, you can't really help anyone else'* (P34)**.** These statements resist the logic of accumulating traits or resources implied in Bourdieu's theory of capitals (1986) and in the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (2019). By engaging in imaginative variation, pupils articulated a vision of success that was simultaneously personal, relational, and ethical. The complexity of these interwoven elements makes it impossible to reduce success in life to a single, universal definition or component part of a curriculum. Rather, it is constituted through a dynamic interplay of personal values, relationships and environments, pointing to a tension with the way policy discourse frames *success in life* as something that can be 'provided' through knowledge and cultural capital alone (Ofsted, 2019). Pupils' accounts emphasise that success must be grounded in environments that nurture happiness, belonging, adaptability and freedom: conditions it could be argued no curriculum provision in isolation can guarantee.

Parents similarly framed success in life in terms of wellbeing and integrity rather than formal markers of achievement. PA1 reflected: *'as long as she's happy and doing what she loves and is passionate about I will find her successful, whether that's a high paid job, travelling… or a wife and stay home mum'*. PA13 emphasised: *'if they are truly happy, make others feel happy and valued, are kind and considerate and feel fulfilled with their life'*. These views highlight dimensions of meaning that extend beyond both material accumulation and cultural competence and are more closely aligned to self-perception, with PA19QI reflecting: *'Self-esteem for me is about knowing you can do something, being able to try again if it doesn't work, and not giving up straight away'* (PA19QI). Teachers also recognised forms of success not captured by conventional capitals. TG2A described it as *'making the most of what you've got and being happy in life regardless of the hand life has dealt you'*. TG1B highlighted the importance of agency: *'if you want to be successful… you're going to have to do something about it'*. Here, success is framed as active engagement rather than passive possession of resources, dispositions or knowledge. Another significant aspect of the pupils' responses was connected to the wider natural world which was not

only about 'being outside' but for some pupils in my research, nature was bound up with broader values and life goals. Pupil 21 described success as including '*happiness, nature, friendship and kindness*' while P25 associated it with '*bird watching and being nature friendly*'. P13 expressed hope that '*the world I live in now will be cherished and protected by us and next generations*' adding '*I love nature, and I hope it will stay forever*'. It could therefore be suggested that these 'essential' contributions expose the limitations of current policy framings, which assume that the accumulation of knowledge and cultural capital alone will 'provide' what learners need to succeed (Ofsted, 2019). By foregrounding compassion, happiness and ethical action, participants signal that success cannot simply be supplied through external provision but must be cultivated in environments and the conditions that enable congruence between the individual, their relationships and their broader social context.

4.3 Curriculum and Pedagogy: What, How, and With Whom should we learn?

This section now presents the data on how far the content and pedagogy of the primary curriculum in England are seen to support the development of the characteristics of success in life by my research participants. This starts to serve as a response to my third research question: *Q3: What are the perceptions of pupils, parents and their teachers in English primary schools of the role of the National Curriculum for primary schools in England.in achieving 'success in life'?* This section considers participants' views on what should be learnt (4.3.1), then focusing on cultural capital as part of the curriculum in 4.3.2, followed by the findings linked to 'how and with whom' learning should take place (4.3.3). It then turns in 4.4 to the assessment arrangements in primary schools and my participants' perceptions of how that impacts on perceptions of success in life and their reflections on whether all learners have the same chance of success. As outlined in 1.4, the aim of my research was not to provide a subject-by-subject critique of the curriculum, but to offer a critical examination of how the curriculum, as experienced in practice, is perceived to enable or restrict the ability of all learners to succeed in life (Ofsted, 2019:6) The findings presented here draw on the responses (to the questionnaires in Appendix A and Appendix B) of pupils, who were asked 'What do you think are the most important things you do at school that will help you achieve success in life?', of parents, who were asked 'Which subjects or skills do you think should be learnt

in school to achieve success in life?' and teachers (Appendix C), who were asked the same question in interviews, providing insight from those directly responsible for curriculum design and delivery.

4.3.1 Curriculum: What should we learn

Pupils in my research recognised that very few jobs or careers are possible without a certain level of literacy and numeracy, and often science. Their views on curriculum content closely reflected the six essential characteristics of success identified through imaginative variation (Table 12), particularly the importance of happiness, adaptability, and the freedom to follow one's own path. The pupils explained in a variety of ways that they wanted to '*learn about interesting subjects*' (P19) and '*learn everything you can*' (P45) but they did not appear to place importance on the demarcation of core and other areas of the curriculum. Furthermore, the subjects and activities they valued most (Figure 11 and Table 13), such as creative arts, outdoor learning, and opportunities for choice, were those they felt would nurture the qualities necessary for success in life alongside academic knowledge.

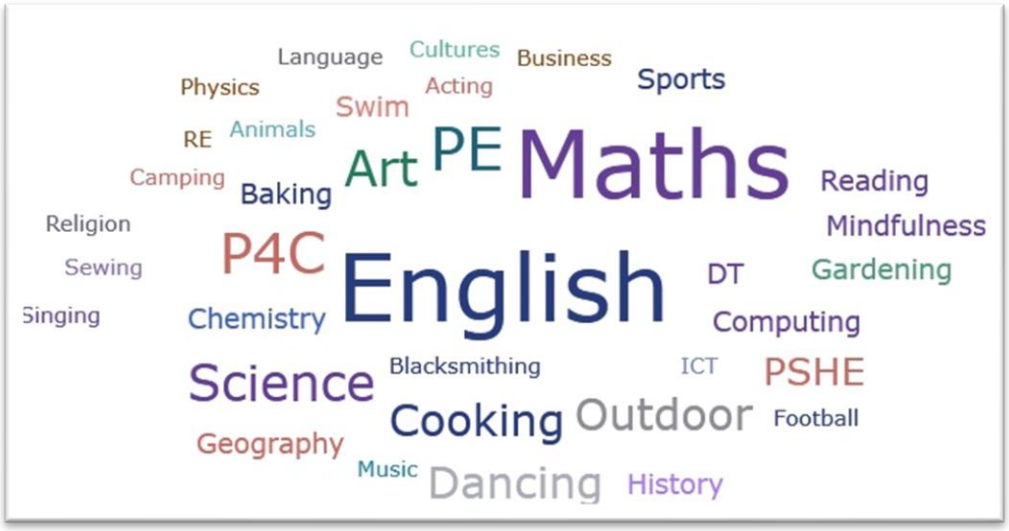

Figure 12: What pupils want to learn to succeed in life (Moses, 2025)

Subject	% of pupils who mentioned this subject	Subject and number of responses	% of pupils who mentioned one or other of these subjects
English and Reading	50%	Music (3)	51%
Maths	42%	Gardening (2)	
PE and Dance	31%	History (3)	
Art	24%	PSHE (3)	
Science	15%	RE, Geography, DT, Business Studies, Computing, Languages, Sewing, Acting, Blacksmithing, Dog Grooming, Banking, Boxing (12)	
Cooking and baking	13%		

Table 13: Frequency of subjects mentioned by pupils (Moses, 2025).

However, 95% argued for a curriculum that extended far beyond these basics, allowing them to pursue interests, apply learning in meaningful ways and collaborate with peers. For some, variety was key to sustaining engagement: *'do lots of different subjects so you're not tired of doing the same ones'* (P18). Others saw breadth as a route to discovering unexpected talents: *'you could become good at things you were not expecting to learn'* (P22PP). Parents and teachers articulated the value of becoming competent in a range of life skills clearly. PA15 explained, '*If they can fix things for themselves, they don't have to rely on someone else to do it*'. TG1A reflected that '*when they grow something, make something, or repair something, they remember it, it's theirs, it means something*'. TG3 remarked, '*If they can make and mend, they've got confidence they can cope*'. Pupils expressed similar priorities, linking these skills to self-reliance, '*I want to be able to look after myself*' P29) as well as emotional wellbeing, '*gardening makes me happy and helps me calm down*' (P31).

Pupil responses highlighted not only subject or skills preferences but also the dispositions and abilities they associated with success. The pupils also acknowledged the importance of knowledge application *'It's not just about knowing stuff, it's about knowing what to do with it and being fair'* (P23) and P16 described the importance of having a *'passion for'* a subject, while P15SD linked mastery to entrepreneurial ambition: *'get really good at something'* so you had the option to *'make a company about it and become rich'*. Several stressed the value of career awareness: *'I think you should learn about your choice of job you want to do because if you have a goal in life you would want to study that job'* (P7). Parent 18 took this idea further by envisioning *'Wouldn't it be lovely if a child went, you know what, I love clearing up, I'm going to be a bin man and that was absolutely embraced… why should they have to aspire to be something that they're not interested in? … it might be you need to be kinder to somebody… or think about how you've helped other people around you'* (PA18).

Pupils also emphasised questioning, reasoning and dialogue skills. They saw philosophical enquiry and metacognitive activities as contributing to *'socialising skills'* (P39PP), *'being able to put up a good argument'* (P40PP) and *'polite disputing'* (P34). For P30, this meant the freedom to *'ask lots of questions'*, while P37 believed such approaches could help people *'be happier in the future'* and help them to achieve their desire to *'do things with other people so we all get better'* (P15).

Theme	Frequency	%	Example response
Practical life skills	22	49%	*'How to cook and look after yourself'* (P23Q)
Academic knowledge	20	44%	*'Maths, English, science'* (P3Q)
Creativity / arts	15	33%	*'Drama, music, art'* (P10Q)
Environmental awareness	12	27%	*'How to look after the planet'* (P19Q)

Table 14: What pupils say they should learn – extending beyond the core curriculum (Moses, 2025).

Parents echoed this desire for breadth and balance, though their priorities reflected adult perspectives on preparation and security. While they recognised the necessity of reading, writing,

and numeracy, only 18% prioritised the core curriculum. The largest proportion (40%) emphasised non-statutory PSHE, including financial literacy, mental health, citizenship, and social development. Statutory PSHE accounted for 31%, with a focus on emotional regulation, relationships and wellbeing and many parents explicitly linked subject content to dispositions and life skills. PA19QI summarised: *'I think you need the ability to think, reason and challenge yourself. Reading, writing and number work for financial literacy is also pretty key!'* PA17QI emphasised combining basics with wider learning: *'Children definitely need the basic skills of reading, writing and maths but not necessarily to the extent at which the National Curriculum states… I also believe that caring and sharing is a vital part of school life… cookery, basic mechanics maybe… things that provide all children with achievement'*. Others proposed environmental stewardship (PA15Q), '*art [to help] with mindfulness'* (P17), safe use of social media (PA4Q), and enterprise education (PA16Q).

Teachers likewise prioritised breadth of subject areas, but their emphasis was shaped by the practical realities of classroom delivery. Their responses distributed emphasis across foundation subjects (28%), social and emotional learning (24%), non-statutory PSHE (19%), and the core curriculum (19%). Several expressed concern about the overemphasis on English and maths. TG3 described the curriculum as *'very restricted and restrictive for non-academic children'*. TG1B expressed frustration that *'half the things we teach in the curriculum our children will probably never use again… but we've been told we have to'*. Instead, teachers advocated for what they described as *'useful knowledge'* (TG3) and transferable dispositions, for example, TG2A explained the importance of everyday skills: *'Just to be able to get along in life… we're trying to teach [my toddler] that when you get to a road you stop… you need to look both ways to make sure when you're crossing the road that there's nothing coming'* (TG2A). TG1A defined this as *'knowing and finding out things that are useful to whatever you are doing at that particular time'*. H1 highlighted the importance of expressive opportunities in the arts, noting that *'the children don't get enough opportunities to express themselves'*. These views aligned with pupils' emphasis on creativity, wellbeing, and identity, as captured in remarks such as *'I love doing art lessons because it gives me time to be myself'* (P16) and *'art helps with mindfulness'* (P17). Taken together, these findings highlight the curriculum as a site where multiple expectations converge, in particular pupils seeking joy, collaboration and relevance; parents emphasising security, progression and foundational skills; and teachers foregrounding confidence, creativity and transferable dispositions. Despite their

differences, all groups resisted a purely transmission model of curriculum delivery that prioritises canonical knowledge alone and instead identified a number of learning characteristics which were presented in 4.2.4. My participants perspectives point towards a curriculum that balances disciplinary rigour with opportunities for practical competence, creative expression and social participation. These findings also set up the curriculum tensions discussed in 5.4, where I examine how such expectations align, or converge, with policy framings of cultural capital and the knowledge focused curriculum.

4.3.2 Cultural capital as part of the curriculum

Underlying these discussions of subject content is the central question I asked at the outset of my research (1.1): why did Ofsted (2019:6) place such emphasis on cultural capital as curriculum content, and what did that emphasis mean in practice? The perspectives and understandings of success in life that emerged in 4.2.3 mapped closely onto Bourdieu's three forms of cultural capital, as well as extending significantly beyond them. Therefore, the focus here shifts to how my participants interpreted and applied the concept within curriculum and pedagogy. This framing of my findings highlights not only what cultural capital was thought to mean, but also how it was enacted, provided, or resisted in school practice.

Firstly, none of the pupils or parents used the term *cultural capital* within the context of curriculum and pedagogy, yet I do acknowledge that many of their priorities from 4.2.4 aligned with Bourdieu's three forms (embodied, institutionalised, and objectified) and could potentially be acquired or learned at school if they were part of the curriculum. One pupil did say '*Some people get to go to shows and places all the time, and some people never get to go*' (P21) but it seemed more observational than an expression of desire or intent. Others highlighted the way small experiences could feel transformative: '*When we went to the museum on the tram, it made me think I could do something like that when I'm older*' (P19). Parents echoed this emphasis on access. One commented that such opportunities should not be confined to a privileged few: '*If schools don't open those doors, then children from families like ours won't ever walk through them*' (PA12).

Teachers' understandings of cultural capital as part of the curriculum revealed particular variation. Both teacher groups expressed a lack of clarity about the concept with, TG1B admitted, '*I don't know what you mean by cultural capital… I suppose it's the wealth of experience you get—concerts, theatre… making the most of our culture*' (TG1). H2 initially equated cultural capital with

affluence and travel, *'they've had holidays; they've seen the world'*, before questioning whether such experiences automatically built transferable skills *'You could know about the Renaissance… but that hasn't improved your ability to communicate or think abstractly. The key is being able to navigate society—thinking, social and communication skills*' (HT). He also added '*If you don't get a lot of cultural capital outside school… that is a disadvantage instantly… so we try to provide those experiences in our curriculum, music lessons, the other things we do*' (H2). H1 offered a broader interpretation, emphasising cultural capital as enrichment through the arts, reading, and outdoor learning. These interpretations suggest a scope well beyond Ofsted's definition of cultural capital as *'*the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens*'* (Ofsted, 2019:6).

Type of Cultural Capital	**Pupils**	**Parents**	**Teachers**
Embodied (dispositions, skills, ways of being)	Confidence, kindness, resilience, communication '*staying positive*' (P45PP); '*friendly, happy, playful and encouraging*' (P21); '*asking for help when you are struggling*'(P31)	Positive attitude, communication, adaptability '*a genuine positive attitude is critical*' (PA16Q); '*communication skills are essential*' (PA18Q)	Confidence, social functioning, enrichment of language and arts. '*if you can't function in society, then you will not be successful*', (TG2B); '*enrichment of language and learning*', (H1)
Institutionalised (qualifications, credentials)	Recognised as useful but not defining; achievements linked with happiness '*you will have a higher chance… but… it does not mean you aren't successful*', (TG1A)	'*A passport to success*' (PA9Q); '*Certificates and qualifications aren't everything*' (PA14QI)	Necessary but insufficient; seen as steppingstones rather than end points (TG1A, H2)
Objectified (possessions, goods, cultural artefacts)	'*A gold medal*' (P3); '*a decent house and clothes*' (P17) often linked to relationships and wellbeing	Material items downplayed unless tied to wellbeing '*the majority of items in life are not needed*', (PA8)	Trips, experiences, and artefacts as vocabulary and opportunity builders '*a trip to feed ducks*', (H1)

Table 15: A snapshot of participant perspectives on cultural capital (Moses, 2025).

Building on 4.2, Table 15 above provides a snapshot of how participants' perspectives mapped onto Bourdieu's three forms of cultural capital while also extending beyond them. Embodied capital dominated across groups, with pupils, parents and teachers all emphasising dispositions such as confidence, kindness, communication and adaptability. Institutionalised and objectified forms were acknowledged, but consistently reframed in relation to wellbeing, relationships and opportunity rather than treated as ends in themselves. Taken together, they suggest that cultural capital, as lived and enacted in schools and families, cannot be reduced to the codified knowledge or experiences implied in Ofsted's (2019) framework. Instead, participants positioned dispositions and values at the core of success, highlighting tensions that will be developed further in the discussion chapter (5.4 and 5.7). Building on these perspectives, it becomes clear that pupils, parents and teachers consistently placed embodied cultural capital at the centre of their definitions of success in life and what they should learn. In particular, dispositions such as confidence, kindness, communication, resilience and adaptability were repeatedly foregrounded as more critical than canonical knowledge or elite dispositions, with H1 explicitly stating that *'the danger is we prepare children for a version of success that doesn't match their world. We should be helping them to connect their learning to who they want to be'*. Subject content and cultural opportunities were recognised as useful, yet rarely in isolation; rather, participants linked them to the personal qualities and capacities they could develop which in turn they saw as essential for success. The complexity of these interpretations is illustrated in dialogue between teachers. When asked directly if cultural capital was *'a key part of being successful in life'*, TG1A shook his head. A conversation followed:

TG1B: *'And now I'm changing my mind because a lot of my success has probably come from…'*

TG1A: *'The experiences that you had as a…'*

TG1B: *'Yeah, like being part of music and playing in an orchestra, you know, things like that. Is that part of our culture…'*

TG1A: *'I think it can, but I don't think it has to.'*

After a pause for reflection, TG1B added: *'I could be completely wrong, and this could come out wrong and sound really judgmental, and it's not meant to be, but you have some children who won't*

have the opportunity to go to like concerts and the theatre, or – would you class sports? I don't know. It's the wealth of experience you get I suppose linked to our culture?' (TG1B). This comment shows his awareness that not all pupils have equal access to such opportunities, and that different assumptions or measures of value about what culture is important could shape children's journeys towards success in life.

4.3.3 Pedagogy: How and with whom should we learn

Across all participant groups, there was agreement that the way children learn is as important as what they learn. Pupils, parents, and teachers each described teaching approaches that developed independence, problem-solving, collaboration, and real-world application. The teachers in the final interview talked about wanting to move away from a directive stance towards what they called '*being more of a guide than a teller*'. TG3 also explained that when they stepped back and allowed pupils to explore, '*you get better questions, more unexpected answers, and they start linking it to their own lives*' and TG1B explained that he really wanted his pupils '*being able to think outside the box… not just following the pattern but coming up with new ideas*' (TG2B) but also that *'children thrive when they feel trusted and when learning connects to their world'* (TG1).

P45 described a *'good teacher'* as central to success, while P6 valued classrooms where *'everyone is learning and feels free to ask questions'* hopefully preventing the situation described by P5 that *'if teachers listened more to what makes us happy, school would feel more like it's for us'* and (P23) wanted to *'move about, talk to friends and work things out together'.* One parent insisted that *'children need to feel safe and respected before they can succeed'* (PA9) added to by P25 '*when we talk together you can see it different ways, and that helps you think better*'. Pupils also described moments when teachers encouraged them to persist: *'When the teacher says, "you can do it" and you do, you feel proud and want to try again'* (P12) with another pupil adding '*it's easier to join in when you know your ideas matter*' (P26) reinforcing the earlier discussion in about the importance of recognition for all learners (2.4.3). Others spoke of how compassion was modelled in classrooms: *'When the teacher helps someone who's struggling, we see that and then we help each other'* (P21). Teachers also recognised their role: TG1 noted, *'You can't teach compassion by telling children to be nice; you have to show it in how you respond to them'* (TG1). Parents highlighted the continuity between home and school. PA18 explained: *'If schools encourage children to be kind and confident, it reinforces what we try to teach at home'* (PA18) (4.5).

'*Thinking better*' was also described by P17 as a form of critical discernment, '*finding out both sides before deciding*' (P17) added to by P33 that '*you have to check if it's true before you believe it*'. Teachers explained a desire to use debate a collaborative enquiry in the classroom as it helps their pupils to '*think about what's fair for everyone, not just what works for you*' (TG3).

For some pupils this more flexible pedagogical approach meant using knowledge to solve practical problems explaining '*if you know how to measure, you can make things work*'(P19) while for others it was about being able to respond imaginatively to unexpected challenges '*we had to make a bridge out of paper. I liked figuring it out*'(P14).

Headteacher One (H1) was very clear that knowledge was important but that it should be taught in a way that would allow pupils to '*contextualise what's going on in the world'* and provide a lens through which they may be able to interpret current events and phenomena and critically think about '*how does knowing this develop our understanding of something else'* or '*How does that link to that'* (TG2). She continued to describe the '*characteristics of effective learning'* from the non-statutory Development Matters document for Early Years teachers (DfE, 2023) (2.3). She suggested that the characteristics of effective learning should be a core part of what is delivered and assessed throughout the National Curriculum for primary schools in England. She described a curriculum with reading at its heart but that also values the pupils' ability in '*making links, being creative, concentrating – all those things that make somebody a good learner and skills that apply throughout the different subjects'* (H1) again reinforcing the points made by the pupils and parents about the range of skills and knowledge they think they should learn at school earlier in this section (4.2.4). This Headteacher (H1) was keen to make clear that she was not just talking about the pupils' making links to 'Maths or English' but that *'it applies to – and I think that's one of the most important things - being able to make links from one subject to another, having a go at new things and seeing patterns in things'* (H1). She then reflected on the differences between the Early Years classes (aged 4-5) that she had taught in the past compared to her current Year Three Class (aged 7-8) who are *'very, very immature, especially the boys, they really have lost a lot of those learning behaviours*'. These attitudes to learning were also mentioned by TG1B who mentioned *'the umbrella of learning skills'* are needed for success in life '*so that the children can become independent learners and don't rely on having to have an adult there to actually learn something*'. TG1A added to these points by saying that she thought '*too often, as children, if something goes*

wrong, they're told '*here's a solution' rather than them having to find the solutions. They should be able to find a solution to the problem, a different way out, whether that be socially or any other aspect of life that they find themselves in'* (TG1A), resonating with the contributions from parents and teachers throughout these findings about being able to cope with whatever life throws at you and make the most of it for a successful life. PA5QI asked for schools to be places that '*focussed on 'giving [pupils] the skills to be confident enough to question, you know, I don't mean sort of answering back, I mean, genuinely question and knowing that that's OK to do that, you know, ask for consolidation with the learning by asking the teachers to reconfirm things that sort of thing'*. However, both teacher groups (TG1 and TG2) made clear that they could not teach in the way that they thought was best for their pupils because of the '*admin or accountability of delivering and assessing the curriculum*'(TG3) and TG2 explaining *'we spend so much time on assessment that we can't think about how to make lessons fun'*.

Interestingly one of the parents in my research, who declared herself as a primary school teacher when we started the interview, described the recent whole day spent marking tests (at the weekend) '*the amount of paperwork we have to do now and assess absolutely everything. So, I spend most time doing that rather than thinking - How can I make this lesson fun? Which is not how it used to be*' (PA17QI), continuing by saying that '*they need to be able to read. They need to be able to write, but I think they need to be able to write creatively but the curriculum doesn't particularly allow you to write creatively because you've got to get your brackets in for parenthesis and you've got to get your frontal adverbials in*' and my sense from this interview was not that this parent/teacher was 'anti-knowledge' (Kirby:2019) but just that the way that the curriculum and pedagogy is currently arranged at her primary school was not working in her mind, for her pupils. Finally, saying that '*there's very little time to do the lessons in the afternoons, our geography, our history, our art*' adding that '*there's also no time for extra things like doing some baking with them*', despite it being part of the Design and Technology curriculum. Furthermore, she explained that '*if you miss a day of doing some teaching of the curriculum because you've been on a school trip or it's been sports day, you're immediately on catch up so I just think it's too much hassle*' (PA17QI). H2 described this situation even more starkly, *'we try to build a culture where children feel safe, but the pressure from league tables and inspections can push us towards narrow teaching. That tension feeds right through the school'*.

TG1B described a situation that '*stuck in his mind*' from when he was at school '*we went to a museum, and we were allowed to dress up this window as if it was a shop window and you were looking in*'. He continued to explain that this trip allowed a wide range of application of knowledge that he had learnt in class '*but I wouldn't have seen that as learning*' instead I thought '*yes we get to do some more on the display*' back at school about the topic. TG1A described happily her days at school '*I remember in Year 6 making stargazers out of papier mache and making the Parthenon out of balsa wood and chalk, stuff like that. You don't get the chance to do anything like that now*'. Despite knowing and feeling that this was an approach that would work for his pupils he explained that when he did try to bring a more creative approach into his classroom practice where the pupils could pick an aspect of ancient Greek life to research, present and display, he was constantly thinking that he '*can't afford to give them another lesson on this*' and '*we're not quite ready to present but I need to be moving on [because of] that constant pressure of it to get through stuff, to cover content*' (TG1B).

The parents did not really talk about teachers in their questionnaire responses, with only one mention of '*good feedback from teachers*' (P10Q). However, in the parent interviews PA19QI was very concerned that *'teachers aren't confident enough in the subjects to be able to adapt, and schools aren't confident enough in order to allow teachers to change the plan and not have a million risk assessments and everything else in place - both with the emotional side and your academic side (P19)* adding that teachers were vital to help the pupils to have '*a curiosity to learn more*' (PA19QI).

Category	**Distribution**
Problem solving in groups as well as through independent work	37%
Contextualised into real life experiences	29%
Collaborative enquiry and critical thinking	22%
Extra-curricular clubs	12%

Table 16: Teachers' perspectives on how pupils should learn to succeed in life (Moses, 2025).

As Table 16 above shows, over one-third of teachers highlighted problem solving and independence. TG1A explained that pupils should be able *'to think for themselves, to take the learning the way they want to, to be independent'*. TG2B emphasised contextualisation, stating *'we try to contextualise our lessons so that they are applicable to real-life scenarios'*. Several teachers also noted the importance of encouraging critical thinking and questioning, while others described extra-curricular activities as useful to developing dispositions for success. Teachers reinforced this perspective in the final collaborative interview (TG3) noting that pupils '*light up*' when they can explore a topic in depth rather than skim content for test preparation. H1 described embedding the Early Years Foundation Stage's characteristics of effective learning across all phases, highlighting *'making links, being creative, concentrating'* as transferable habits that underpin later learning and the potential for success in life. Parents also stressed the value of transferable abilities. For example, PA11QI wanted her child to *'speak about [subjects] in ways that would make sense to other people'*, while PA16Q emphasised *'confidence, maturity, personal responsibility and personal growth'* as outcomes that should be fostered through pedagogy. PA15Q also linked learning with community responsibility, describing the importance of *'how to look after ourselves and also each other and the environment'*. Pupils expressed a strong preference for active, participatory learning. Several wanted more choice: P20 explained, *'choose what they want to learn about'*. Group activities were also valued, as P34 said, *'many group activities'* but teachers claimed that they didn't '*get the chance to be that free anymore*' (TG1A) in the way that they taught due to the pressures of covering all the curriculum content. Other pupils highlighted project-based work that connected learning to future goals: P4 wanted *'projects'*, while P7 linked subject choice to career ambition, arguing, *'learn about your choice of job… if you have a goal in life you would want to study that job'* and another added *'when we get to do projects about the environment, it feels real, like we're doing something that matters'* (P34)

They also emphasised the social and emotional dimensions of classroom life. For some, this meant opportunities to build confidence through performances: P39PP referred to *'school plays'*. For others, outdoor learning was especially important. P23 insisted, *'you need to play outside… so you will be happier and kinder in the future'*, '*more break and lunchtimes*' (P16) and described outdoor time as '*helping their mental health'* (P39PP) or allowing them to '*just relax and get away from stressful work*' (P21). Teachers and parents in my research also valued outdoor play and nature connection with one parent advocating for '*more emphasis placed on contextual learning in*

outdoor environments' (PA19QI). and another pupil explaining that '*drawing makes me feel calm and proud'* (P30). Parents supported these views by calling for practical outdoor learning, gardening, and environmental education. Teachers similarly described how activities beyond the classroom often generated the richest learning, particularly for pupils who found traditional academic settings difficult. TG1 teachers noted that outdoor projects allowed pupils to excel in ways that might not be visible in classroom-based learning.

The importance of *with whom* children learn was also highlighted. Pupils suggested mixed-age projects, buddy systems, and more opportunities to learn from external specialists, such as musicians, actors, and sports coaches. Parents emphasised the role of peer and community relationships. PA13 explained the value of *'surrounding yourself with people who make you happy, who you can learn from, who you can teach something to, who build you up instead of breaking you down'*. Teachers reinforced the importance of these social dimensions. TG2A described how mixing pupils from different backgrounds could build empathy and adaptability, while H1 emphasised mentoring and inter-age collaboration as valuable ways of developing leadership and social skills. TG2B drew attention to how pupils' learning was shaped by relationships both in and out of school, noting that *'children could have been disadvantaged because of their exposure… the level of care they got at home; the interaction they got with their parents'*. In summary, these accounts demonstrate strong endorsement across pupils, parents, and teachers for active, participatory learning that is collaborative, relevant, and socially grounded. Learning was consistently framed as something shaped not only by content and pedagogy, but also by the people with whom children learn and interact.

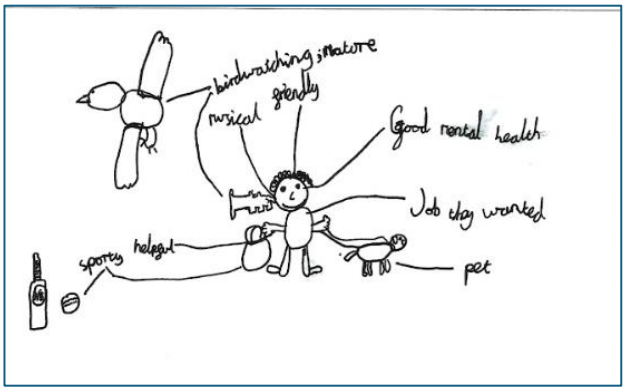

Figure 13: Vision of a successful person (P25)

4.3.4 All learners: success and recognition.

Participants across all groups challenged the notion that all children begin with the same opportunity to accumulate the forms of capital that enable success in life. While Ofsted's (2019) framework positions the curriculum as something that can 'provide' cultural capital to every learner, participants frequently pointed to the unevenness of access, echoing Bourdieu's (1986) observation that schools often reproduce, rather than disrupt, social inequalities. The very capitals that schools are expected to cultivate, knowledge, experiences, and dispositions, are already unevenly distributed across families and communities. This section therefore connects directly with the inequalities surfaced in 4.3.1 on curriculum content and the learning characteristics, skills and abilities in 4.2.3.3.

Group	Key barriers reported	Example
Pupils	Pressure of tests, not fitting in, lack of fairness	*'Success is being fair and happy, not just getting marks' (P18)*
Parents	Poverty, unequal opportunities, narrow curriculum	*'Opportunities depend on money and connections' (PA5)* *'Schools sometimes miss the spark in children who think differently'* (PA7)
Teachers	High-stakes accountability, lack of SEND resources	*'Assessment doesn't always capture real learning' (TG2)*

Table 17: Snapshot of perceived barriers to success by sample group (Moses, 2025).

Parents were particularly candid in rejecting the idea of equal chances existing within primary education in England. Around seventy per cent of those interviewed stated outright that success was contingent on background factors such as financial resources, family stability and parental time. One mother stated simply, *'I think home life plays a huge role'* (PA3), while another was blunt: *'Children who have privileges and wealth have a better chance of achieving success'* (PA7Q). Others emphasised the compounded effects of multiple disadvantages, noting that children with learning difficulties, or those growing up in households with little time or support, faced structural barriers. PA9Q observed: *'Some children, those with learning disabilities… do not have the same*

chance' and PA6 explained *'my child has had to work twice as hard as others, but that determination is what will carry them through'*. PA16Q pointed to intersections between class and ethnicity: *'We have read that the poorest performers in secondary school education are white males. And young people from the BAME community do better in education but get fewer career opportunities!?'* Such accounts could be said to reinforce the sense that inequalities in wider society are mirrored and sometimes reinforced within schools.

Pupils themselves expressed an intuitive awareness of these disparities. Some suggested practical supports for peers: *'free cereal for kids who didn't have breakfast'* (P32), *'45 minutes to sleep'* (P32), or *'pets in classes'* (P23) to '*reduce stress*'. Others advocated for specialist provision, such as *'teachers for anger management, mindfulness and how to behave and change'* (P10). In one of the collaborative enquiries, the group wrestled with whether universal success was even possible. One pupil concluded: *'The reason why universal success is really hard to get is because if you have universal success, the world will be like perfect and I don't think it will really ever be'*, suggesting instead that the most realistic form of success was to *'be happy with yourself'* (Enq1). This reflects both their pragmatism and their recognition of structural limits. These concerns also bring cultural capital back into focus, though now in relation to disadvantage.

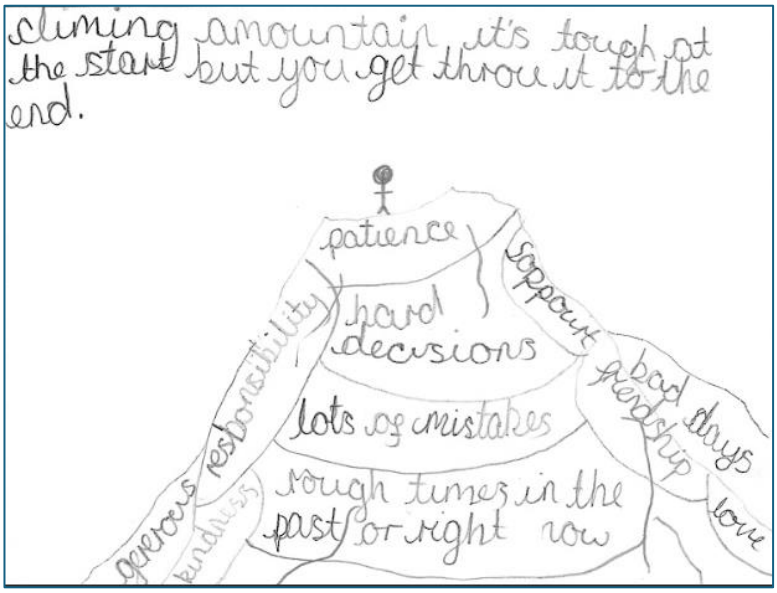

Figure 14: Recognising the complexity of a successful life (P17)

Teachers also adopted a broad definition of disadvantage, often aligning with the Department for Education's (2023) framing of any barrier to learning. TG1A described it as *'anything that might create a barrier… social situations that may affect pupils beyond their control'*. They gave examples ranging from children caring for parents to those who lacked enriching experiences despite material stability. Several also noted what they called the *'flip side'* of affluence, where *'high-achieving families, big wages, important jobs'* sometimes meant children had less parental time or attention (TG2B). H2 gave a telling comparison between pupils in different contexts: in deprived areas, children *'lacked the things they needed to organise their life properly'* but often had *'a sense of community, a sense of belonging'* in affluent areas, pupils had resources and opportunities but *'craved adult attention… that was their disadvantage there'* (H2).

Cultural capital (in the form of cultural accumulation) was often described as a clear marker of inequality. Teachers observed that pupils arriving without certain experiences or background knowledge could be instantly disadvantaged compared to peers. TG2A reflected: *'When a child joins the school without a lot of cultural capital outside of school, that is a disadvantage instantly because sometimes the room was already more advanced than where they were'*. To mitigate this, schools deliberately sought to provide experiences, music lessons, trips, clubs, that they felt middle-class families could take for granted. Yet this also reinforces Bourdieu's insight that schools tend to valorise particular forms of knowledge and experience, so that what counts as capital is still largely defined by dominant cultural groups (2.2.6).

Despite these challenges, teachers were clear that disadvantage should not limit children's entitlement to the full curriculum. TG2B insisted: *'Just because someone has a special educational need, and they struggle with certain aspects of their learning, does not mean that they should be excluded from the wider learning available'*. Similarly, H2 emphasised that provision must start and end in the classroom, not rely solely on *'bolt-on'* interventions. Yet many teachers admitted that the pressures of assessment and accountability could narrow opportunities, especially for those whose strengths lay outside English and maths. TG3 captured the frustration: pupils may *'get sick of trying their best'* and not feeling like they are succeeding. This tension between what is and is not valued in the primary curriculum brings into sharp focus the role of assessment, which participants saw as both shaping what counts as cultural capital and determining whose knowledge

and dispositions are recognised as success. It is to these perceptions of assessment and their impact on children's opportunities that the next section now turns.

4.4 Assessment and its impact on perceptions of success

Assessment emerged across the dataset not only as a formal process of measuring attainment but also as a powerful mechanism for determining which forms of knowledge and cultural capital are recognised as legitimate success in schools. Participants' accounts revealed a recurring tension: while assessment was acknowledged as necessary to track progress, it was also widely experienced as narrowing opportunities, privileging certain forms of capital, and misrepresenting the broader qualities they valued for life beyond school.

Pupils' views of assessment were often framed in terms of what it displaced. Several linked test preparations directly to the loss of valued opportunities: '*Don't get to do much art anymore*' (P17); '*Don't go outside*' (P23). For many, this narrowing of experience was felt as a loss of balance between academic and creative or active learning. In collaborative enquiries, pupils moved conversations about success away from test results and towards broader markers of achievement. In Enquiry One (Enq1), when asked whether success could ever be universal, pupils emphasised happiness, kindness, and relationships rather than exam results: *'The reason why universal success is really hard to get is because if you have universal success, the world will be like perfect and I don't think it will really ever be'*, concluding that the only way to achieve success was to *'be happy with your life'* (P6). Other pupils echoed this reorientation: *'friends can help you achieve your goals'* and *'if you fail, you try again'* (P39PP). Pupils also recognised the performative weight of assessment, noting that it shaped how teachers and schools judged their worth. One remarked that *'SATs are what everyone talks about, but that doesn't mean it's what matters'* (Enq2). Another commented on the emotional impact: *'Tests make you nervous, and sometimes you don't show what you know'* (P22) and '*Sometimes you learn it for the test and then forget it*' (P34) captured a sentiment echoed by others. P23 explained *'I get nervous before tests because if you get it wrong you feel like you're not good enough'* while another explained that *'if you don't pass the SATs it makes you feel like you've failed at everything'* (P33). These reflections suggest that pupils were highly aware not only of the formal role of assessment but also of its social and emotional consequences, particularly the way it eclipsed other aspects of their learning.

Parents were often pragmatic about assessment, acknowledging its role but resisting its dominance. PA9Q described qualifications as *'a passport to success… they open doors'*, but PA14QI challenged their primacy: *'Certificates and qualifications aren't everything'*. PA16Q went further, observing that *'academia has its limitations… it does not teach you the skills and experience needed to operate in the real world'*. Many parents expressed concern that the balance of the curriculum was distorted by the pressure to achieve high scores in core subjects. PA17QI argued that children *'definitely need the basic skills of reading, writing and maths but not necessarily to the extent at which the National Curriculum states… I also believe that caring and sharing is a vital part of school life'*. PA4Q suggested schools should attend more to '*mental health skills around mindfulness, management of anxiety and stress, coping with social media*' while PA15Q advocated environmental education, both of which they felt were overshadowed by test preparation. Parents repeatedly returned to the idea that assessment overlooked essential life skills. PA19QI summarised the priority as *'the ability to think, reason and challenge yourself'*, placing reasoning and adaptability above test scores. Their comments reflected a desire for forms of recognition that validated children's wider capabilities, not just academic attainment. Teachers were the most outspoken about the limitations of assessment and its effect on curriculum design. TG1B expressed frustration that *'half the things we teach… they will probably never use again'*, while TG3 described the system as *'very restricted and restrictive for non-academic children'*. TG2B highlighted the gap between assessed attainment and life success: *'You can be as brilliant as you like at English and Maths, but if you can't function in society, then you will not be successful in life'*. Furthermore, TG3 described '*the children who can sit for long periods and churn out work on the spot'* as those most likely to be recognised as successful in formal terms. TG1B described the current model as '*feeling like a conveyor belt*' and questioned whether pupils were retaining learning in a way that would serve them in life. Pupils were aware of this dynamic, noting that *'if you do well in maths and English tests, you get more praise'* (P26) and that other abilities such as art, music or problem-solving were often overlooked. As P34 put it, *'you could be good at loads of things, but if they're not tested, people don't really notice'*. This was echoed by PA7, who observed that *'schools sometimes miss the spark in children who think differently' (PA7)*.

Headteacher One (H1) described an alternative vision, emphasising the Early Years Foundation Stage characteristics of effective learning, persistence, creativity, and making links, as habits that should be assessed and valued throughout primary education. She argued that these were more

durable than factual recall: *'Knowledge fades if you don't use it… but if you can persist, be creative, make those links, you can pick the knowledge back up again'.* Teachers also drew attention to how assessment shapes pupil identity, some pupils reported that fear of failure undermined their self-esteem: *'If you're always told you're wrong, you just stop putting your hand up'* (P9) (4.3), others observed that competition sometimes eroded compassion: *'People just want to beat each other, not help'* (P27). TG3 reflected that pupils *'get sick of trying their best'* suggesting that repeated test failure could erode self-esteem and motivation with another teacher suggesting that *'The children who succeed are not always the ones who get it right first time, but the ones who don't give up and who learn to trust themselves'* (TG2B)

Group	Snapshot of how assessment was perceived by my participants	Illustrative quotes
Pupils	Restrictive, reducing opportunities for creativity and outdoor learning; emotionally stressful; disconnected from real success	*'Don't get to do much art anymore'* (P17); *'Tests make you nervous, and sometimes you don't show what you know'* (P22); *'Be happy with yourself'* (Enq1)
Parents	Useful for opening doors but insufficient alone; should not overshadow life skills, wellbeing, and adaptability	*'Certificates and qualifications aren't everything'* (PA14QI); *'a passport to success'* (PA9Q); *'Children definitely need… reading, writing and Maths but not necessarily to the extent… the National Curriculum states'* (PA17QI)
Teachers	Narrowing the curriculum; undermining creativity and self-esteem; failing to capture transferable dispositions	*'Very restricted and restrictive for non-academic children'* (TG3); *'You can be as brilliant as you like at English and Maths, but if you can't function in society…'* (TG2B); *'Knowledge fades if you don't use it… but if you can persist… you can pick the knowledge back up again'* (H1)

Table 18: Summary table of participant perspectives on assessment (Moses, 2025).

Several teachers noted that assessment-driven teaching left little space for creativity, collaboration, or enquiry-based work, even when these approaches were what they believed pupils valued most. These perspectives suggest that while participants recognised the role of summative assessment in monitoring progress or supporting pupils, they also saw testing and formative assessment driven schools as a distorting influence that narrows the curriculum and undervalues broader capabilities. Through this exploration of the findings, we have discovered that pupils, parents, and teachers described success in life in terms of fulfilment, creativity, and relationships, yet acknowledged that these qualities are often invisible within high stakes testing. Their accounts point to a persistent misalignment between what communities value and what is officially measured in schools. It was in the collaborative enquiries (Appendix E), however, that pupils were able to move furthest away from the language of assessment and articulate their own collective definitions of success in life. These discussions provided space for children to explore what mattered to them, to question whether universal success was even possible, and to test their ideas against one another's experiences. In doing so, the enquiries offer a window into the values and priorities that sit beyond what is recognised through assessment, and they highlight the ethical, relational and imaginative dimensions of success in life to which the next section now turns.

4.5 Concluding thoughts

This chapter has presented and explored how pupils, parents, and teachers in the participating schools defined and imagined success in life, and how they believed primary education could best prepare children for it. The findings have been organised into four main areas. First, in 4.2, I present the findings related to the forms of capital participants associated with success in life, using Bourdieu's (1986) framework of economic, social, and cultural capital as an analytical lens. Secondly in 4.3, I presented findings related to curriculum content, pedagogy and the potential for all learners to have the same opportunities to success. Third, in 4.4, the findings were presented which explored the role of assessment in the English primary school. Across all participant groups, a consistent picture emerged. While academic knowledge was recognised as important, success in life was defined in much broader terms, encompassing social, emotional, and personal dimensions that many felt were overlooked by the current policy emphasis on measurable attainment. Pupils linked success to happiness, positive relationships, basic self-esteem and the freedom to follow their own paths. Parents echoed many of these priorities, often connecting curriculum content with

life skills, adaptability and emotional literacy. Several expressed frustrations with the narrowness of current provision, with one parent concluding bluntly that '*it's broken – the whole system needs a reset'* continuing *'It doesn't prepare them for life; it just prepares them for tests*' (PA5). However, TG1A suggested, '*pupils wouldn't associate being successful with being happy*', assuming they would prioritise earnings. TG1B questioned whether parents would really prioritise happiness over material success. Teachers voiced concern that assessment pressures were restricting opportunities for breadth and expression, with TG1 describing the curriculum as '*very restricted and restrictive for non-academic children*' and TG2A's expressed a desire to support their pupils more effectively so that they could *'give them the skills to be happy in life regardless of the hand life has dealt them' in an attempt to avoid.* TG3's concern pupils could *'lose the love of learning'.* The gaps and areas of alignment between what my participants valued and how the current primary school system in England measures success in life will be explored next in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter draws together the findings presented in Chapter Four with the literature examined in Chapters One and Two to address the fourth research question: *How do these perceptions converge with established models of success, and what analysis could be provided when offering a critique of the future of the English primary curriculum?* (1.4). The discussion is framed within the pragmatic phenomenological methodology outlined in Chapter Three (3.2), in which an iterative process of reading, re-reading, and reflective analysis (Perry, 2013:272) allowed me to move beyond surface interpretation towards a deeper synthesis of meaning.

Chapter Five is the critical point at which my research's contribution becomes explicit. Here, the voices of pupils, parents, and teachers are placed in direct conversation with dominant theories and policy discourses on success in life, revealing where the data reinforces existing models, where it challenges prevailing assumptions and where it suggests new ways forward. In particular, the discussion interrogates the limitations of current curriculum priorities in England, while proposing refinements to established theoretical frameworks to better account for the real-life perceptions described by participants. The discussion in this chapter lays out how the factors shaping the pupil participants ability to succeed in life within the primary school system in England are not discrete variables, but interconnected elements operating within a dynamic system. One where, relationships, learning spaces, wellbeing, teaching approaches and curriculum content are interdependent and influence each other continuously, shaping both the experience and potential of learners. It is suggested that the data from my research recognising this complexity is essential if we are to move beyond narrow, performance-driven definitions of success in life and towards an educational vision capable of serving all children. To capture the complexity of the findings, the discussion is structured across several interconnected themes. Section 5.1 considers the spaces, relationships and pedagogical practices that shape opportunities for success in life, including attention to inclusion and psychological wellbeing. Section 5.2 turns to the embodiment of success in life, examining happiness, self-esteem, compassion, fairness and resilience as central dispositions identified by participants. Section 5.3 focuses on social capital, exploring the relational foundations of success, while 5.4 addresses curriculum knowledge, skills and pedagogies, highlighting both possibilities and limitations. Section 5.5 examines the relationship between assessment and success, including the risks of misrecognition, and 5.6 considers cultural capital in

relation to curriculum policy and practice. Finally, Section 5.7 introduces *congruent capital* as an original theoretical contribution, tracing its origins in participant perspectives, situating it alongside existing concepts, and developing its educational and systemic significance. Together, these sections provide the basis for a critique of the future of the English primary curriculum, addressing the concluding part of the fourth research question: *what analysis could be provided when offering a critique of the future of the English primary curriculum?* (1.4).

5.1 Spaces, People and Pedagogy

5.1.1 Physical spaces for learning

Insights from all participant groups in my research, supported by the literature, suggest the way that the physical environment of a school interacts with the people in it and the ways they relate to one another shapes how perceptions of success are experienced. It could be argued that the design, layout and ethos of a school space can influence learning, wellbeing, motivation and behaviour, not as isolated variables but as part of a dynamic interplay between environment, pedagogy and relationships. This perspective resonates with Husbands and Pearce's (2012:12) description of the 'complex, multi-faceted and demanding nature' of primary schools and their call for environments that nurture both academic and personal development, echoing my earlier discussion of context and provision in 2.3.2. The Centre for Educational Design (CED, 2025) also notes that the learning environment can 'influence how you feel or how effectively you can work', a sentiment reinforced by teachers and pupils in my research. While some pupils described spaces that enabled movement, collaboration and creativity in positive terms, several teachers in my research spoke of classrooms that felt limiting. They described how layout and lack of flexible space constrained their pedagogical choices. Some wanted to rearrange chairs into circles or small groups to encourage collaboration but felt they no longer '*get the chance to be that free anymore*' (TG1A) (4.3), citing both spatial restrictions and time pressures to cover curriculum content. One teacher explained that even minor creative changes triggered the concern '*I can't afford [the time] to give them another lesson on this*' (TG1B), illustrating how performative pressures (2.4) intersect with spatial limitations to restrict teacher agency. These accounts also illustrate how professional autonomy of the teachers in my research is mediated not only by the material affordances of space or how time is used in the classroom but also by the wider performative culture. As Priestley et al. (2015) emphasise in their ecological model, agency is not a fixed trait but emerges in the interplay of

individual, cultural and structural conditions. Teachers in my study expressed a desire to create dialogic and collaborative environments, but accountability frameworks and policy mandates curtailed these efforts. However, their views do resonate with Ranken et al.'s (2024) evidence that experiential, hands-on learning significantly improves academic outcomes, strengthening the case for treating environments as active agents in success. This tension aligns with Ball's (2003) critique of performativity as a regime of surveillance that narrows professional discretion causes a form of 'values schizophrenia', where teachers feel that they are required to act against their professional beliefs. Similarly, Braun and Maguire's (2020) findings that teachers often end up 'doing without believing', enacting practices they regard as ineffective or misaligned with their values (2.4.2). In this sense, classroom layout, where learning happens and how time is used in the classroom becomes more than a technical concern: it is bound up with questions of power, trust and the scope of teacher agency.

Returning to the physical space within which pupils learn, national policy guidance from the DfE (2014) addresses physical space but in ways that suggest certain affordances for more flexibility remain peripheral. That is to say, the DfE (2014:36) (2.3.2) recommends that a teaching space for 30 primary-aged pupils should be 55–62 m² with one small group room for every 150 pupils. The same guidance refers to 'habitat areas' for outdoor classrooms intended for cross-curricular use but presents them as optional without any implementation timeframe. In 2.3.2 it was argued that this framing appears to position outdoor learning as an enrichment rather than an integral component of education, but it is in opposition to my pupil participants who called for '*more break and lunchtimes*' (P16) and described outdoor time as '*helping their mental health'* (P39PP) or allowing them to '*just relax and get away from stressful work*' (P21). Teachers and parents in my research also valued outdoor play and nature connection with one parent advocating for '*more emphasis placed on contextual learning in outdoor environments*' (PA19QI). It appears that my participants are also aligned with the literature from Wang et al. (2023) report that up to 2.3 hours of daily outdoor time can reduce obesity, depression and cognitive strain in primary-aged children as well as Barrett et al. (2015:130) who found that 'naturalness factors' such as light, air quality and spatial design have a disproportionately high effect on learning outcomes. This is consistent with Ardelean et al. (2021) who found that despite teacher support, outdoor play typically constitutes less than 10% of the school day.

For some pupils in my research, nature was bound up with broader values and life goals. Pupil 21 described success as including '*happiness, nature, friendship and kindness*' while P25 associated it with '*bird watching and being nature friendly*'. P13 expressed hope that '*the world I live in now will be cherished and protected by us and next generations*' adding '*I love nature, and I hope it will stay forever*'. These perspectives reflect Richardson's (2016) finding that nature connection predicts wellbeing and achievement as strongly as school attendance. González and Schenetti (2022) similarly argue that nature-based experiences foster emotional and cognitive development as well as investigative autonomy, qualities that participants in my research perceived as central to lifelong learning. Taken together, my findings indicate that physical and natural learning environments may not simply provide a backdrop for pedagogy but actively shape how children experience, engage with and find meaning in their learning. These results are consistent with research demonstrating the cognitive, emotional and behavioural benefits of well-designed and nature-rich environments (Barrett et al., 2015; Richardson, 2016; Wang et al., 2023) yet they also highlight tensions between policy rhetoric and classroom realities. By positioning physical space as a form of cultural and social capital that interacts with pedagogical agency, my research extends existing work by foregrounding the relational and value-forming dimensions of the learning environment, aspects that have received less emphasis in the literature.

5.1.2 Recognition and inclusion of all learners

As highlighted in 4.3.4, participants consistently emphasised that success in life depends on being recognised and included as valued members of their school communities which aligns with Goodenow (1993) who defines belonging as the extent to which pupils feel accepted, respected and included within the school environment (2.4.4). In my research, recognition was understood by the participants not only as acknowledgement of achievement but also as being seen, accepted and supported as a whole or 'legitimate' person within the school community. This emphasis provides the foundation for the following discussion, which considers to what extent these accounts from my research participants align with and extend existing literature.

Firstly, the desire to be seen as a valued learner connects with Bourdieu's (1986:243) concept of embodied cultural capital (2.2.3), or the 'long lasting dispositions of the mind and the body', and with social capital as discussed in 2.2.4. There is evidence in the literature which emphasises that certain types of certain dispositions, such as confidence or communication skills, are more highly

valued in schools than others and that this preference can contribute to inequality between students and how their academic ability is perceived by teachers (Bourdieu, 2010:9; DiMaggio, 1982:199) (2.2.6, 2.3.3). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that such embodied capital is shaped by early experiences, called habitus, while Gutman and Schoon (2013) also found that many traits linked to success in life are formed before school begins, with only some being influenced by interventions at school (2.3.3). My findings are consistent with these arguments from Bourdieu and Gutman and Schoon in recognising the formative role of early experience, but my participants perceptions also extend the discussion by showing the extent to which pupils and families in my research position emotional wellbeing, relationships and trust as equally important to success as the formal knowledge or qualifications promoted by the education sector in England and pervasive neo-liberal norms of progress and growth. For example, while parents and pupils in my research acknowledged that money could provide security and opportunities, they consistently downplayed wealth as a primary measure of success. As one parent explained, '*success comes from happiness in what you do'* and *'how you live and not from possessions'* (PA2Q) (4.2.1). Furthermore, pupils spoke about needing '*enough*' to meet basic needs (P22PP). Similarly, P20 emphasised balance rather than accumulation: *'To be comfortable and happy with enough, but no more, of everything'* and placed greater emphasis on having supportive relationships and emotional stability (4.2.2). This emphasis on social and emotional dimensions of success aligns with Reay's (2010) work on noticing the differences between fitting in and standing out (2.2.5), and with Bowlby and Ainsworth's (1991) attachment theory (2.2.4), which shows how early relationships shape self-worth, trust in others and capacity to thrive. Teachers in my research also challenged narrow definitions of disadvantage. One teacher noted that children from affluent families could nonetheless lack emotional nurture or access to enriching experiences, highlighting that disadvantage is not exclusively economic (TG2). Pupils echoed this, expressing concern for classmates without strong friendships or family support. This reinforces the argument in 2.2.4 that social capital plays a vital role in participation and aspiration, yet my findings suggest that the pupils, teachers and parents in my research frame these issues through relational and emotional language rather than policy terminology.

In summary, my research findings support earlier research on the role of social and embodied cultural capital in educational success yet also extends it by foregrounding the relational and emotional aspects of recognition as experienced by pupils, parents and teachers. These findings suggest that inclusion cannot be fully understood through economic or academic measures alone

but must also account for the ways in which learners are valued, trusted and supported as whole people regardless of background or ability. This perspective opens the possibility, explored further in Chapter Six, that broadening the forms of capital recognised in schools could lead to more inclusive definitions of success in life.

5.1.3 The psychological wellbeing of learners and teachers

Current policy frameworks, particularly those framing 'cultural capital' as something delivered through curriculum content, tend to privilege knowledge acquisition over other dimensions of success (2.3.3). My participants, however, described success in life in ways that extend this view. P26 emphasised the importance of '*being yourself*' (P33PP), while many pupils linked success to happiness, kindness and confidence (4.2.5). These qualities were not described as skills to be explicitly taught, but as attributes that develop when schools foster fun and happy psychological environments of trust, belonging and inclusion. As one pupil put it, '*happiness is essential; without it, you are not motivated*' (P35/3) (4.2.3.3). This resonates with, but also moves beyond, the literature on social capital in education (Reay, 2010), which tends to focus on networks and participation as enablers of achievement. My findings indicate that recognition of learners' and teachers' emotional states and personal identities can be as important to success as recognition of their academic or professional performance. For pupils, this has implications for how disadvantage is conceptualised in policy: if recognition is too narrowly defined in terms of measurable attainment, it risks overlooking the capitals that many pupils see as essential to thriving. For teachers, it may mean that the professional and personal agency needs to be brought up the agenda in terms of their recruitment and retention. Taking a view of the whole system, which will be expanded on in 5.7.7, these findings suggest that recognition and inclusion are not isolated factors but dynamic elements that interact with wellbeing, motivation and learning outcomes. It could be suggested that if policy continues to treat recognition of learners as synonymous with narrow forms of academic attainment, it risks destabilising this wider system of elements and characteristics that participants identified as central to success in life.

Building on the previous section on recognition and inclusion (5.1.2), participants across all groups linked success in life to emotional safety, trust and enjoyment in learning. This aligns with Walton and Cohen's (2011) finding that a sense of acceptance and mattering can improve motivation and with Jetten, Haslam and Haslam's (2012) (2.4.4) argument that belonging depends on maintaining

identity while being accepted by others. Pupils in my research often articulated this directly. P20 explained that *'a school should be a community'*, a perception echoed in accounts that placed friendships, consistent and kind adults, and a sense of belonging within society at the centre of wellbeing (4.2.3). My findings reinforce Clarke's (2020:267) (2.2.3.1) argument that hedonic wellbeing is as important, for primary school aged pupils, as knowledge acquisition for lifelong success, while adding that pupils perceive wellbeing as inseparable from recognition and inclusion. Pupils described confidence, self-esteem and enjoyment as necessary for learning, with P2 calling for schools to be *'funny, loving, kind'* (4.2.3.2). These psychological elements were described by my research participants as foundational conditions for engagement in learning, not as optional extras which builds the case for belonging as a key part of creating agency for pupils and teachers. Pupils also emphasised that they could only develop independence and responsibility when they felt secure within supportive relationships. P43PPSD explained that *'if you are happy in life, then you are successful'*, while P33PP stressed *'being yourself and not copying others'* as a foundation for flourishing and success in life (4.2.5). These accounts indicate that wellbeing was not merely about feeling good but about being free to act authentically and to make choices in a trusted, relational environment. Collaborative enquiries reinforced this point: one pupil reflected, *'I want to do things with other people so we all get better'* (P15), framing belonging as the ground on which agency could be exercised. This resonates with Manyukhina and Wyse's (2025) argument that structured freedom requires both autonomy and relational support, and with Ryan and Deci's (2017) claim that relatedness is a basic psychological need. Teacher accounts in my research emphasised the importance they placed on the reciprocity of pupil and teacher wellbeing but that they were not always able to teach in the way they thought most effective. These accounts suggested that teacher wellbeing is inseparable from professional agency. As Braun and Maguire (2020:441) argue in 2.4.2, teachers frequently find themselves 'doing without believing', enacting policies they privately reject. Such constrained agency not only undermines professional fulfilment but also erodes the relational conditions that pupils identified as essential for success. Ball (2003) describes this performative culture in 2.2.2 as producing a 'values schizophrenia' in which teachers must act against their professional beliefs, while Priestley et al. (2015) emphasise that agency is not an inherent trait but arises from the interplay between individual capacity, cultural norms and structural constraints. My findings confirm this: teachers wanted to act responsively, yet policy frameworks left them little space to do so, with TG1B commenting in 4.3.3 on '*that constant*

pressure of it to get through stuff, to cover content' (TG1B). Such enforced compliance undermines professional fulfilment for teachers in line with Worth & Van den Brande, 2020 in 2.4.2 who report that many teachers feel that their professional values are compromised by the need to demonstrate compliance also echoing Gunter's (2011) argument that managerialism displaces pedagogical decision-making with bureaucratic control. Alternatively, when teachers felt supported, valued and able to exercise professional judgement, in line with Priestley et al. (2015) who conceptualise teacher agency through an ecological model in (2.4.2), they reported creating richer, more responsive classrooms. Cotson and Kim (2023) argue that teacher autonomy and wellbeing shape the emotional life of schools (2.4.2), a view supported by TG2A's wish to *'give them the skills to be happy in life regardless of the hand life has dealt them'* and TG3's concern that overemphasis on core subjects could make pupils *'lose the love of learning'* (4.5).

Parents also valued this wider approach to pedagogy, with PA17QI advocating *'both academic and non-academic skills… things that could provide all children with achievement!'* (4.2.4, 4.3.1). However, teachers described workload, assessment pressures and rigid expectations as barriers to prioritising wellbeing. One remarked *'the amount of paperwork we have to do now and assess absolutely everything. So, I spend most time doing that rather than thinking - How can I make this lesson fun?'* (PA17QI). TG3 in noted that some pupils disengage not because they dislike learning but because they perceive that they are *'not really succeeding in the things that appear to matter to teachers and the government'*. These experiences echo research by Pope (2019) and Herbert et al. (2018) on the displacement of creative pedagogies by performative demands and align with Manyukhina and Wyse's (2019) argument that without structured freedom for teacher and learner agency, wellbeing and engagement are undermined. Furthermore, it risks undermining the pupils in my research who consistently linked good learning experiences to positive teacher relationships. P45 described a *'good teacher'* as central to success, while P6 valued classrooms where *'everyone is learning and feels free to ask questions'*. These views align with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory but extend it by showing how pupils themselves articulate the interplay between autonomy, competence and relatedness. Taken together, these accounts suggest that psychological wellbeing in primary schools in England is not an isolated outcome but a systemic condition: it emerges when the intention is aligned with recognition, belonging and agency across pupils and teachers. My pupil and teacher participants pointed to the need for environments that are inclusive, emotionally safe, fun and flexible. When teachers are recognised and supported, and

when children feel they belong and are understood, success becomes possible in a deeper and more embodied sense. These findings align with Clarke's (2020:283) evidence that social and emotional ethos supports engagement, but they also highlight a persistent gap in accountability frameworks such as Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (2019), which does not directly assess these dimensions. As a result, wellbeing and agency are pushed to the margins, despite being perceived as foundational to the forms of success in life identified by pupils, parents and teachers alike in my research. This brief mention of a systems perspective provides the bridge to 5.7, where I develop the concept of congruent capital to argue that wellbeing and belonging are not peripheral supports to learning but integral to the alignment of intention and environment that enables pupils to succeed in life.

5.2 The embodiment of success in life

In my research findings in 4.2.3.3 and 4.2.4, pupils, parents and teachers often described success in life in ways that were deeply embodied. By this I mean success was understood not simply as something to be known or measured, but as something lived and felt through physical, emotional and relational experience. As explored in 2.2.3 this emphasis connects directly to Bourdieu's (1986:243) concept of embodied cultural capital as the 'long lasting dispositions of the mind and the body' but my participants' perspectives both support and extend existing frameworks by showing how embodied dispositions are cultivated or constrained through everyday interactions in school and home life. Within this, four areas emerged with particular strength: pupils emphasised happiness as essential for motivation and engagement and both pupils and teachers linked self-esteem to feeling competent and being able to master a subject or skill (4.3.1). A third recurring theme was around relational notions of fairness, justice and resilience, often framed in policy as persistence in the face of challenge but my participants perceptions (4.2.4) and critiques from the literature in 2.2.3 also raised questions about how schools define and value it. Finally, participants highlighted reciprocal forms of compassion and kindness as fundamental dispositions for a person who succeeds in life, not peripheral traits, shaping both personal fulfilment and social contribution. Together, these themes illustrate how embodied understandings of success in life encompass joy, capability, adaptability and reciprocal care, and how schools play a central role in fostering or constraining these qualities. Here I start by looking at the extent to which the findings and literature converge on the concept of happiness.

5.2.1 Happiness

Pupils in my research consistently recognised happiness as a condition for learning and succeeding in life (4.2.4). As P22PP explained '*without happiness, you can't really do anything because if I'm not happy, I struggle to learn*'. This extends the psychological wellbeing discussion in 5.1.3 and links to the conceptual distinction in 2.2.3 between hedonia, associated with pleasure and positive emotion, and eudaimonia, associated with purpose and fulfilment. Pupils described hedonic happiness as '*talking and playing with friends*' (P44PP), '*mixing with people*' (P24) and being with those who are '*friendly, happy and playful*' (P35). They also spoke of its relationship to eudaimonic happiness, as in P39PP's reflection that '*happiness is what keeps me going; without it, achievements feel empty*' (4.2.4). As demonstrated in the findings from the initial questionnaires in 4.2.3.3 I discovered that many pupils (about 25%) named happiness as most important to success in life. After the collaborative enquiries and imaginative variation exercises, this perception rose to just over half of the pupils suggesting that structured dialogue encouraged pupils to reflect more deeply and to move from unexamined preference towards reasoned judgement about what matters in a successful life. This mirrors Kristjánsson's (2014) argument that reflection and a deepening understanding of phronesis can help young people shift from surface choices to considered values (2.2.3.1). In 2.2.3 the literature outlined how policy discourse often privileges eudaimonia as a route to societal benefit (Jubilee Centre, 2022:18; DfE, 2017) yet Clarke and Platt (2023:964) suggest that hedonic experiences are especially significant in primary years (2.2.3.1) which is supported by my findings which indicate that younger children need simpler forms of happiness to learn and thrive. This echoes Aristotle's claim that happiness, whether through pleasure or purpose, is the ultimate goal of life pursued for its own sake (Waterman et al., 2008:42; Kenny, 1995:8, 19) (2.2.3.1). Parents in my research also largely shared this emphasis with Eighty percent mentioned happiness in their definition of success. In 4.2.5 we learned that PA1 wrote, '*as long as she's happy and doing what she loves, I will find her successful*'. PA17 added, '*we view school as an opportunity for our daughter to develop a solid foundation... not just academic but also personal and social*'. This convergence between family and pupil views connects to the idea of subjective wellbeing in 2.2.3, which frames emotional resources as a form of advantage that supports pupils' wellbeing and achievement. Some teachers, however, expressed scepticism, we discovered that TG1A suggested, '*pupils wouldn't associate being successful with being happy*', assuming they would prioritise earnings. TG1B also questioned whether parents would really prioritise happiness

over material success. This disconnect between the views of the parents and their children with the teachers echoes Apple's (2012) concern in 2.2.5 that schools risk becoming 'islands, separate from their localities' and is reinforced by the absence of happiness from the National Curriculum aims and Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (2019:6).

5.2.2 Self-esteem and compassion as embodied dispositions

Participants in this study frequently framed self-esteem and positive self-perception as a cornerstone of success in life. For many, it was not a superficial sense of feeling good about oneself compared to others, but a deeper confidence rooted in capability, resilience and peace of mind. The pupil's accounts resonate with Cigman's (2001:562) distinction between basic and reflective self-esteem (2.2.3.1). Basic self-esteem involves a fundamental sense of being valued, while reflective self-esteem is tied to achievements and the recognition of one's competence. with PA19QI reflecting: *'Self-esteem for me is about knowing you can do something, being able to try again if it doesn't work, and not giving up straight away'* (PA19QI) and *'if you don't believe in yourself, you can't really help anyone else'* (P34) (4.2.5). Pupils' accounts showed both dimensions: they wanted to feel accepted for who they were, but they also valued the pride that comes from meeting a challenge. This nuanced view aligns with Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (2000) (2.4.1), which emphasises competence, autonomy and relatedness as the psychological needs underpinning motivation and wellbeing. Pupils were acutely aware that success meant more than external recognition: it required inner confidence to try, fail, reflect and persist, with P39 explaining that *'you need to have faith in yourself because if you keep saying you're not good enough then you'll never get better'* (P39PP) (4.2.4).

Teachers too drew attention to this process. TG2B observed: *'The children who succeed are not always the ones who get it right first time, but the ones who don't give up and who learn to trust themselves'* (TG2B) (4.4). This reflects what Waterman (1993:678) described as 'personal expressiveness,' or the sense of fulfilment gained from activities that resonate with one's true capacities (2.4.3). In this way, self-esteem was presented not as inflated self-regard but as confidence born from authentic experience, belonging and a sense of recognition regardless of abilities or interests itself. Several pupils expressed frustration at being overlooked if their strengths lay outside tested subjects: *'You could be good at loads of things, but if they're not tested, people don't really notice'* (P34) (4.3). This echoes Honneth's (Pada, 2017:18) theory of recognition

(2.2.3.1), which argues that being seen and valued is fundamental to human development. Parents and teachers similarly emphasised the role of recognition in building children's sense of self-worth. PA18, for example, reflected: *'Sometimes it's just about someone noticing what they're good at, even if it's not maths or English'* (PA18). Taken together, these perspectives present self-esteem as a dynamic process in which competence and recognition interact. It is not a fixed trait, nor is it mere confidence without foundation; rather, it is an embodied capacity cultivated through supportive relationships and meaningful challenges. This interpretation complicates deficit-based models which portray self-esteem as fragile or inflated, instead aligning with Cigman's (2001) argument that self-esteem is integral to moral agency and responsibility when interacting with the wider world (2.2.2).

Compassion as relational and reciprocal practice

Alongside self-esteem, compassion emerged strongly in participants' accounts as an embodied quality of success. Pupils frequently described in 4.2.3.3 the embodied characteristics of kindness, empathy and fairness as indicators of a successful life. One pupil stated simply: *'It's about being kind to people because if you're not kind then no one will want to be around you'* (P22) Another reflected: *'Helping others makes you feel good inside, like you've done something that matters'* (P19) (4.3). Teachers observed that compassion was not only morally desirable but practically necessary for classroom life. TG1 explained: *'Children who can see when someone else is upset and go over to help, those are the children who hold a class together'* (TG1) (4.4). Parents too valued compassion as central to success, with PA12 noting: *'If my child grows up to be kind and thinks about other people, I'll see that as success, more than any grade'* (PA12) (4.2.3.3).

These accounts resonate with Noddings' ethic of care (Stables and Semetsky, 2014:76) (2.2.3.2), which positions relational responsiveness, alongside attentiveness to others, responsibility, competence as essential to ethical life and as the foundation of education. Compassion, in this framing, is not sentimental but ethical and practical: it is the disposition to attend to others' needs in context and in line with my pupils participants descriptions of helping and being helped illustrate how compassion is enacted in everyday school life, sustaining belonging and mutual recognition. Contemporary psychological research builds on this, Neff (2003:89) (2.2.3.1) distinguishes between self-esteem and self-compassion, arguing that self-compassion involves treating oneself with kindness during setbacks, which in turn supports resilience and wellbeing. Several participants

implicitly recognised this dynamic. One pupil explained: *'You have to be nice to yourself if you get something wrong, otherwise you just feel rubbish and stop trying'* (P15) (4.2.3.3) and another '*trying again even when you get it wrong'* (P33). Compassion here is both outward and inward: it enables learning from mistakes without collapse of self-worth. Critical pedagogy also situates compassion as central to justice, Freire (1970:90) argues that education should foster solidarity with the oppressed, while Hooks (1994:39) positions love and care as radical practices of freedom (2.4.1) and it could be argued that pupils' calls for kindness and fairness can thus be read not only as personal values but as seeds of democratic citizenship. Cassidy (2017) (2.3) underscores this in her work on collaborative enquiry, showing how children's discussions of fairness cultivate civic reasoning. What is most striking is that self-esteem and compassion were not presented by participants as separate dispositions, but as deeply interdependent and an embodied disposition with both personal and political significance. In line with Aristotle's concept of flourishing (eudaimonia) which requires both self-respect and the capacity to act justly towards others, pupils often explained that believing in oneself enabled them to support others. As one put it: *'If you're confident, you can stand up for your friends when someone's being mean'* or '*not giving up when it's hard'* (P17) (4.2.2). Parents similarly described how children's kindness was rooted in their own sense of security, with PA19QI reflecting: *'If a child feels good about themselves, they don't need to put others down, they can actually lift others up'* (PA19QI). Teachers reinforced this link, with TG2B noting: *'The children who are happiest in themselves are usually the ones who show the most care for others'* (TG2B) (4.2.2).

Pupils' and parents' insights capture this balance: self-esteem without compassion risks arrogance, while compassion without self-esteem risks self-effacement. True success, in their accounts, is achieved when the two reinforce one another. The stoic ideal of equanimity (ataraxia) emphasises stability of mind and freedom from destructive emotion (2.2.3). Participants' emphasis on self-belief combined with kindness echoes this: a secure sense of self allows calm, fair and compassionate engagement with others. In this way, the dispositions described by pupils and parents align with long philosophical traditions of ethical self-cultivation. Framing self-esteem and compassion as *embodied dispositions* also allows them to be situated within broader theoretical debates on capital. Bourdieu (1986) (2.2.6) conceptualised cultural capital as the embodied, objectified, and institutionalised resources that confer advantage within a social field. Yet, as participants' testimonies demonstrate, what counts as valued capital in schools is often narrowly

defined, privileging test results and compliance. Pupils expressed frustration that their kindness or resilience went unrecognised: *'You don't get a certificate for being nice, but you do for spelling'* (P18) (4.2.3.2). Parents and teachers similarly noted that compassion and confidence were essential to long-term success, yet largely invisible in formal assessments (4.2.3.2). This misrecognition points to the limitations of cultural capital as framed in policy, particularly within the Ofsted Inspection Framework where 'knowledge and cultural capital' remains vague and deficit-laden (2.3). In contrast, participants' accounts suggest a need for what Yosso (2005:77) (2.3.3) calls community cultural wealth, forms of capital rooted in aspirational, navigational, linguistic, familial, and resistant practices. Self-esteem and compassion resonate strongly with these, as they are capacities nurtured through community, family, and peer relationships, not merely conferred by formal schooling. The testimonies here also foreshadow the concept of congruent capital developed later (5.7) which arises when dispositions, relationships, curriculum, and ethos align, allowing the conditions for pupils to act with coherence. Self-esteem and compassion, in this sense, are not only individual traits but systemic outcomes: they flourish when schools recognise them as legitimate forms of success, and they wither when misrecognised. Participants' reflections in 4.3.3 showed how positive self-esteem and both sides of compassion were cultivated, or undermined, in everyday school life. Pupils described moments when teachers encouraged them to persist: *'When the teacher says, "you can do it" and you do, you feel proud and want to try again'* (P12) (4.3). Others spoke of how compassion was modelled in classrooms: *'When the teacher helps someone who's struggling, we see that and then we help each other'* (P21) (4.3). Teachers also recognised their role: TG1 noted, *'You can't teach compassion by telling children to be nice; you have to show it in how you respond to them'* (TG1) (4.4). Parents highlighted the continuity between home and school. PA18 explained: *'If schools encourage children to be kind and confident, it reinforces what we try to teach at home'* (PA18).

This call for reciprocity reflects Dewey's (1938:40) argument in that education is a social process in which 'meaning is never wholly in the mind, but unfolds in and with others' (Laverty, 2016:1038) (3.3.4). It also echoes Manyukhina's (2025) notion of structured freedom (2.4.3): schools can create environments where children's autonomy and relational capacities are exercised within supportive structures, rather than reduced to compliance. However, participants also identified constraints. Some pupils reported that fear of failure undermined their self-esteem: *'If you're always told you're wrong, you just stop putting your hand up'* (P9). Others observed that

competition sometimes eroded compassion: *'People just want to beat each other, not help'* (P27). These accounts highlight how institutional practices, high stakes testing, ranking, and narrow curricula, can distort the development of these dispositions. They also demonstrate that self-esteem and compassion cannot be treated as add-ons: they are contingent on systemic conditions that either foster or hinder them.

The interdependence of self-esteem and compassion finds resonance in multiple philosophical traditions. Aristotle's account of the virtues situates self-respect and justice to others as mutually reinforcing and to flourish, one must cultivate both (2.2). Pupils' insistence that believing in oneself enabled kindness reflects this Aristotelian balance. Teachers' accounts of modelling compassion align with this: care must be enacted, not merely taught as abstract principle. Stoic thought also illuminates participants' reflections. The ideal of equanimity (ataraxia) involves a calm acceptance of setbacks and a commitment to virtue (2.2). Pupils' recognition that self-kindness was essential to resilience echoes this: *'You have to be nice to yourself if you get something wrong'* (P15) (4.3). Compassion thus includes the ability to sustain equilibrium in the face of difficulty, an essential quality for lifelong success. Finally, critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970:90; Hooks, 1994:39) (2.4) situates compassion and self-esteem within struggles for justice. To esteem oneself while caring for others is to resist dehumanising structures. Pupils' emphasis on fairness and inclusion illustrates this potential: they are not only describing personal wellbeing but envisioning a more democratic community. The findings and literature presented here demonstrates that self-esteem and compassion are not peripheral qualities but central, embodied dispositions that underpin success in life. They enable resilience, motivation, fairness, and relational belonging. They also complicate dominant policy discourses which privilege narrow forms of cultural capital and testable knowledge. My participants' accounts show that self-esteem arises from competence, recognition, and persistence, while compassion is enacted through kindness, empathy, and mutual support. Together, they form a reciprocal cycle: self-esteem empowers compassion, and compassion sustains self-esteem. This cycle reflects philosophical traditions of virtue, equanimity, and care, as well as contemporary psychological and pedagogical theories. Framing them as embodied dispositions of success in life also highlights their systemic dimension. They cannot be reduced to traits of individual children but are shaped by curriculum, pedagogy, ethos, and relationships. When schools value only test results, self-esteem and compassion can be are marginalised. When schools cultivate recognition, belonging, and authentic challenge, these dispositions thrive.

In this sense, it could be argued that self-esteem and compassion could be recognised as forms of capital that enable success in life. But unlike cultural capital, which often reproduces inequality, they represent inclusive capacities accessible to all. As such, they underpin the broader conceptual development of congruent capital, which emphasises coherence between personal values, social relations, and systemic conditions. The interdependence of self-esteem and compassion also sets the stage for the next embodied disposition: fairness and justice. Pupils repeatedly linked confidence and kindness to treating others equally and standing up against injustice. As one reflected: *'If you believe in yourself, you can say when something isn't fair'* (P25) (4.2.3.3). Teachers similarly saw compassion and confidence as precursors to civic responsibility. This suggests that fairness is not an isolated virtue but grows from the foundations of self-esteem and compassion. The following section therefore examines fairness and justice as embodied practices of success, extending the discussion beyond personal confidence and relational care towards the ethical and civic dimensions of flourishing in life.

5.2.3 Fairness and justice as embodied practices

Alongside happiness, self-esteem and compassion, participants also positioned fairness and justice as central to the embodied experience of success. Pupils in particular described success as dependent not only on achieving goals but on achieving them in ways that felt fair and respectful to others. Such accounts point to a moral dimension of embodiment, where dispositions of integrity and fairness were understood as significant alongside confidence or competence. Parents and teachers echoed these concerns in broader terms. In 4.3.1, one parent resisted narrow notions of aspiration, emphasising instead the value of recognising children's own interests: *'Wouldn't it be lovely if a child went, you know what, I love clearing up, I'm going to be a bin man and that was absolutely embraced… why should they have to aspire to be something that they're not interested in? … it might be you need to be kinder to somebody… or think about how you've helped other people around you'* (PA18). Teachers also stressed fairness as everyday responsibility, with TG2A explaining: *'Just to be able to get along in life… we're trying to teach [my toddler] that when you get to a road you stop… you need to look both ways to make sure when you're crossing the road that there's nothing coming'* (TG2A). These examples show fairness not as an abstract value but as a practical, embodied way of navigating the world safely and responsibly. This emphasis resonates with traditions of democratic education in which schools are seen not only as sites of knowledge acquisition but as communities where pupils practise reasoning together about what is right or fair.

Cassidy (2017) highlights the role of collaborative enquiry in fostering civic participation and critical being. The emphasis on fairness in pupils' accounts suggests that such dispositions are already valued and practised by children, even at primary level. In conclusion, Happiness, self-esteem, compassion and fairness together create the conditions in which confidence, competence and resourcefulness can be embodied as durable dispositions. These findings therefore point to a generative sequence: when the right conditions are created, the right embodiments occur, and from these, success in life emerges. Yet whether such qualities are recognised as valuable or discounted through symbolic violence (2.2.6) depends on the field in which they are enacted. This tension raises the question of who currently gets to succeed, and how certain embodiments come to be recognised while others are overlooked.

5.2.4 Who currently succeeds?

In my research, participants frequently reflected on the kinds of pupils who appear to do well within the current English primary curriculum. Success was often associated with a narrow set of embodied dispositions: sustained focus under pressure, ability to recall knowledge for tests, willingness to comply with teacher instructions, and capacity to fit prevailing behavioural norms. Several teachers suggested that these traits, rather than creativity, curiosity or emotional intelligence, were the most consistently rewarded. In 4.4 the findings presented TG3 described '*the children who can sit for long periods and churn out work on the spot'* as those most likely to be recognised as successful in formal terms. Pupils were aware of this dynamic, noting that *'if you do well in maths and English tests, you get more praise'* (P26) and that other abilities such as art, music or problem-solving were often overlooked. As P34 put it, *'you could be good at loads of things, but if they're not tested, people don't really notice'*. This was echoed by PA7, who observed that *'schools sometimes miss the spark in children who think differently' (PA7)*. These perspectives resonate with Reay's (2010) argument that the 'ideal pupil' is one whose habitus aligns with middle-class norms of quiet compliance and academic stamina. Gillborn (2016) similarly critiques how school systems valorise a narrow set of dispositions while marginalising those whose cultural and personal capital differ (2.3.3). These accounts expose a deep tension. On the one hand, schools seek to extend opportunities and level the playing field through broad curriculum provision. On the other hand, the capitals most recognised and rewarded by the system, particularly institutionalised cultural capital in the form of test scores and qualifications, remain unevenly distributed and tied to family background. In this sense, Bourdieu's notion of social reproduction (2.2.6) is borne out:

rather than equalising opportunity, schools risk legitimising pre-existing inequalities by rewarding the cultural knowledge and dispositions that some pupils already bring with them. Participants across all groups revealed an acute awareness of this dilemma, underscoring the difficulty of achieving truly equitable outcomes, as seen especially in the pupil collaborative enquiries (Appendix E). At the same time, the persistent promotion by the educational establishment in England (2.2.2) of institutionalised and objectified forms of success as gateways to opportunity highlights the continuing role of cultural capital as social reproduction within education. Certain knowledge, experiences, and credentials still function as 'keys to the club' (4.2.3.3), advantaging some pupils while excluding others. Several teachers made this link explicit, pointing to how affluence, travel, and enrichment outside school can position children more advantageously within the system. Yet participants also challenged the notion that cultural capital, as currently defined in policy, can be equitably distributed or straightforwardly 'provided' through the curriculum. For parents in particular, the value of qualifications and possessions was consistently reframed in relation to wellbeing, adaptability, and relationships, suggesting that success could not be reduced to a transfer of sanctioned knowledge from school to child. My findings extend these critiques by showing how children and families themselves perceive these patterns, sometimes accepting them as inevitable but often questioning their fairness (4.2.3).

5.3 Social capital and the relational foundations of success in life

In my research, social connections were consistently described as central to success in life, extending from friendships and peer relationships to family support and the involvement of parents in education. Pupils often framed success in terms of friendship and belonging, valuing being liked, supported and included. Parents similarly emphasised relational dimensions, while highlighting their own role in sustaining children's learning and wellbeing. One parent explained, *'the support of your family has a huge impact on how successful in life you are'* (PA14). Another stressed the need for genuine partnership with schools: *'Parents should be partners with the school, not just expected to be mini teachers at home… it's about communication, encouragement, not just homework'* (PA19). Teachers also foregrounded the importance of family–school partnerships. TG1B reflected that *'if you've got people around you 'rooting' for you… to just give you that little bit of a boost… that does make a difference'*. For some, this meant children having advocates to intervene when things went wrong; for others it meant establishing trust and reciprocity between home and school.

Such accounts suggest that social capital was not understood simply as the accumulation of contacts, but as the quality of relationships, the mutuality of support, and the willingness of adults to act as advocates for children. This resonates with Yosso's (2005) expansion to include community cultural wealth, which recognises the strengths of families and communities often overlooked in deficit narratives. It is important, however, to reflect on whose voices are most visible in this data. As discussed in Chapter Three, the parents who took part may appear to represent a more 'engaged' demographic. Yet some were not middle class and still sought actively to contribute to their children's education. This echoes Reay's (1998; 2004) work showing that forms of care and advocacy enacted by working-class parents are often overlooked or misrecognised. My findings suggest that schools may privilege parental engagement that aligns with institutional expectations, such as homework support or formal meetings, while marginalising other valuable contributions. This illustrates how symbolic violence can operate not only on pupils but also on parents, with particular forms of support legitimised and others devalued.

For pupils, family was frequently described as the foundation of motivation, self-belief and values. P18 explained, *'my mum helps me when I don't get it, she makes me feel I can do it'*, while P27 recalled, *'my dad always says don't give up, just keep trying'*. Such accounts resonate with attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), which highlights how secure early relationships shape confidence and resilience, and with Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus, where enduring dispositions are rooted in early socialisation. Yet rather than treating family influence as a barrier to mobility, pupils in my research described it as a source of aspiration, security and motivation. Peer relationships also emerged as crucial. Pupils consistently linked happiness and confidence to peer acceptance: *'when you've got friends, it's easier to learn because you're not worrying'* (P22). This aligns with Putnam's (2000) concept of bonding social capital, which builds trust and mutual support within close groups. Importantly, several pupils suggested that maintaining these peer relationships was itself part of success, not just a background condition for academic progress. This challenges policy framings that present mobility as leaving original networks behind (DfE, 2022b), and echoes Clarke's (2020) argument that kindness and social cohesion underpin engagement. Teachers were also identified by the pupils as critical figures in pupils' relational worlds. P14 explained, *'when the teacher believes you can do it, you believe it too'*, highlighting the role of trust and encouragement. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory emphasises relatedness as a basic psychological need, and my findings extend this by showing how pupils themselves articulate

the connection between teacher belief and self-belief. Parents similarly recalled their children's most positive experiences in classrooms where they felt known as individuals. Conversely, when pupils felt unseen or unsupported, their motivation declined: *'it's harder when no one talks to you'* (P36). These accounts reinforce Reay's (2020) analysis of alienation in school cultures, as well as Simpson's (2023) argument that raising aspirations requires addressing relational barriers to belonging (2.2.5).

In summary, these findings indicate that participants positioned relationships not merely as instrumental to attainment but as constitutive of success in life itself. Success was described by parents as *'having people around you who care'* (PA10) and teachers as *'working together so everyone does well'* (TG2B), reflecting a collective and reciprocal model. This perspective extends existing research on social capital by foregrounding the quality of relational experiences and their role in shaping children's sense of capability and belonging. Recognising social capital in this way challenges deficit framings of families and communities as disadvantaged, highlights the richness of parental and peer support regardless of background, and underscores the need for schools to cultivate genuine partnerships with the families of their pupils. In this sense, social capital becomes a foundational dimension of what I later theorise as congruent capital: success grounded in alignment between values, relationships and meaningful action. Curriculum cannot be separated from the relational environments in which it is enacted. To nurture social capital, curriculum design and pedagogy must create space for sustained collaboration, trust-building and shared problem-solving, allowing every learner to experience academic growth through and alongside relational belonging.

5.4 Curriculum and Pedagogy: What, How, and With Whom should we learn?

In my research, the curriculum emerged as more than a list of subjects, knowledge or facts to be memorised. My research participants described it as a living framework that could either open or close possibilities for success in life. Their accounts showed how the curriculum interacts with the physical, embodied, relational and psychological dimensions explored in 5.1, shaping the knowledge, skills and dispositions that pupils develop. This section builds on the discussion in 5.1 but also builds towards the concept of congruent capital in 5.7 by examining how the primary school curriculum can foster resourcefulness, competence and ethical agency, enabling learners to navigate their present and future lives with confidence, purpose and success.

Alongside their wide-ranging subject preferences presented in 4.3.1 alongside the characteristics of effective learners in 4.2.4, pupils highlighted the dispositions and abilities they associated with success. P16 described the importance of having a *'passion for'* a subject, while P15SD linked mastery to entrepreneurial ambition: '*get really good at something'* and *'make a company about it and become rich' (P15SD)*. Several stressed the value of career awareness: *'I think you should learn about your choice of job you want to do because if you have a goal in life you would want to study that job'* (P7) (4.3.1). Pupils also emphasised questioning, reasoning and dialogue as something that you learn, a key part of creating a secure psychological environment and a characteristic of effective learning (4.2.3.3, 5.1.3). Furthermore, my pupil participants saw critical thinking and metacognitive activities as contributing to success in life, discussed again in 5.4.3. For P30, this meant the freedom to *'ask lots of questions'*, while P37 believed such approaches to teaching and learning could help people *'be happier in the future'*. These perspectives suggest that pupils located value not only in the knowledge they acquired but also in how that knowledge connected with their interests, ambitions and relationships. Parents and teachers echoed this desire for breadth and balance, though they often articulated it in terms of life skills and inclusion, particularly financial literacy, mental health, citizenship and social development. PA19QI summarised: *'I think you need the ability to think, reason and challenge yourself. Reading, writing and number work for financial literacy is also pretty key!'* (4.3.1). When discussing the curriculum, the teachers in my research, voiced concern about the overemphasis on English and maths within the statutory framework. TG3 described the curriculum as *'very restricted and restrictive for non-academic children'*, while

TG1B was frustrated that *'half the things we teach in the curriculum our children will probably never use again… but we've been told we have to'*. Instead, they advocated for *'useful knowledge'* (TG3) and transferable dispositions, defined by TG1A as *'knowing and finding out things that are useful to whatever you are doing at that particular time'*. These accounts show how pupils, parents and teachers converge in calling for a curriculum that goes beyond the canonical and measurable, making space for creativity, wellbeing and identity as essential dimensions of success (4.3.1, 4.4).

5.4.1 Skilful knowledge: motivating, integrated and multifunctional

While national policy often frames curriculum design as a binary choice between a 'knowledge-rich' approach (Gibb, 2016; Hirsch, 2016) and a skills-focused model that prioritises generic competencies, my findings about what, how and with whom pupils want to learn confirm that this binary is both misleading and unhelpful (4.3) which is also in line with key literature in 2.3. My participants acknowledged the importance of knowing facts but consistently framed these as tools for thinking and action rather than ends in themselves. '*It's not just about knowing stuff, it's about knowing what to do with it*' (P23, 4.3.1), one pupil explained. For some, this meant using knowledge to solve practical problems ('*if you know how to measure, you can make things work*', P19) (4.3.4), while for others it was about being able to respond imaginatively to unexpected challenges ('*we had to make a bridge out of paper. I liked figuring it out*' P14). Teachers reinforced this perspective, with TG3 noting that pupils '*light up*' when they can explore a topic in depth rather than skim content for test preparation (4.3.4). Pupils, parents and teachers alike described success in life as requiring both the acquisition of valuable knowledge and the ability to apply it with flexibility, creativity and good judgement, an integrated approach I am calling *skilful knowledge*.

My participants were clear that privileging certain forms of knowledge over others as identified in 2.3 and theorised by Bourdieu (1977; 1986) remains consequential for equity and inclusion in primary education in England. In my research, pupils excelling in art, sport or practical problem-solving often felt these abilities were marginal to what 'counts' in school. TG2B reflected, '*you can be brilliant at design or music, but if it's not tested, it's like it doesn't matter*'. This reflects Kirby's (2019) critique that subject hierarchies reproduce social advantage by valuing knowledge most accessible to those already aligned with middle-class cultural norms (2.2.6. 2.3.3).

This emphasis on depth and personal connection as curriculum also aligns with Deci and Ryan's (2000) argument that autonomy and perceived relevance are central to intrinsic motivation (2.2.3). Several participants perspectives in 4.4 contrasted this vision with their experience of a more restrictive curriculum and high stakes testing system '*Sometimes you learn it for the test and then forget it*' (P34) captured a sentiment echoed by others. TG1B described the current model as '*feeling like a conveyor belt*' and questioned whether pupils were retaining learning in a way that would serve them in life. Teachers' frustrations in my data echo Braun and Maguire's (2020) account of policy enactment as 'doing without believing' (2.4.2), where compliance with mandated curricula is maintained despite dissonance with professional values about assessment. This dynamic illustrates how performativity narrows curriculum design and erodes opportunities for congruent practice and reflect Kelly's (2009) warning in 2.3.3 that knowledge detached from lived experience risks disengagement, and alienation or misrecognition of learners as explained by Reay's (2020) observation that narrow knowledge priorities can marginalise those whose strengths lie outside the dominant frame (2.2.5). This marginalisation is not unique to England. Wyse and Ferrari (2015:233), in their comparative study of curricula across Europe and the UK, found that creativity and autonomy are consistently undervalued in systems dominated by prescribed knowledge and high stakes testing. Their analysis suggests that such curricular priorities not only constrain pupil motivation and engagement but also limit the broader dispositions that contribute to lifelong success. This aligns with Wyse and Ferrari's (2015) comparative analysis of national curricula across the EU and UK, which found that an emphasis on prescribed knowledge and measurable outcomes often sidelines creativity and applied learning (2.3.3). Such narrowing contrasts with the perspectives of teachers and parents in this study, who emphasised that knowledge becomes genuinely skilful when it is integrated with opportunities for application, imagination, and critical engagement as well as Manyukhina and Wyse's (2019, 2025) findings that knowledge gains educational significance when combined with structured autonomy and purposeful application. My data extends these arguments by showing how such autonomy might look in primary classrooms, for example, through project-based work where pupils identify their own research questions, or through practical tasks linked to community needs, such as planning a school garden or running a charity event. For my participants, their conceptions of skilful knowledge were never abstract but multifunctional in a way that enabled them to solve problems, care for others, contribute to their communities and adapt in the face of uncertainty. It was also relational, developing most

powerfully when pupils and teachers learned together in supportive, collaborative environments (5.1.3). In this way, skilful knowledge becomes a foundation for what I later theorise as congruent capital (5.7), because it aligns what is learned in school with pupils' sense of self, their relationships and their capacity for meaningful, happy and compassionate action in the wider world.

5.4.2 Practical and wise life skills: preparing for uncertainty

Alongside academic subject knowledge, across all parts of my participant groups there was a consistent identification of the importance of practical life skills as essential for both present wellbeing and long-term success in life. These ranged from financial literacy and budgeting to cooking, home economics, first aid, gardening and caring for the natural world. TG2B spoke of the importance of '*being able to go to the shop and budget correctly*', while PA15 wanted pupils to learn '*cooking, home economics, first aid and environmental care*', capacities rarely prioritised in official curriculum guidance but regarded by participants as essential for independence, wellbeing and success in life. This emphasis on practical and wise skills also linked to a desire by my participants for learners to foster competence and self-reliance, echoing my findings in 5.2.2 where self-esteem was linked to competence and mastering certain skills or knowledge. Pupils added their own aspirations, listing: cook, garden, blacksmith, often pairing these with art and science alongside English and maths (4.3.1). Teachers framed such skills as part of broader resilience, with TG3 remarking, '*If they can make and mend, they've got confidence they can cope*'. Pupils expressed similar priorities, linking these skills to self-reliance, '*I want to be able to look after myself*' (P29) and emotional wellbeing, '*gardening makes me happy and helps me calm down*' (P31). Teachers were seen to be the bridge between academic and practical domains, being seen by parents and pupils as being able to deliberately design opportunities for pupils to apply subject knowledge in real contexts and the teachers recognised the power of these experiences, for example, TG2B described with great enthusiasm a science project in which pupils investigated renewable energy and then built and tested small-scale wind turbines.. In philosophical terms, these findings also connect with Aristotle's concept of phronesis, described by Kenny (1995) as the capacity for practical reasoning and moral judgement, and with Dewey's (1916, 1938) argument that education should prepare pupils for democratic life by engaging them with real-world challenges or simply put: pupils thinking for themselves.

In my data, practical competence was never framed by my participants as optional curriculum enrichment, it was described as central to feeling prepared for and succeeding in life's unpredictability. Teachers often noted that the erosion of these opportunities left pupils over-reliant on consumerist solutions. By developing the resourcefulness to repair, grow or create, pupils could not only meet their needs in more sustainable ways but also resist the pressure to measure their own worth through ownership or consumption. This connection between resourcefulness, autonomy and happiness strengthens the link to 5.2.2, where competence was shown to underpin self-esteem and motivation to live a successful life. The wider literature supports this: materialism has been shown to decrease life satisfaction and wellbeing (*Doing Good Together*, 2019), while reducing materialism through practical capability can enhance both emotional and environmental wellbeing. Parents and teachers articulated this ethos clearly. PA15 explained, '*If they can fix things for themselves, they don't have to rely on someone else to do it*'. TG1A reflected that '*when they grow something, make something, or repair something, they remember it, it's theirs, it means something*'.

My findings extend this area from simply learning new skills to strengthening relational bonds and fostering an independence of mind and body as activities such as cooking together, tending a garden or repairing an item are inherently social, drawing on skill, knowledge and an enquiring 'have a go' attitude (4.2.4), as well as the capacity to learn from mistakes. They foster connection not only between peers, but also across generations and with the natural world, embedding practical competence within a network of multifunctional learning. In this sense, practical and wise life skills are not only tools for survival but part of a broader educational vision in which pupils, and teachers alongside them, are equipped to live well, contribute to their communities, and adapt with confidence to changing circumstances. This relational and ecological dimension, as I later argue in 5.7, is central to building congruent capital, because it connects what pupils can do with who they are, the people they value, and the world they inhabit.

5.4.3 Critical, creative and dialogic thinking: building meaning in community

The participants in my research consistently emphasised the value of thinking critically, creatively and reflectively as a dimension of success in life and to a certain extent the thinking skills highlighted here overlap with the characteristics of an effective learner in 4.2.4. Pupils spoke of '*being able to put up a good argument*' (P40PP), '*polite disputing*' (P34) and '*asking lots of questions*' (P30). Several described enjoyment in '*working together to solve a tricky problem*'

(P18), which connects with the collaborative dimension of dialogic learning. Teachers highlighted a wish that they had the time to be able to work with or on the imagination and originality or their pupils thinking: '*being able to think outside the box… not just following the pattern but coming up with new ideas*' (TG2B). This was illustrated in Table 16 which showed that over one-third of teachers responses highlighted problem solving and independence as important to learning for success in life. TG1A explained that pupils should be able *'to think for themselves, to take the learning the way they want to, to be independent'*. Such dispositions also resonate with wider research on creativity and criticality in the curriculum, which stress the importance of equipping learners not only with knowledge but with the capacities to use, adapt and question it (Wyse & Ferrari, 2015). These findings reflect traditions of dialogic education that emphasise thinking with others as well as for oneself. Pupils explained that talking through ideas with peers helped them to clarify their own thinking and to consider different perspectives: '*when we talk together you can see it different ways, and that helps you think better*' (P25) (4.3.3). This aligns with Alexander's (2004) argument that dialogic pedagogy creates collective spaces for reasoning and reflection, and with Mercer and Littleton's (2007) evidence that exploratory talk deepens learning. Cassidy (2017) extends this to the idea of critical being, where learners are able to question assumptions, evaluate competing claims and construct reasoned arguments.

For many participants, the significance of critical and creative thinking lay not only in its academic benefits but also in its civic and protective value. The OECD (2018:5) predicts that future societies will require individuals capable of navigating contradictory ideas, a capacity already evident in pupils' comments about '*finding out both sides before deciding*' (P17) and '*you have to check if it's true before you believe it*' (P33) (4.3.3). Cassidy (2018:210–211) warns that without such dispositions young people are more vulnerable to misinformation, uncritical conformity to other people's views and even harmful conspiracy thinking. My findings suggest that, even at primary level, pupils were already able to practise the habits of mind that underpin healthy scepticism, an ability to disagree as well as civic responsibility through the use of collaborative enquiry. Teachers also reflected on their role in creating the conditions for such thinking to thrive. Several described moving from a directive stance towards what TG3 called '*being more of a guide than a teller*'. TG3 explained that when they stepped back and allowed pupils to explore, '*you get better questions, more unexpected answers, and they start linking it to their own lives*' (4.3). This shift towards facilitation links to the creation of the relational climate described in 5.1.3, where trust and safety

enabled pupils to take intellectual risks. One teacher described using class debates on environmental issues to encourage pupils to '*think about what's fair for everyone, not just what works for you*' (TG3, 4.3.3). This illustrates the ethical dimension of dialogic pedagogy, where children practise fairness and responsibility as part of their intellectual development. Such practices connect again with Cigman's (2004) concept of *ethical confidence*, the ability to make judgements about what is right, to consider alternatives, and to act with integrity (2.2.3.1). They also echo Dewey's (1916) belief in education as preparation for democratic participation. In this sense, dialogic learning links cognitive, relational and moral dimensions, enabling pupils to embody fairness, responsibility and autonomy as lived dispositions, unrelated to 'legitimate' forms of capital. Pupils themselves connected these opportunities to confidence and belonging: '*it's easier to join in when you know your ideas matter*' (P26) (4.3.3). This reflects Manyukhina and Wyse's (2019) argument that structured freedom supports learner agency and extends it by showing how such spaces are also emotionally sustaining and relationally rich.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that critical, creative and dialogic thinking were understood by participants as integral to success in life, yet they remain precarious within a curriculum that prioritises standardisation and measurable outcomes. As Biesta (2010) argues, the qualification function of education is often privileged over socialisation and subjectification, squeezing out opportunities for independent thought. When thinking is reduced to correct answers, opportunities for creativity, fairness and ethical reasoning are diminished. By contrast, when schools provide dialogic and collaborative spaces, pupils can practise the very forms of judgement, scepticism and participation that underpin both academic learning and democratic life. This underscores the need for curricula that cultivate not only knowledge but also the critical and ethical capacities through which pupils can succeed in life alongside others in uncertain and interconnected futures.

5.5 Assessment, success and the risk of misrecognition

The literature in 2.4 shows that assessment remains one of the most powerful forces shaping the primary curriculum and classroom in England, influencing not only what is taught but also how success is defined and recognised. While it could be argued that it serves important functions, identifying learning needs, informing teaching, and providing accountability to parents and pupils, the findings in 4.4 reveal a persistent tension between these formal purposes and participants' broader definitions of success in life. Teachers in this research voiced frustration with the narrowing effect of high stakes testing, describing how reporting frameworks disproportionately privilege English and maths, leaving other subjects compressed into *'one little box'* on the report card (TG1B). TG2B expressed this succinctly: *'You can be as brilliant as you like at English and Maths, but if you can't function in society, then you will not be successful in life'* (4.4) which suggests that for pupils whose strengths lie in creative, practical, or relational domains, this marginalisation risks a form of misrecognition (Pada, 2017:18) where their capabilities are undervalued because they do not align with dominant metrics of success. Pupils rarely described tests as central to their own sense of success in life. Instead, they positioned them as something adults around them valued, signalling that what 'counts' in school is defined externally rather than through their own learning experiences. As one pupil explained, *'it's the teachers who care about the tests, not us…tests don't tell you if you are kind - SATs are for the school, not for me'*. (P2) (4.2.3.2). The concerns voiced by pupils, parents and teachers in Chapter Four illustrate the personal impact of assessment regimes with striking clarity. Several pupil responses reveal anxiety and disengagement linked to statutory tests. For example, one pupil admitted *'I get nervous before tests because if you get it wrong you feel like you're not good enough'* (P23), while another explained that *'if you don't pass the SATs it makes you feel like you've failed at everything'* (P33). Teachers, too, spoke of how such pressures narrowed their practice. TG3 noted that *'some pupils get sick of trying their best and not really succeeding in the things that appear to matter to teachers and the government'* (4.3.4 and 4.4), and TG1B warned that an overemphasis on English and maths meant that wider capacities for functioning in society were often overlooked. This reflects Stobart's (2008) critique of testing cultures that equate effort with deficit when outcomes do not meet externally imposed standards (2.3.3). Parents echoed these observations, describing how talents in areas such as art or caring for others were rarely acknowledged (PA16Q, PA17QI, 4.4). This distinction reflects Black and Wiliam's (2018) critique that assessment is too often separated from

pedagogy and used primarily as an accountability mechanism (2.2.2). Their work shows how classroom assessment, when genuinely integrated with teaching, can enhance motivation and deepen understanding. By contrast, the dominance of high stakes testing reinforces a performative culture in which pupils internalise the idea that success is measured by external criteria, even when this is incongruent with their lived priorities.

The ICAPE final report (Wyse, Bradbury and Trollope, 2022) discussed in 2.4.2 underscores this point, highlighting how current assessment practices in England are among the most test-heavy internationally, with limited evidence that they raise standards equitably. Instead, they disproportionately disadvantage lower-attaining pupils and narrow the curriculum, undermining inclusion. My findings echo these critiques, showing that participants valued a wider set of dispositions, kindness, compassion, creativity, fairness, that remain invisible in high-stakes systems. In line with the literature from Bradbury (2017; 2021) a genuine shift in assessment policy would require rethinking the weight given to standardised testing and performative practice in accountability frameworks, ensuring that schools are incentivised to develop and assess a richer conception of success. Without this, the risk remains that certain forms of capital, particularly those most valued by pupils and parents, such as resilience, kindness and social contribution, will continue to be marginalised. This tension between adult-imposed priorities and pupils' own conceptions of meaningful learning highlights how assessment practices can either support or erode congruence which aligns with the insights from 2.4.2, Wyse, Bradbury and Trollope (2022) who explain that assessment has the potential to enhance learning when integrated with pedagogy, but under current accountability regimes it too often reinforces a narrow conception of success. My research findings and this synthesis with the literature provides a useful lens for considering how schools might move towards forms of assessment that recognise the wider dispositions, relationships and capacities my participants associated in 4.4 with success in life. My findings extend this critique by showing how pupils recognised such priorities as externally imposed, rather than intrinsic to their own learning or aspirations. Taken together, these accounts suggest that assessment cannot be understood merely as a technical process of measurement but must be seen as a cultural and relational practice. When assessment aligns with pupils' sense of purpose and autonomy, it contributes to the development of congruent capital by validating what learners value in themselves and in their communities. When it does not, assessment risks dissonance: pupils learn that what matters to them is peripheral, and that their worth is judged through criteria they do not

share. This raises critical questions for how primary schools in England might design assessment practices that nurture not only attainment but also wellbeing, belonging and the capacity for ethical agency. This critique resonates with Cigman's (2001) argument that assessment systems which place children in constant comparison to one another can undermine self-esteem, particularly when success is narrowly defined in terms of measurable attainment. Cigman warns that such systems risk fostering a deficit identity in those who do not achieve at the expected level, framing them as lacking rather than recognising their existing strengths. The implications are both academic and psychological: pupils may disengage from learning if they feel their efforts and abilities are invisible in the measures that 'count'. Parents in this research echoed these concerns. Several observed that their children's abilities in areas such as art, sport, or social leadership were rarely acknowledged in school reports, despite being central to their confidence and motivation. PA16Q described how her child's enthusiasm for helping others in the community *'never gets mentioned'* in formal feedback, while PA17QI argued that *'caring and sharing is a vital part of school life'* but is not something schools are set up to assess.

Furthermore, as outlined in 4.2.4, H1 suggested that the *'characteristics of effective learning'* from the Early Years Foundation Stage where pupils build abilities in *'making links, being creative, concentrating'* should be embedded across all primary phases, seeing them as transferable skills essential for life beyond school. Such an approach aligns with wider literature in 2.2.1 calling for assessment to capture both cognitive and non-cognitive development (Duckworth et al., 2012), recognising that success in life encompasses more than academic attainment. Yet, the data also show that the link between existing assessment structures and opportunity is complex and cannot simply be severed as discussed in the findings surrounding institutionalised capital in 4.2.3.2 and Table 8 where more parents (60%) than teachers (43%) valued qualifications and external recognition as fundamental to success in life.

The way assessment shapes curriculum priorities also has direct implications for the development of cultural capital. When what is measured narrows to what is most easily tested, opportunities to build diverse and embodied forms of capital are constrained. As the findings in 4.2.4 demonstrate, pupils, parents and teachers often see success in life as rooted in dispositions, relationships and lived experiences, forms of capital that are less visible in standardised assessments. In this sense, assessment can either nurture congruent capital, when it validates what learners and their

communities value, or it can fracture it, when the worth of those dispositions is overlooked. The next section considers how cultural capital is conceptualised and enacted in the primary curriculum, and how these interpretations align or conflict with policy frameworks. Together, these accounts evidence what Honneth (Pada, 2017:18) terms misrecognition: when individuals' valued abilities are excluded from dominant metrics of success. The design implication is that assessment must move beyond exclusive reliance on high-stakes, summative tests and instead incorporate formative and dialogic modes that capture the dispositions pupils' prize. Low stakes talk tasks, for example, could provide insight into reasoning, creativity and collaboration, capacities consistently described by participants as central to success in life. Portfolios that combine written work, creative artefacts and reflective commentary would allow pupils to demonstrate growth across diverse domains. Peer and self-assessment could legitimise relational and ethical dimensions of learning by positioning children as co-evaluators of their own and others' contributions. Such practices would align more closely with the forms of success identified in 4.2, validating kindness, teamwork and adaptability alongside academic attainment. As Alexander (2010) argues for assessment to value dialogue and creativity, dimensions consistently marginalised in test-driven systems (2.4). In recognising assessment as both a cultural and relational practice, rather than merely a technical measurement.

5.6 Cultural capital and the curriculum

This section of the chapter directly relates to 4.3.2, and within it Table 15 which presents a snapshot of participant perspectives on cultural capital. It is notable that pupils did not use the term 'cultural capital' themselves, as I did not introduce this phrase in research conversations because I didn't want to pre-empt thinking, and they had not picked it up from their interactions with their teachers. Instead, their accounts revealed the forms of capital that mattered to them, happiness, fairness, relational opportunities and confidence, which I have explored throughout this chapter but sit uneasily with canonical definitions of embodied cultural capital. This gap underlines the risk of policy framings that privilege prescribed forms of knowledge over those recognised by children which are in receipt of the curriculum. In this sense, Ofsted's appropriation of Bourdieu decontextualises the concept, shifting it from a critical tool for analysing inequality to a policy slogan that risks re-legitimising hierarchies of knowledge and culture (2.2.1).

In 1.1 it was explained that the statement from Ofsted (2019) that schools must provide all learners with the 'knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life' was the spark for this thesis.

Yet, while the phrase has become part of the inspection discourse, my findings reveal persistent ambiguity about what cultural capital means in practice and how it should be enacted in the primary curriculum (4.2.3, 4.2.5). Teachers in my research interpreted the term in different ways, often linking it to enrichment activities, exposure to experiences, and access to language. As one explained: '*It's about enrichment… enrichment of language… learning… the arts—giving children opportunities they might not have in their lives… a wider perspective and greater accessibility in life*' (H2). Another reflected an alternative perspective, '*They're disadvantaged in the enrichment of family support, the enrichment of language… and the opportunities, clubs, trips to museums, there's this thing on cultural capital now in the curriculum*' (H1). Other teachers emphasised that cultural capital is not a fixed set of activities but context-dependent: '*What counts as cultural capital might be different in a different school… it might not be visits to the museum; it might be eating in a restaurant, going to the countryside… it does need money to buy these opportunities*' (H1). Similarly, TG1 admitted uncertainty about the definition but associated it with cultural participation: '*I don't know what you mean by cultural capital… I suppose it's the wealth of experience you get—concerts, theatre… making the most of our culture*' (TG1). Pupils, meanwhile, often framed enrichment in terms of access and fairness. Several described cultural opportunities as exciting but unevenly available: '*Some people get to go to shows and places all the time, and some people never get to go*' (P21). Others highlighted the way small experiences could feel transformative: '*When we went to the museum on the tram, it made me think I could do something like that when I'm older*' (P19). Parents echoed this emphasis on access. One commented that such opportunities should not be confined to a privileged few: '*If schools don't open those doors, then children from families like ours won't ever walk through them*' (PA12). These perspectives underline that cultural capital is not just about enrichment itself but about equity of provision and the recognition of different starting points. These accounts reflect Bourdieu's (1986) original formulation of cultural capital as dispositions, skills and cultural knowledge that confer advantage, but they also highlight the slippage in meaning when the term is used rhetorically in policy.

Teachers' references to enrichment activities such as concerts or trips resonate with Reay's (2004; 2020) critique that cultural capital is often reduced to middle-class cultural participation, risking deficit framings of working-class families. One headteacher was explicit about this risk: '*If you don't get a lot of cultural capital outside school… that is a disadvantage instantly… so we try to provide those experiences in our curriculum—music lessons, the other things we do*' (H2). This

reflects a common assumption that cultural capital is something schools must 'bestow' on disadvantaged children, a framing Yosso (2005) critiques as overlooking the existing community cultural wealth that many pupils bring. Crucially, some teachers questioned whether the policy pairing of 'knowledge and cultural capital' captures what children actually need. As one headteacher argued: '*You could know about the Renaissance… but that hasn't improved your ability to communicate or think abstractly. The key is being able to navigate society—thinking, social and communication skills*' (H2). Such comments resonate with Young's (2011) distinction between the 'knowledge of the powerful' and 'powerful knowledge', knowledge that enables pupils to act in the world. They also echo Manyukhina and Wyse's (2019) warning that curriculum framed narrowly around knowledge transmission risks marginalising agency, creativity and criticality (2.3.3).

Taken together, my findings show that cultural capital was interpreted by participants less as a canon of elite cultural references than as a set of opportunities to broaden horizons, build confidence and develop social and communicative skills. Teachers highlighted that while enrichment matters, cultural capital is most powerful when it is relational and embodied so that it nurtures confidence, belonging and the ability to participate meaningfully in society. In Bourdieu's (1990) terms, this points to the symbolic violence that occurs when dominant forms of capital are legitimised at the expense of others. Pupils whose strengths lie in relational or community-based forms of cultural capital risk being devalued when schools focus narrowly on elite knowledge or enrichment experiences (2.3). Meaning that while policy rhetoric frames cultural capital as a universal entitlement, in practice its dominant interpretations reproduce existing hierarchies, privileging middle-class forms of knowledge and participation. My findings suggest the need for a broader conception of cultural capital, one that includes relational, experiential and community-based forms, and recognises that all children already possess cultural capital, even if it does not align with the 'legitimate' forms valorised by schools (Reay, 2020; Yosso, 2005) (2.3.3).

Seen in this light, the policy statement that first prompted this research is both illuminating and problematic. It is illuminating because it foregrounds the link between curriculum, capital and success in life; it is problematic because it risks reducing this link to a narrow conception of enrichment and canonical knowledge. By re-examining cultural capital through the voices of pupils, parents and teachers, this thesis contributes to debates about the purpose of the primary curriculum. It suggests that rather than transmitting pre-defined forms of legitimate culture, schools

should cultivate congruent capital: the aligned assemblage of knowledge, abilities and dispositions by creating the conditions that enable pupils to flourish in ways that are both personally meaningful and socially inclusive. This is the focus of the next section (5.7), where I develop congruent capital as a theoretical contribution emerging from my findings.

5.7 Congruent capital: aligning people, places, pedagogy and curriculum

5.7.1 Origins in participant perspectives on success

The origins of congruent capital lie in the perspectives of the pupils, parents, teachers and headteachers who participated in my study. Their accounts reveal a consistent desire for education to make sense, to feel relevant and humane, and to offer conditions where values and actions can be sustained in harmony. This coherence is not captured in the Ofsted framework's undefined invocation of 'knowledge and cultural capital' (Ofsted, 2019), a phrase that sparked the research at the centre of this thesis. While Ofsted's reference was intended to signal high expectations, my research has discovered that its vagueness left schools uncertain about what was required and risked reducing cultural capital to a tokenistic accumulation of canonical knowledge. The voices in this study demonstrate why such framings are insufficient: they reduce success to external measures, whereas participants described it as an inner orientation toward coherence, belonging and contribution. The following sections trace how these perspectives inform the conceptualisation and practical application of congruent capital.

Pupils repeatedly foregrounded happiness, fairness and survival as dimensions of success. One pupil reflected that *'success is being happy with who you are and not pretending to be someone else'* (P14), while another argued that *'if everyone was treated fairly then more people would feel successful'* (P22). For others, success was bound up with meeting basic needs: *'you can't do well in life if you don't have food or shelter'* (Enq3). These comments suggest that success was not seen as an abstract status or future reward, but as a lived state of balance between wellbeing, fairness and security. Such a balance resonates with the philosophical tradition of equanimity, the steady state of mind described by Stoic thinkers as necessary for a successful life (2.2.3.1). Parents likewise emphasised alignment between values and action. One parent insisted that *'children need to feel safe and respected before they can succeed'* (PA9), while another linked success to the capacity to act responsibly: *'it's about making choices that don't just help yourself but also help others'* (PA12). These accounts echo Aristotle's idea of phronesis, or practical wisdom, where good

judgement arises from situating one's actions within a wider ethical horizon (2.2.3.1). Success here was understood not simply as a personal achievement, but as an ongoing negotiation of values and responsibilities. Teachers and headteachers were also sceptical of narrow definitions. In 4.2.5 one teacher's perceptions described how *'true success was about making the most of what you've got'* (TG2), emphasising sufficiency and self-acceptance rather than external validation. Another commented that *'acceptance with what I've got, not in a giving up, know your place type of way, but in a calm way'* (TG1) was central to their own sense of success. A headteacher drew this out further: *'if school is only about grades, then we are not preparing children for life. Success is knowing yourself and having the strength to stick by your values'* (H2) echoing Nussbaum's (2011:34) 'practical reason' in 2.4.1 as one of her central characteristics of success in life. Together, these perspectives reveal that success was not understood as an isolated trait or fixed endpoint, but as something relational and dynamic, shaped by the interaction of curriculum, pedagogy, relationships and environments.

Pupils valued projects that connected personal interests with contributions to their school or community, such as gardening, mentoring younger pupils, or taking part in environmental campaigns. One pupil explained that *'helping in the garden made me feel proud because it was for everyone, not just me'* (P31). Parents described the same dynamic in everyday terms: *'success is when my child learns something at school and comes home and uses it to help around the house or with their younger brother'* (PA4) another perspective came from PA18 who envisioned *'Wouldn't it be lovely if a child went, you know what, I love clearing up, I'm going to be a bin man and that was absolutely embraced… why should they have to aspire to be something that they're not interested in? … it might be you need to be kinder to somebody… or think about how you've helped other people around you'*. Teachers emphasised the importance of autonomy, competence and emotional safety in enabling such contributions, noting that *'children thrive when they feel trusted and when learning connects to their world'* (TG1).

It is from these insights that I introduce the concept of congruent capital: a form of capital that emerges when curriculum, pedagogy, relationships and learning environments align in ways that enable learners and teachers to connect who they are with what they do and how they interact with others. It is experienced as an internal sense of coherence grounded in self-understanding, reciprocal relationships and personally meaningful involvement in the world. Congruent capital is

therefore distinct from cultural capital as framed by Ofsted (2019). Where the latter remains vague and risks collapsing into a deficit-based view of what pupils' lack, congruent capital is generated through systemic alignment and is accessible to all. It reframes success not as assimilation into a dominant canon, but as the capacity to sustain coherence across personal purpose, social contribution and long-term wellbeing. This shift in emphasis, from possession of sanctioned knowledge to the lived experience of coherence, provides the foundation for operationalising the concept in the next section (5.7.2).

5.7.2 Operationalising congruent capital

Having traced its roots in participant perspectives, I now conceptualise congruent capital as arising when the conditions of schooling, curriculum choices, pedagogy, relationships and physical environments, enable learners to align their values, purposes and actions. In other words, congruent capital is not an attribute that pupils simply possess, but a dynamic resource generated through interaction and the creation of the right conditions or psychological spaces. It becomes visible when learners can connect who they are, what they do, and how their actions matter to others.

To operationalise this concept, three elements can be distinguished. First are the inputs, which include the design of the curriculum, the forms of pedagogy adopted, the needs of teachers, pupils and families as well as the wider school environment. For instance, opportunities for creative expression, collaborative enquiry, and emotional safety all serve as inputs that set the conditions for congruence. Second are the processes or characteristics of a congruent school: reflection, choice-making, dialogue and collaboration. These are the mechanisms through which pupils interpret their experiences and align them with their developing sense of self. Third are the outputs, which appear as alignment between values, purpose and action. These outcomes can be recognised in dispositions such as independence, fairness, kindness and resilience, but also in the confidence pupils show when articulating their own goals and justifying them in relation to others. P15SD's account of '*following your own dreams*' provides a vivid illustration of success in life as well P17's drawing which recognises the complexity of a successful life in Figure 14. Later in this chapter, I present Figure 15 which is a model that depicts congruent capital as a web of interdependence. Inputs such as curriculum breadth, dialogic pedagogy and supportive relationships feed into processes of reflection and collaboration, which in turn lead to outcomes of aligned purpose and action. This systemic framing echoes Meadows' (2008) description of systems as made up of interconnected

elements whose behaviour cannot be understood by studying parts in isolation. Congruent capital emerges not from a single input but from feedback loops between relationships, pedagogy and reflection. Capra and Luisi (2014) similarly argue that life systems are sustained by patterns of relationship, and Sterling (2003) frames education itself as a complex adaptive system where values and practices must remain in dynamic alignment if learners are to flourish. By walking through a single pathway in from social relationships to reflection to articulated purpose it becomes possible to see how congruent capital can be both cultivated and recognised. This framework offers a practical tool for educators and policymakers, moving beyond abstract theory to a model that captures how pupils can flourish when learning conditions support coherence between self, learning and contribution. The next section considers potential misinterpretations of the concept and clarifies its boundaries.

5.7.3 Boundaries and critique

Any new conceptual framework risks being misunderstood or co-opted. In the case of congruent capital, one possible misinterpretation is to view it as a variant of individual self-optimisation: the idea that pupils should continually align values and actions in order to maximise their own success. Such a reading would risk folding the concept back into the neoliberal logic critiqued by Ball (2003) and Gillies (2011) but promoted by Gibb (2015) where education becomes a vehicle for producing competitive, self-managing individuals. Participants in my research, however, articulated something different. Their accounts consistently emphasised congruence as embedded in relationships and happiness but oriented towards ethical contribution. As one pupil explained, *'if you have a goal, but you get it by hurting people, then that's not real success'* (Enq2, 4.2.2). Another insisted that *'success is being fair and happy, not just getting marks'* (Enq1, 4.3.4). These statements underline that congruent capital is not about maximising personal gain but about living in alignment with values in ways that respect others and the wider world.

A further risk is that congruent capital could be reduced to a checklist of desirable dispositions, similar to what Yosso (2005) warns against in deficit framings of cultural capital. Such codification would flatten the concept and obscure its dynamic, relational character. It acknowledges that flourishing requires alignment between personal values, social relationships and broader purposes, echoing Biesta's (2020) argument that education should prioritise subjectification and democratic participation over mere qualification and socialisation, and Pratt's (2016, 2.2.2) call for conceptions

of flourishing that avoid becoming another narrow performance measure running the risk of reproducing the very instrumentalism they aim to resist. My findings suggest instead that congruence emerges through dialogue, reflection and context. Parents, for example, framed success not as fixed achievement but as integrity: *'as long as she's happy and doing what she loves and is passionate about I will find her successful'* (PA1, 4.2.5). Teachers also linked success to adaptability: *'making the most of what you've got and being happy in life regardless of the hand life has dealt you'* (TG2A) (4.2.5). These perspectives highlight success as relationally and ethically grounded, not as a universalised trait to be imposed through conformity. In this sense, congruent capital resists neoliberal framings by foregrounding coherence and contribution rather than competition.

5.7.4 Positioning congruent capital in relation to existing theories

The concept of congruent capital can only be understood in relation to the theoretical traditions that precede it. Bourdieu's framework of economic, social and cultural capital (1986) has proved influential in analysing how advantage is reproduced through education. Yet its application to English curriculum policy, particularly in Ofsted's 2019 framework, has been selective and, at times, distorting. The rhetorical invocation of 'cultural capital' in policy documents rarely acknowledges Bourdieu's original emphasis on social reproduction, nor the institutional mechanisms that confer legitimacy on particular forms of knowledge and habitus (2.2.4). Instead, it tends to reduce cultural capital to a list of desirable cultural experiences or canonical texts, easily measured but detached from pupils' lived realities. Participants in this study repeatedly challenged such narrow definitions. Pupils often saw success in terms that exceeded accumulation of sanctioned knowledge. One observed that *'you can be really clever but still not be happy or kind'* (P19). Teachers voiced similar concerns: *'we're told to give children cultural capital, but it often feels like ticking off visits to museums rather than building their confidence to navigate life'* (TG1) (4.2.3.3). These reflections highlight a gap between Bourdieu's theoretical insight into the arbitrariness of valued culture and its superficial uptake in accountability frameworks.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) offers an important corrective by recognising the aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant capitals that exist within marginalised communities. Many of these were evident in participants' accounts. Parents spoke about perseverance as a form of success: *'my child has had to work twice as hard as others, but*

that determination is what will carry them through' (PA6) (4.3.4). Yet while Yosso's framework shifts the focus from deficit to asset, it too retains a classificatory orientation: capitals are listed and described as if discrete, and their interaction remains underdeveloped. What emerged strongly in this research was not simply the existence of multiple capitals, but the importance of coherence between them. A pupil put this powerfully: *'it's no good being good at sport if everyone thinks you're mean. You need to be the same person in all parts of your life'* (P23). Similarly, a teacher noted that *'when school values match family values, children feel stronger. When they clash, children feel torn'* (TG2). Such testimonies suggest that success is experienced not just in the accumulation of different capitals, but in their alignment across contexts. This is where congruent capital contributes. It highlights that what matters for learners is not simply possessing resources (economic, cultural or social), but sustaining a sense of congruence between their values, relationships, actions and environments. Congruence enables resilience without alienation, agency without mere compliance, and wellbeing without isolation. It provides an account of why some pupils thrive in systems designed to recognise only narrow forms of capital, while others experience dissonance even when they outwardly achieve. In contrast to Bourdieu's focus on reproduction and Yosso's celebration of alternative resources, congruent capital foregrounds alignment. It is less concerned with the legitimacy of cultural codes than with the lived coherence of identities and practices. In doing so, it resonates with Dewey's insistence that education should promote growth through continuity between experience and reflection (Dewey, 1938, 3.2.4), and with Nussbaum's (2011) capability approach (2.4.1), which frames flourishing as the ability to live a life one has reason to value. The emphasis on congruence also echoes philosophical traditions of equanimity and ataraxia, where success is not contingent on external status but on sustaining a steady orientation amidst life's uncertainties (2.4.1). In policy debates, this perspective challenges the narrowness of the Ofsted framework's (2019) interpretation of cultural capital. Where the framework risks encouraging tokenistic provision of sanctioned knowledge, congruent capital calls attention to the relational and systemic conditions that allow knowledge, skills and values to be integrated into meaningful lives. As one headteacher put it: *'the danger is we prepare children for a version of success that doesn't match their world. We should be helping them to connect their learning to who they want to be'* (H1) (4.3.2). This remark encapsulates the core argument: success cannot be reduced to cultural exposure or attainment metrics, but must be understood as coherence across personal purpose, social contribution and wellbeing.

5.7.5 Relational and systemic dimensions of congruent capital

A central feature of congruent capital is that it cannot be understood solely at the level of the individual. It emerges from the dynamic interplay between learners, teachers, families, environments and institutional frameworks. Participants consistently emphasised that success was not something one possessed in isolation, but something sustained through relationships and contexts. One pupil explained that *'you feel successful when your friends help you and you help them back'* (P8), while another observed that *'if everyone around you is miserable, then even if you do well, it doesn't feel like success'* (P30) (Enq3). Such comments point towards the relational constitution of success, where coherence depends on reciprocity and recognition.

Teachers echoed this importance placed in reciprocity. One noted that *'children thrive when home, school and community are pulling in the same direction'* (TG1). Another added: *'when we ask children to act one way in school and they see the opposite at home or on the street, they feel split. That's when behaviour problems start'* (TG2). Parents, too, spoke of the need for alignment: *'I want my child to see the same values of fairness and respect in school that we teach at home'* (PA11). These testimonies illustrate that congruent capital is relational, arising when different parts of a child's world reinforce rather than contradict one another. This relational dimension also requires us to consider systems. Meadows (2008) reminds us that systems are not simply aggregates of parts but complex structures where feedback loops and interdependencies determine outcomes (2.2). In education, small shifts in one part of the system, curriculum design, classroom culture, parental engagement, policy pressures, can have cascading effects on others. Participants' accounts resonate strongly with this systems perspective. One headteacher described: *'we try to build a culture where children feel safe, but the pressure from league tables and inspections can push us towards narrow teaching. That tension feeds right through the school'* (H2). Here the misalignment between policy demands and pastoral intentions disrupts the coherence necessary for congruent capital to flourish. Meadows also emphasises that leverage points for change in systems often lie not in superficial adjustments but in altering underlying goals and paradigms. Applying this to education, congruent capital highlights the importance of shifting from performativity-driven definitions of success to more holistic ones that prioritise coherence, wellbeing and contribution (Ball, 2003; Gillies, 2011). Pupils themselves articulated this leverage intuitively. One suggested: *'if teachers listened more to what makes us happy, school would feel more like it's for us'* (P5). Another commented: *'when we get to do projects about the environment, it feels real, like we're*

doing something that matters' (P34). These examples suggest that congruent capital grows when systemic goals are reframed around meaningful engagement rather than narrow attainment.

Relational and systemic dimensions also extend to peer cultures. Success, pupils noted, was fragile if it alienated friends. *'If you get a prize but everyone thinks you're a show-off, it's not worth it'* (Enq2). Conversely, collective achievements fostered strong feelings of congruence: *'our class worked together on the play, and everyone clapped, that was the best success'* (Enq2). Such moments illustrate Meadows' observation that systems are sustained by reinforcing feedback loops. Collective recognition builds further collaboration, while competitive individualism can breed resentment and fracture. The ecological metaphor is also instructive here. Just as ecosystems depend on balance, diversity and interdependence, so too does congruent capital (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Sterling, 2003). Parents often spoke of balance in terms of wellbeing: *'there's no point in pushing for grades if your child is anxious and can't sleep'* (PA15). Teachers expressed similar concerns: *'I worry about children who hit targets but are unhappy. That's not success, that's a system out of balance'* (TG1). These reflections underscore that congruent capital is not simply another resource to be accumulated but a systemic quality, sustained by alignment across multiple domains. Thus, congruent capital invites us to view education not as a linear transaction of knowledge but as a complex adaptive system. It foregrounds feedback, alignment and purpose, asking whether the structures of schooling generate coherence or dissonance in young people's lives. When coherence is present, when pupils' values, relationships, and learning experiences resonate with one another, the system supports flourishing. When absent, the system risks producing alienation, compliance without agency, and success that feels hollow or like failure.

5.7.6 Towards a working definition of congruent capital

The preceding sections have shown that congruent capital arises from the intersection of personal values, relationships, systemic conditions and philosophical orientations towards flourishing. Pupils, parents, teachers and headteachers each offered perspectives that, when brought together, point to a form of capital distinct from existing theories. What unites these perspectives is the insistence that success is not simply a matter of possession, of knowledge, wealth, contacts or credentials, but of coherence across the different domains of life. Participants frequently described this coherence in affective terms. Pupils spoke of happiness as central: *'success is when you feel happy with yourself, and others are happy with you too'* (P9). Others emphasised fairness: *'if you*

win by cheating, it's not really success' (P28). Parents highlighted integrity: *'my child needs to know they can live with their choices. That's more important than money'* (PA4). Teachers and headteachers reinforced this sense of alignment, stressing that incongruence leads to disaffection: *'the children who struggle most are often the ones trying to live two different lives, one at home, one at school'* (TG2). Together, these accounts underline that congruence is not an abstract ideal but a lived necessity. The distinction between congruence and compliance is also particularly significant. Manyukhina and Wyse's (2025) notion of structured freedom' captures well the paradox that children's agency requires both constraint and autonomy (2.4.1). Yet participants in this study suggested that agency cannot be reduced to navigating institutional structures; it must involve a steadiness or equanimity that allows children to act in ways consistent with their own values. As one pupil put it: *'it feels like success when you don't have to pretend'* (P15). This quality of authenticity distinguishes congruence from the adaptive compliance that schools often reward.

Philosophical traditions illuminate this further. The stoic pursuit of equanimity (ataraxia) and Aristotle's emphasis on practical wisdom (phronesis) both resonate with participants' understandings of success as steadiness, fairness and self-acceptance (2.2). Dewey's (1938) conception of education as growth through continuity between experience and reflection likewise aligns with parents' insistence that learning must connect with real life, and with pupils' desire for projects that *'*feel real*'*. Congruent capital thus situates itself within a broader lineage of thinking that links wellbeing and social contribution. From these perspectives, congruent capital can now be defined. It is the capacity, cultivated within supportive environments, to sustain alignment between values, actions and relationships in ways that promote both personal wellbeing and collective flourishing. Unlike Bourdieu's cultural capital, it is not primarily a mechanism of reproduction; unlike Yosso's community cultural wealth, it is not a catalogue of discrete resources. Instead, it is a dynamic quality that emerges when the different dimensions of a learner's life cohere. It is accessible to all, not as a fixed possession, but as an evolving capital that grows through congruent experiences of learning, recognition and belonging.

5.7.7 A systems perspective

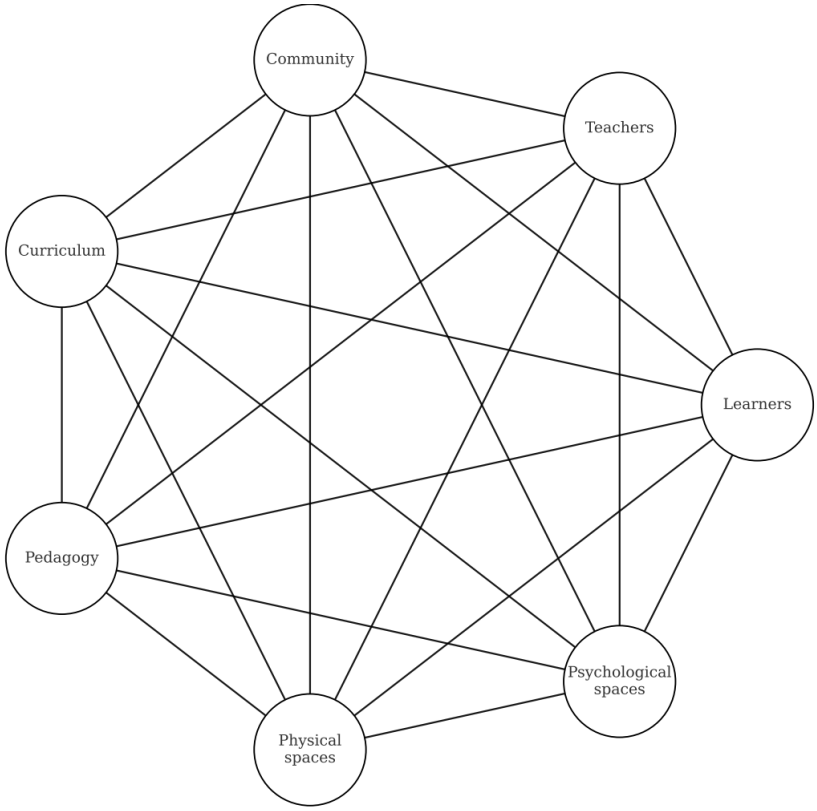

Figure 15: A web of interdependence – a systems approach to creating the conditions for congruent capital and success in life (Moses, 2025)

The systems perspective represented in Figure 15 above highlights that congruent capital is generated not through isolated interventions but through reciprocal feedback across curriculum, pedagogy, ethos and relationships. For instance, if curriculum is planned in abstraction from pedagogy, it risks becoming developmentally inappropriate or disengaging; conversely, when pedagogy is responsive and rooted in an ethos of safety, fun and belonging, pupils can see themselves and their futures reflected in what they learn. The model also makes visible the recursive effects of wellbeing within the system. When teachers are happy, less stressed, and feel fulfilled in their work, they are more likely to design creative and motivating learning experiences; these, in turn, foster pupil engagement, confidence, and happiness, which then feedback positively into the school ethos and even the wider curriculum. Similarly, when pupils are given opportunities to contribute their voices to classroom practice, they influence not only their own learning but also

the pedagogical approaches and relational culture of the school. This perspective shows congruent capital as a dynamic system in which success in life emerges through ongoing alignment of values, practices and wellbeing across all levels of the school community.

To illustrate how the web in Figure 15 functions, consider a single pathway that several participants' accounts make visible. When the curriculum offers opportunities for creative expression (input), and pedagogy provides dialogic space for pupils to share and reflect (process), this enables outcomes such as confidence, fairness and resilience. For example, P16 explained that *'I love doing art lessons because it gives me time to be myself'*, while P39PP emphasised that *'being able to put up a good argument'* made them feel prepared for future life (4.3.1, 4.2.4). These outcomes do not remain isolated; they loop back into the system by strengthening relationships, fostering peer recognition, and feeding pupils' motivation to engage with further curriculum challenges. In this way, congruent capital becomes self-reinforcing: when values, actions and contributions align, the system generates positive feedback that supports both individual wellbeing and collective flourishing. Meadows (2008) identifies such reinforcing feedback loops as critical leverage points in systems change, and participants' testimonies show how relatively small design choices, such as integrating art or enquiry-based tasks, can ripple outwards to shape ethos, belonging and even parental engagement. The model also draws attention to the role of parents in sustaining congruent capital. When parents feel respected and listened to by schools, they are more likely to reinforce positive messages at home, contribute their own cultural and experiential knowledge, and support their children's learning with confidence. For example, a parent who feels welcome in school and recognises that their family culture is valued within the curriculum may be more inclined to engage in conversations about learning at home, attend events, or encourage their child's attendance. This support strengthens pupils' sense of belonging and motivation, which in turn enhances classroom engagement and feeds back into pedagogy and ethos. Conversely, when parents feel excluded or marginalised, tensions can arise that undermine trust and reduce the coherence of support available to pupils. The systems approach therefore recognises that congruent capital depends on aligning relationships across home and school, ensuring that curriculum, pedagogy and ethos are responsive not only to developmental needs but also to familial and cultural contexts. Taken together, these examples underline that success in life cannot be reduced to outcomes measured in isolation but depends on the quality of both psychological and physical

spaces in which pupils, parents and teachers interact, and on the systemic alignment that enables congruent capital to flourish.

In summary, congruent capital offers a way of conceptualising success in life that aligns more closely with the lives and aspirations of pupils than with prevailing policy definitions of social mobility and legitimate cultural capital. It is grounded in self-understanding, sustained by reciprocal relationships and reinforced when learning feels meaningful and is experienced at a human scale. Unlike more established forms of capital, it explicitly addresses the internal coherence that comes from knowing oneself and acting in line with personal values. This understanding responds directly to the central question of this thesis, *what does it mean to succeed in life?* and to the consistent message from participants that education should make sense to those living it. It offers a conceptual lens for identifying when school experiences fall short, and a developmental framework for designing learning environments that nurture this form of capital. This approach reinforces the imperative of inclusion of all learners, regardless of background or ability, and supports a shift toward what Kayukov (2016:7065) calls *'*the capacity and confidence to be integrally successful' as a guiding motivation for curriculum design. It also provides a credible response to the concerns voiced by PA18, who argued that the English primary education system *'is broken'* and *'needs a total hard reset'* (PA18). The value of congruent capital lies not only in theory but in practice. The next chapter therefore considers how English primary education might cultivate the conditions in which congruent capital can operate and generate, translating these insights into recommendations for policy, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and school culture. In doing so, it aims to ensure that all learners, regardless of background or ability, have the opportunity to align who they are with what they know, and how they act in the world.

Chapter Six: Concluding thoughts

6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together the synthesis of findings and literature presented in Chapter Five to articulate the contributions of my research to knowledge, policy, and practice. It also brings the thesis as a whole towards concluding reflections, offering evidence-based recommendations that emerge from the perspectives of pupils, parents, and teachers. My research set out to explore how pupils, parents, and teachers in two English primary schools understand the concept of 'success in life' and how these understandings intersect with the curriculum and wider educational policy environment.

The analysis in Chapter Five suggests that 'success in life', as perceived by participants, is a multifaceted concept encompassing personal wellbeing, social connection, competence and the ability to navigate uncertainty. These perceptions both align with and challenge dominant policy discourses, including those embedded in Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (2019). This chapter begins by summarising the key findings, then outlines the research's contributions, before presenting recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

6.2 Summary of key findings

Before outlining the contributions of this research, it is important to briefly restate the key findings that emerged from the synthesis of data and literature in Chapter Five. This provides a concise reminder of the central themes at the point of transition into contributions and recommendations and ensures clarity by gathering together the main findings in one place. A phenomenological analysis in Chapter Five showed that success in life was understood not as a fixed destination but as a dynamic and relational process. Participants emphasised the importance of stimulating learning environments that supported wellbeing and inclusion. Pupils described schools as places where they should feel '*free to ask questions*' (P6), while parents and teachers stressed that safe, supportive contexts were foundational to learning. Success was also described in embodied terms. Pupils linked it closely to happiness, with one remarking that '*without happiness, you can't really do anything*' (P22PP). Parents highlighted family support and social confidence, while teachers emphasised competence and self-esteem, noting that success might require different pathways for

different learners. Across groups, dispositions such as resilience, adaptability and compassion were consistently valued. Secondly, participants called for a curriculum that integrated academic knowledge with practical experience and problem solving. Pupils explained that '*it's not just about knowing stuff, it's about knowing what to do with it*' (P23). Parents emphasised life skills such as budgeting and cooking, while teachers stressed the need for breadth, creativity and relevance beyond preparation for tests.

Thirdly, assessment was widely criticised when reduced to narrow testing in the core subjects. Parents and teachers argued that such practices distorted recognition of achievement, while pupils valued applied projects and collaborative activities with tangible outcomes. Finally, participants across all groups in my research pointed towards the potential for what this research conceptualises as congruent capital: the capacity that emerges when curriculum, pedagogy, relationships and environments align in ways that connect learners with their values, actions and contributions to others. In these accounts, success was experienced not only as personal fulfilment but also as belonging and shared responsibility

6.3 Contributions to knowledge

Building on this foundation, my research makes three main contributions to knowledge.

Empirical contribution

My research provides new insights into how pupils, parents, and teachers in two contrasting English primary schools conceptualise 'success in life'. While existing research often foregrounds either policy perspectives or outcomes measured through attainment (Reay, 2010; Clarke, 2020), my research illuminates how success is understood in the real-life experiences of those closest to the primary school system. By bringing together multiple stakeholder perspectives, the research identifies both areas of convergence, such as the emphasis on happiness, recognition, and relational belonging, and areas of divergence, for instance in how cultural capital is framed by teachers compared to parents and pupils (5.6). These empirical findings add depth to existing work on curriculum aims, learner agency and wellbeing in primary education by showing how success is perceived not as a single outcome but as a multifaceted blend of personal, social and institutional dimensions. The inclusion of parents' voices in particular offers a distinctive contribution, as

parental perspectives are often absent in research on curriculum and capital yet proved vital in revealing how success in life is framed within family as well as school contexts.

Theoretical contribution

A central theoretical contribution of this thesis is the conceptualisation of congruent capital. Existing frameworks provide important starting points but do not fully capture the phenomena described by participants. Bourdieu's (1986) model of cultural, social, and economic capital highlights the transmission of advantage through legitimate forms of knowledge and embodied dispositions, but it offers limited space for alignment between values, wellbeing and purposeful contribution by learners to society in later life. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework widens recognition to include aspirational, navigational, and resistant capitals, yet participants in my research placed particular emphasis on happiness, compassion, fairness, and the alignment of personal goals with community action (5.2.3; 5.7.1). Congruent capital addresses these gaps by offering a way of theorising success that emerges through the systemic alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, relationships and environments. It is felt when pupils and teachers can connect who they are with what they do and how they contribute to others as well as the wider world. The concept therefore extends debates about cultural capital by reframing success not as assimilation into dominant norms, or failure as a reaction against these norms, but as coherence between personal meaning, educational practice and social participation.

Methodological contribution

The theoretical framework (3.2) for my research advances methodological knowledge by developing and applying a new approach I term *pragmatic phenomenology*. Pragmatic phenomenology is an approach developed in this research that combines the phenomenological aim of striving to find the essences of participants' perceptions with an added pragmatic orientation towards producing findings that are educationally useful. It retains the depth of phenomenological description while integrating analytic tools, such as capital-based coding, to situate participants' accounts within broader social and curricular contexts.

The contribution of my methodology lies in two aspects. First, the analysis combined phenomenological methods of iterative reading, re-reading and reflective synthesis with a capital-based coding framework. This integration enabled me to identify the essences of pupils', parents'

and teachers' understandings of success in life, while situating them within wider sociological debates about advantage, equity and curriculum purpose. Second, the design incorporated dialogic and participatory methods, including philosophical enquiry and imaginative variation exercises, which enabled children to reflect more deeply on their values and priorities. These methods supported pupils to move beyond immediate preferences to considered judgements about what matters in a successful life, illustrating the potential of pragmatic phenomenology to enrich research with younger participants. Taken together, this research demonstrates how pragmatic phenomenology can bridge the gap between phenomenological depth and practical applicability, offering a methodological innovation for educational research that is attentive to participants' perceptions while also oriented towards actionable knowledge.

6.4 Limitations of the research and transferability

Here I acknowledge the limitations of my study so that the findings can be interpreted with appropriate awareness. Firstly, the findings of my research are context-specific and cannot be assumed to represent all schools or communities. The study involved two primary schools in the Northwest of England, each with its own demographic and cultural profile. While this limits the generalisability of the findings, the 70 individuals who took part, 45 pupils, seven teachers, two headteachers and 20 parents, were generous with their time and open in sharing their perceptions.

The sample of teachers was limited to those working directly with the pupil participants, meaning that only five class teachers and two headteachers were interviewed. The busy schedules and professional commitments of these teachers made it difficult to secure further involvement, such as follow-up conversations or individual questionnaires. However, the teachers who did participate provided exceptionally detailed and reflective accounts that contributed significantly to the depth of the analysis. A further limitation was the lack of comprehensive demographic data for the parent participants. As explained in 3.3, the decision not to request detailed demographic information was taken in consultation with the schools, who felt that collecting such data might deter parents from participating. As a lone researcher dependent on school support, I respected these constraints. While this decision prioritised participation and trust, it also means that certain demographic patterns could not be analysed.

Although the findings are not statistically generalisable, they may be considered transferable. Drisko (2024) explains that transferability is established when sufficient detail about the research context is provided to allow readers to judge whether insights are relevant to their own settings. In this study, the richness of participants' accounts and the thick description of school contexts offer a basis for comparison. For educators and researchers working in similar primary school environments, the findings may resonate and suggest implications that extend beyond the two schools studied.

6.5 Recommendations for practice and policy

The following recommendations are derived directly from the perceptions and experiences of pupils, parents and teachers in my research. They are organised around the areas developed in Chapter Five, though the headings here have been adapted to highlight their practical and policy relevance. In Chapter Five the analysis was structured around spaces and pedagogy, the embodiment of success in life, social capital, curriculum, assessment, and cultural capital. The recommendations presented below follow the same broad lines but are grouped under headings designed to make them actionable: Spaces, people and pedagogy (5.1, 6.5.1); Embodiment of success in life (5.2, 6.5.2); the importance of positive relationships (5.3, 6.5.3); Curriculum (5.4, 6.5.4); and Assessment and recognition (5.5, 6.5.5). Across all areas, a unifying thread is the potential for what this thesis has conceptualised as congruent capital (5.7): the capacity that emerges when curriculum, pedagogy, relationships and environments align in ways that connect learners and teachers with who they are, what they do and how they interact with others as well as the wider world. The sections that follow outline recommendations for practice and policy in each of these areas.

6.5.1 Spaces, people, and pedagogy

Participants in my research viewed safe, stimulating and inclusive environments, both physical and psychological, as foundational to success in life. The accounts of pupils, parents and teachers highlighted that success was not experienced only through academic outcomes but through the quality of the spaces in which learning took place and the relationships that were fostered within them.

- **Design and maintain adaptable learning environments that support both collaborative and independent work.** Pupils spoke about the importance of spaces where they could *'move about, talk to friends and work things out together'* (P23), while teachers described the constraints of classrooms arranged primarily for efficiency rather than engagement. Adaptable spaces were seen as directly influencing confidence, creativity, and a sense of belonging.

  Recommendation for policy makers and school leaders: prioritise investment in flexible, naturally well-lit environments that allow for collaboration and independent learning, both inside and out, ensuring that classroom spaces actively support engagement and belonging (5.1.1).

- **Recognise and value diverse learner identities through inclusive pedagogies and curriculum representation.** Pupils frequently linked success in life to *'being yourself'* (P26) and feeling accepted, while parents stressed that recognition mattered as much as achievement. Teachers described inclusion as central to participation, noting that when children did not feel seen they often disengaged from learning.

  Recommendation for teachers and school leaders: adopt inclusive pedagogies, ensure curriculum content reflects pupils' cultural backgrounds, and celebrate varied strengths in the classroom.

  Recommendation for policy makers: support frameworks that encourage inclusive representation across the curriculum (5.1.2).

- **Embed wellbeing-promoting practices in daily routines for both pupils and staff.** Participants consistently connected psychological wellbeing to success in life, with one pupil insisting that *'happiness is essential; without it, you are not motivated'* (P35). Teachers also recognised that their own wellbeing directly influenced classroom climate, with TG3 noting that workload pressures reduced their capacity to make lessons enjoyable and responsive. Daily practices that build trust, belonging and enjoyment, such as structured outdoor time, collaborative dialogue, or wellbeing check-ins, were described as integral rather than optional.

Recommendation for policy makers, school leaders and teachers: embed wellbeing practices into the daily rhythm of schooling, not as add-ons but as core elements of pedagogy (5.1.3).

- **Reduce administrative burdens so teachers can focus on relationships and high-quality learning experiences.** Teachers spoke candidly about the pressures of paperwork and accountability requirements, with one remarking, *'we spend so much time on assessment that we can't think about how to make lessons fun'* (TG2). Parents and pupils alike emphasised the value of relational teaching, where teachers knew pupils well and engaged beyond formal lessons.

  Recommendation for policy makers and school leaders: reduce administrative demands on teachers to enable more time for building relationships, preparing stimulating learning activities, and engaging more deeply with pupils (5.1.3).

Together, these recommendations reflect participants' conviction that success in life begins with the quality of the physical and psychological environments in which children learn and the people who shape those environments. When such environments align with pedagogy and relationships, they create the conditions for congruent capital to emerge by enabling pupils and teachers to connect who they are with what they do (5.7).

6.5.2 Embodiment of success in life

Participants in my research consistently described success in embodied terms, linking it to happiness, self-esteem, resilience, and strong social relationships. These qualities were understood as both outcomes of learning and preconditions for it. Pupils, parents, and teachers each emphasised that success in life was not reducible to academic achievement but emerged from dispositions and experiences that made learning feel worthwhile and sustainable.

- **Incorporate joy, play and positive emotional experiences as legitimate curriculum aims.** Pupils described happiness as essential for learning: *'without happiness, you can't really do anything'* (P22PP), and *'happiness is essential; without it, you are not motivated'* (P35/3). Parents also emphasised that children's sense of enjoyment and wellbeing shaped how they

engaged with school. Teachers highlighted how laughter and playfulness made classrooms more responsive and memorable.

> **Recommendation for policy makers, school leaders and teachers:** recognise joy and wellbeing as legitimate curriculum aims, embedding opportunities for play, discovery and fun into everyday classroom practice (5.2.1).

- **Provide competence-building experiences across a range of domains.** Pupils and teachers linked confidence and self-esteem to achieving goals, not only in academic subjects but also in art, sport and problem-solving. One pupil explained that *'without believing in yourself... even if you have succeeded, you won't recognise it'* (Enq3). Parents stressed that success involved *'being able to function in society'* (PA17QI), while teachers noted that experiences of competence foster resilience and motivation.

  > **Recommendation for school leaders and teachers:** ensure that competence is developed and recognised across diverse domains, so that pupils' self-esteem is not tied exclusively to performance in English and maths (5.2.2).

- **Support resilience through realistic challenges and scaffolding.** Pupils spoke about *'trying again even when you get it wrong'* (P33) and *'not giving up when it's hard'* (P17), while parents emphasised persistence and adaptability as vital to long-term success. Teachers, however, cautioned against equating resilience solely with endurance in stressful environments, noting the risk of valorising compliance or endurance under pressure.

  > **Recommendation for school leaders and teachers:** frame resilience as adaptive problem-solving and reflective action, supported by scaffolding and encouragement, rather than rewarding endurance in high stakes contexts (5.2.4).

Together, these recommendations highlight that success in life, as described by participants, is deeply embodied. When schools create opportunities for joy, competence and compassionate action, they foster wellbeing and self-belief while equipping children with the dispositions needed to navigate challenge. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for congruent capital by aligning pupils' personal values with their everyday experiences of learning.

6.5.3 The importance of positive relationships throughout the school community

Participants in my research consistently positioned relationships as central to success in life. Pupils described friendship and belonging as essential to learning and wellbeing, while parents highlighted the developmental benefits of family support, encouragement and partnership with schools. Teachers emphasised their own role in fostering confidence through advocacy and trust. Across all groups, relationships were not simply seen as a backdrop to academic achievement but as constitutive of success itself, shaping how children experienced school and how they viewed their future opportunities.

- **Value unstructured time and relationships.** Pupils frequently associated success with friendship and belonging: 'when you've got friends, it's easier to learn because you're not worrying' (P22). Parents reinforced this view by pointing to the importance of free play, nature connection and informal collaboration, while teachers and pupils noted that unstructured time allowed children to practise and build social skills.

  Recommendation for parents and school leaders: protect time for unstructured play, outdoor activities and peer interaction as integral to development, rather than treating them as optional extras (5.2.1; 5.3).

- **Strengthen family–school partnerships.** Parents described success as rooted in collaboration and trust, stressing that '*parents should be partners with the school, not just expected to be mini teachers at home*' (PA19). Teachers echoed this, noting that encouragement and advocacy from families often gave children '*that little bit of a boost*' (TG1B).

  Recommendation for school leaders and policymakers: create varied and flexible opportunities for parental engagement, recognising diverse forms of support beyond homework and attendance at formal meetings, and valuing these equally in school–home partnerships (5.3).

- **Prioritise belonging and peer support**. Pupils often linked confidence and motivation to peer acceptance, describing success not only as individual achievement but as collective support: 'working together so everyone does well' (TG2B).

Recommendation for teachers: foster inclusive peer cultures through collaborative projects, cooperative problem-solving and mixed-age activities, ensuring that belonging is understood as central to learning, not peripheral (5.3).

- **Protect relational pedagogy.** Pupils and parents often recalled their most positive experiences in classrooms where teachers listened and encouraged them: '*when the teacher believes you can do it; you believe it too*' (P14). Teachers, however, cautioned that accountability pressures risked narrowing these interactions.

  Recommendation for policymakers and school leaders: safeguard time and space for relational teaching by resisting over-narrow accountability measures, enabling teachers to build trust, encourage pupils and engage in meaningful dialogue (5.3).

These recommendations show that my participants perceived success in life as highly relational. Pupils, parents and teachers consistently emphasised that friendship, belonging and trust were as vital to learning as knowledge itself. By nurturing social capital in ways that recognise diverse forms of support and encourage genuine partnership, schools create the conditions for congruent capital to emerge, where children's values and identities are reinforced through the quality of their relationships with peers, families and teachers.

6.5.4 Curriculum

Participants consistently called for a curriculum that integrates academic knowledge with practical life skills, critical and creative thinking, and cultural inclusivity. They wanted learning to be both rigorous and meaningful, with space for pupils to see themselves reflected and to contribute to the wider world. Teachers, parents and pupils alike described a curriculum that was too narrow when confined to core subjects or test preparation, and instead argued for approaches that built competence, creativity and agency.

- **Integrate academic knowledge with purposeful, real-world applications.** Pupils stressed the importance of learning that connects to life beyond the classroom. One explained, *'it's not just about knowing stuff, it's about knowing what to do with it'* (P23). Teachers echoed this, noting that children engaged more deeply when tasks had practical or community relevance, such as projects on local energy or designing a school garden. Parents also wanted schools to prepare

pupils for everyday life, emphasising budgeting, cooking, and environmental care as equally valuable to academic knowledge.

> **Recommendation for policy makers and school leaders:** support curriculum frameworks that combine academic rigour with real-world applications, ensuring that relevance and meaning are explicit outcomes.
>
> **Recommendation for teachers:** design opportunities for pupils to apply knowledge in authentic contexts, linking subject learning with competent and practical life skills and community projects (5.2.2).

- **Foster critical, creative, and dialogic thinking across all subjects.** Pupils valued opportunities to ask questions, debate ideas, and think differently, with P34 describing *'polite disputing'* as central to learning, and P30 highlighting the importance of *'asking lots of questions'*. Teachers emphasised the role of facilitation, with TG5 noting that stepping back as a '*guide rather than a teller*' encouraged richer enquiry and deeper learning. Parents also wanted schools to nurture curiosity and problem-solving, not just factual recall. Sustained opportunities for exploratory dialogue and creativity were seen as vital for success in life.

  > **Recommendation for teachers and school leaders:** embed dialogic and creative approaches across the curriculum, supported by sustained professional development for all staff.
  >
  > **Recommendation for policy makers:** incentivise pedagogies that develop critical and creative thinking rather than privileging test preparation (5.2.2; 5.4.3).

- **Diversify cultural content to reflect the experiences and interests of pupils.** Pupils often described cultural enrichment in terms of fairness and access, noting that *'some people get to go to shows and places all the time, and some people never get to go'* (P21). Parents called for cultural opportunities to be more inclusive, arguing that otherwise their children risked being left out of experiences valued by schools and society. Teachers were divided: some saw cultural capital as enrichment trips and exposure to elite knowledge, while others argued for broader definitions that included everyday experiences and community knowledge. One headteacher

challenged narrow policy framings, remarking, *'you could know about the Renaissance… but that hasn't improved your ability to communicate and navigate life'* (H2).

> **Recommendation for policy makers and school leaders:** move beyond monocultural interpretations of cultural capital by diversifying curriculum content to reflect pupils' lived experiences and community wealth.
>
> **Recommendation for teachers:** ensure classroom practices value multiple forms of cultural knowledge and experience, not just those privileged by inspection frameworks or dominant parts of society (5.2.3; 5.6).

- **Enable pupil agency in learning design.** Pupils expressed enthusiasm for projects where they could shape the direction of their work, explaining that it felt more meaningful when they had choice. For example, one group described how planning a fundraising event gave them responsibility and a sense of contribution to the school community. Teachers also reflected that co-designed projects encouraged motivation and independence, with TG3 observing that pupils *'light up'* when they get to explore something in depth. Parents noted that when children felt ownership of their learning, they became more confident and resourceful at home.

  > **Recommendation for teachers and pupils:** collaborate in co-designing multifunctional projects that combine cognitive, social and emotional development through subject rigour alongside problem solving.
  >
  > **Recommendation for school leaders:** protect curriculum time for pupil-led enquiry and project-based learning so that agency is more than a token gesture (5.2.2; 5.2.3).

Together, these recommendations reflect participants' call for a curriculum that is both academically rigorous and personally meaningful. Success in life was described not simply as acquiring knowledge, but as being able to use, question, and share it in ways that build competence, confidence, and contribution. Such alignment of knowledge, pedagogy and personal meaning illustrates the potential for congruent capital to emerge through curriculum design (5.7).

6.5.5 Assessment and recognition

- Participants across all groups viewed high stakes testing as a constraint on meaningful learning and as too narrow a way of recognising whether what is provided will enable success in life. Pupils rarely spoke of statutory tests as important to them; instead, they valued applied projects, creative work and visible outcomes of their learning. Parents and teachers both expressed concern that current assessment systems privileged a limited set of academic outcomes in core subjects at the expense of recognising broader abilities, interests and dispositions.

  Adopt holistic, formative approaches that capture a broader range of learner achievements and dispositions. Pupils in my research rarely mentioned SATs or formal tests as goals in themselves. Instead, they highlighted projects and collaborative tasks where their contributions were visible, such as group debates or making things to share with others. Parents echoed this view, with PA16Q noting that her child's enthusiasm for helping others in the community never gets mentioned in reports. Teachers also expressed frustration that recognition of creativity, empathy, or problem-solving was crowded out by the emphasis on English and maths. One headteacher (H1) argued that the *'characteristics of effective learning'* from the Early Years Foundation Stage, such as playing and exploring, active learning, having a go and thinking critically, should be embedded across all primary phases, as they capture skills that are crucial to long-term success but currently fade from view after EYFS.

  > **Recommendation for policy makers and school leaders:** broaden assessment systems so that they capture social, emotional and practical dimensions of learning, not only academic attainment. Extend existing broader frameworks such as the EYFS 'characteristics of effective learning' across all primary phases (5.2.4; 5.5).

- Recognise and celebrate diverse forms of success. Pupils frequently spoke about the satisfaction of completing projects, helping peers, or contributing to school life. One explained, *'I like when you can see what you've made or done'* (**Enq3**), while teachers described how pupils gained confidence when achievements in the arts, sports or wider school life were noticed. Parents wanted schools to celebrate personal growth and contribution to others or the wider community, not just test results.

Recommendation for school leaders and teachers: develop recognition systems that value creativity, collaboration and social contribution alongside academic outcomes, for example, through portfolios, exhibitions or community engagement (5.2.4; 5.5).

- Use assessment as a tool for reflection and goal-setting. Pupils described success as *'achieving the goals you set yourself'* (P39PP), linking assessment to personal progress rather than comparison. Teachers suggested that assessment could foster metacognitive awareness if framed around self-reflection and next steps, rather than accountability alone. Parents supported this view, seeing reflective goal setting as more motivating for children than grades or levels.

  Recommendation for teachers: embed reflective and formative assessment practices that help pupils set goals, recognise progress, and connect learning to their own values and interests.

  Recommendation for school leaders and policy makers: ensure accountability systems make space for and recognise reflective assessment, rather than positioning it only as a bureaucratic requirement (5.2.4; 5.5).

Together, these recommendations reflect participants' desire for assessment to be reoriented towards learning, growth and recognition of diverse contributions. When assessment validates the skills and values most meaningful to pupils, parents and teachers, it sustains congruent capital by aligning personal goals with recognition and feedback. Rolling out the EYFS 'characteristics of effective learning' across all primary phases could provide a practical framework for embedding this alignment consistently (5.7).

Taken together, these recommendations demonstrate that participants wanted schools to operate as coherent systems where spaces, relationships, pedagogy and curriculum were mutually reinforcing. The systems diagram in Chapter Five (Figure 20) illustrates how the component parts of school life interact dynamically. It highlights the need for input–output analysis before changes are made to any part of the system, so that potential consequences for other elements are anticipated and alignment is safeguarded. Only when such a systems approach is taken can congruent capital emerge fully, allowing schools to cultivate the coherence and reciprocity that participants in my research identified as central to success in life.

6.6 Recommendations for further research

The findings of this research suggest several avenues for future inquiry.

1. **Expanding contexts**: Further research could explore perceptions of 'success in life' across a wider range of schools, including different regions, socio-economic contexts, and educational phases, to examine how local cultures and policy pressures shape these understandings.

2. **Longitudinal perspectives**: Following the same pupils, parents and teachers over time could illuminate how perceptions of success evolve, particularly during key educational transitions such as the move from primary to secondary school.

3. **Operationalising congruent capital**: Future studies could develop and test frameworks for creating congruent capital within curriculum and school ethos design. This would help to identify practical strategies for fostering alignment between pupils' values, goals, and actions in diverse contexts.

4. **Assessment and recognition**: Investigating alternative forms of assessment that reflect the broader dimensions of success valued by participants could inform more holistic evaluation practices in schools.

5. **Teacher professional development**: Further research might examine how training and ongoing professional learning can equip teachers to nurture the forms of success described in this research, including the skills and dispositions associated with systems design, input and output analysis necessary for creating the conditions necessary for the development of congruent capital in all learners.

6.7 Concluding reflections

These concluding reflections are necessarily personal, synthesising the voices of pupils, parents and teachers with my own analysis of what they reveal about the possibilities and constraints of the English primary curriculum and all learners' ability to achieve success in life. My research set out to explore how participants in two schools understood the idea of *success in life* and how these perceptions intersect with curriculum and policy. The central research question asked: *What does success in life mean for these participants, and how might their views inform a critique of the English primary curriculum?*

The findings show that to succeed in life was not perceived as a fixed outcome but as a process shaped by wellbeing, relationships, competence, fairness and opportunities for meaningful contribution. Pupils, parents and teachers converged in valuing happiness, belonging and compassion as inseparable from academic learning. At the same time, they expressed frustration with aspects of the policy environment, particularly the narrowing effects of high stakes testing. As one parent put it starkly, '*The system is broken. It doesn't prepare them for life; it just prepares them for tests*' (PA5). These accounts highlight both the strengths and the limitations of the system. On the one hand, participants affirmed the unique role of primary schools as relational and psychological hubs, places where children can discover interests, practise fairness and gain confidence through mastery. On the other, they described how performative pressures, and rigid expectations often undermined these possibilities. Progress towards success in life, in their view, was sometimes achieved despite the system, rather than because of it.

A unifying thread across the data is the call for education that integrates social, emotional and cognitive aims rather than separating them or prioritising one over the other. Success in life was described as something that emerges when curriculum, pedagogy, relationships and environments align to create conditions where children and teachers can flourish. Congruent capital, as conceptualised in my research, is the capacity that emerges when such alignment occurs, enabling pupils and teachers to connect who they are with what they do and how they interact with others and the wider world. Pupils described success in life as '*helping others in the community*' (PA16Q) or '*working together so everyone does well*' (TG2B), while teachers emphasised '*giving them the skills to be happy in life regardless of the hand life has dealt them*' (TG2A). In these moments,

education felt both personally meaningful and socially cohesive. The implications of my research findings extend beyond classrooms. At a policy level, the findings question the adequacy of a curriculum model that prioritises standardised knowledge recall while giving less attention to wellbeing, creativity and relational learning. Participants consistently described success in life in terms that cut across these categories, calling for schools to cultivate environments where laughter, dialogue and purposeful challenge are central. As one pupil put it, '*happiness is essential; without it, you are not motivated*' (P35/3). Parents linked success to confidence and responsibility, while teachers broadened it to '*making the most of what you've got*' (TG2A). The broader contribution of this research lies in showing that primary schools are not only preparatory institutions but lived contexts for success in life in their own right. To echo Dewey's (1933) reminder that 'education is not preparation for life but is life itself', the years spent in primary education should be recognised as intrinsically valuable. Children are not simply future workers or exam candidates; they are present members of communities whose happiness, confidence and belonging matter now as much as in the future.

In conclusion, the future of the English primary curriculum depends on creating the conditions for success in life as articulated by pupils, parents and teachers. Success was described not only in terms of knowledge and attainment but as a lived experience of happiness, belonging, adaptability and relationships. By introducing the concept of congruent capital, I have argued that success in life is most likely to be realised when curriculum, pedagogy, relationships and learning environments are aligned to support children's interests and realities. Such alignment enables schools to move beyond deficit framings and narrow measures of attainment, offering instead a more inclusive vision in which every learner can find recognition, purpose and confidence. Success in life, in this sense, is not deferred to an imagined future but enacted daily in the relationships, practices and environments of primary schools in England.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Pupil questionnaire

(Used in Section 3.3; sample N stated in 4.1.)

1. How would you describe success in life?

2. Can you describe or draw a person who has achieved success in life?
   Ask yourself…

- What do you need to **know** to be successful?
- What do you need to **have** to be successful?
- How do you need to **behave** to be successful?
- Who do you need to **know** to be successful?

3. What do you think are the most important things you do at school that will help you achieve success in life? (Think about: subjects/lessons; time outside class; people you mix with; behaviour; attitude.)

4. Do you think there are other people who have ideas about what you should do to achieve success in life?

5. How will you know if you have achieved success in life when you are older? (Draw or describe yourself in the future.)

Appendix B: Parent questionnaire

(Used in Section 3.3; responses analysed in 4.2–4.3.)

1. First thought/word that comes to mind for “success in life”.
2. Which subjects or skills should be learnt in school to achieve success in life?
3. Do possessions or money have anything to do with success in life? Explain.
4. How do qualifications/certificates relate to success in life? Explain.
5. How can family impact success in life?
6. Are there ways to behave or speak if you want to achieve success in life?
7. Are there people/friends you need to know to be successful?
8. How would you know if your child was successful in life (now and in the future)?
9. Do all children have the same chance of achieving success in life? Give reasons/examples.
10. Anything else you would add?

Appendix C: Teacher interview schedule

(Used in Section 3.3; responses analysed in 4.2–4.3.)

1. First thought/word for “success in life”.
2. Which subjects/skills should be learnt in school to achieve success in life?
3. How would you describe disadvantage? Do you design lessons differently for disadvantaged vs non-disadvantaged children?
4. Do all children have the same chance of achieving success in life? (Reasons/examples.)
5. How would you describe cultural capital?
6. How would you describe knowledge?
7. How do you design the curriculum to ensure success in life for your pupils?
8. Do possessions or money relate to success in life?
9. How do qualifications/certificates relate to success in life?
10. How do you think **your** family can impact on your success in life? ← (fixed “you’re your”)
11. Are there ways to behave or speak if you want to achieve success in life?
12. How would you know if your pupils were successful in life (now and in the future)?
13. Anything else you would add?

Appendix D: Ethics and consent (templates)

(See Section 3.1/3.3 for ethical overview.)

- D1. Participant Information Sheet **(parents/teachers)** — anonymised template.
- D2. Parent/Carer Consent Form — anonymised template.
- D3. Teacher Information Sheet
- D4: Teacher Consent Form
- D5. Pupil Information Sheet (Stage Two) — approval letter/email (reference number, date; redact names/emails if needed).
  Note: All pupil drawings reproduced with parent/guardian consent; identifying details removed.
- D6: Pupil Consent Form (to be completed with their parent or carer)

D1: Parent Information Sheet

Title of Study: An exploration of how curriculum is designed and delivered in the English Primary School to ensure 'success in life', through an analysis of the perceptions of pupils, parents and their teachers.

About the study

This research project is looking for ideas and perceptions about what children learn in school and ask if pupils, parents/carers and their teachers think this is the right mix to help children achieve **success in life.**

The research will ask pupils and parents or carers a range of questions to find out:

1. What they think **success in life** is**.**
2. If they think that the primary school curriculum is designed in the right way to achieve **success in life.**

<u>Some questions you may have about the research project:</u>

Why have you asked me to take part and what will I be required to do?

- I have asked you to take part because I am interested in what you have to say.
- I will be asking you to complete a confidential questionnaire either online or on paper.

What if I do not wish to take part or change my mind during the study?

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason for doing so.

What happens to the research data?

The answers you give will be completely confidential. The information collected will only be seen by the researcher and any reference to it will be anonymised. The information you provide will be kept in an encrypted file and destroyed at the end of the project.

How will the research be reported?

The research will be reported to the University at the end of the project (estimated 2024/5) and will be used in articles for academic journals and or as part of conferences. Throughout this process, all your information will be kept anonymous.

Safeguarding and Child Protection

If you tell me about something which indicates a risk of serious harm to yourself or other person(s), I may not be able to keep this confidential as I will work in partnership with the school and follow their Safeguarding Policies.

What if I want to complain about the research

Initially you should contact the researcher (Paula Moses) directly. However, if you are not satisfied or wish to make a more formal complaint you should contact Name to be added, Director of Research Office, University of Cumbria, Bowerham Road, Lancaster, LA1 3JD. diane.cox@cumbria.ac.uk

How can I find out more information?

You can contact the Researcher for any information or to talk about the project at any time: paula.moses@uni.cumbria.ac.uk or phone 07914 853919

D2: Parent/Carer Consent Form

Title of Investigation: An exploration of how curriculum is designed and delivered in the English Primary School to ensure 'success in life,' through an analysis of the perceptions of pupils, parents/carers and their teachers.

Please answer the following questions by circling your responses:

Have you read and understood the information sheet about this study? YES / NO

Have you been able to ask questions and had enough information? YES / NO

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time, and without having to give a reason for withdrawal? YES / NO

Your questionnaire responses will be anonymised. Do you give permission for members of the research team to analyse and quote your anonymous responses? YES / NO

In addition to this questionnaire - would you be interested in taking part in an interview at a later stage of this research? YES / NO

Please sign below to show that you agree to take part in the research and feel you have had enough information about what is involved:

Parent/Carer Signature: Date: .....

Your Name (block letters):

Signature of investigator: Date: .....

Name (block letters):

D3: Teacher Information Sheet and Consent Form

An exploration of how curriculum is designed and delivered in the English Primary School to ensure 'success in life', through an analysis of the perceptions of pupils, parents/carers and their teachers.

This research project is looking for ideas and perceptions about what children learn in school and ask if pupils, parents/carers and their teachers think this is the right mix to help children achieve **success in life.**

The research will ask pupils, parents, carers and teachers a range of questions to find out:

1. What they think **success in life** is**.**
2. If they think that the primary school curriculum is designed in the right way to achieve **success in life.**

Some questions you may have about the research project:

Why have you asked me to take part and what will I be required to do?

1. I have asked you to take part because I am interested in what you have to say as a Year Five class teacher.
2. I will be asking you to complete a 20–30-minute informal interview with me, which will be recorded on a Dictaphone, where we will discuss your approach to the primary curriculum in your school. You will have the questions beforehand and will be able to stay in contact with me throughout the research if you want to add to any of your responses.
3. I will also ask you to support your pupils so that they can complete their questionnaires and take part in an enquiry with me to discuss the concepts of success and curriculum. You may also need to answer some questions about the project from pupils or their parents.

What if I do not wish to take part or change my mind during the study?

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study, within two weeks, without having to provide a reason for doing so.

What happens to the research data? The answers you give will be completely confidential. The information collected will only be seen by the researcher and any reference to it will be anonymised. The information you provide will be kept in an encrypted file and destroyed at the end of the project.

How will the research be reported? - The research will be reported to the University at the end of the project (estimated 2024/5) and will be used in articles for academic journals and or as part of conferences. Throughout this process, all your information will be kept anonymous.

How can I find out more information? You can contact the Researcher for any information or to talk about the project at any time: paula.moses@uni.cumbria.ac.uk or phone 07914 853919

Safeguarding and Child Protection- If you tell me about something which indicates a risk of serious harm to yourself or other person(s), I may not be able to keep this confidential as I will work in partnership with the school and follow their Safeguarding Policies.

What if I want to complain about the research? Initially you should contact the researcher (Paula Moses) directly. However, if you are not satisfied or wish to make a more formal complaint you should contact Dr Colette Conroy, Chair of Research Ethics, University of Cumbria. Email: research.office@cumbria.ac.uk

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D4: Teacher Consent Form

Title of Investigation: An exploration of how curriculum is designed and delivered in the English Primary School to ensure 'success in life', through an analysis of the perceptions of pupils, parents/carers and their teachers.

Please answer the following questions by circling your responses:

Have you read and understood the information sheet about this study?

YES / NO

Have you been able to ask questions and had enough information?

YES / NO

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study within two weeks of your interview, and without having to give a reason for withdrawal?

YES / NO

Your responses to the interview will be anonymised. Do you give permission for members of the research team to analyse and quote your anonymous responses? YES / NO

Do you agree that I can audio record (on a Dictaphone NOT a mobile phone) the interview?

YES / NO

Please sign below to show that you agree to take part in the research and feel you have had enough information about what is involved:

Your signature: .... Date: .....

Your Name (block letters): ......

Signature of investigator: Paula Moses . Date: 25th May 2021

Name (block letters): **Paula** Moses

D5: Pupil Information Sheet (Stage Two)

Hello! My name is Paula Moses and I am doing a research project for the University of Cumbria to find out what pupils think about what you learn in school and if you think it will give you success later in your life. You, your teachers and your parents/carers were all involved last year, and I am asking you join in with the next stage of the project. I will be asking you to:

- Look at the questionnaire which you completed in Year Five and tell me what you think about your answers.
- Play some 'thinking games' together about the idea of success in life to see if we can work out a definition of the concept.

Just to let you know that all your answers will be kept anonymous so you can speak your mind!

Below is a bit more information and if you have any more questions, please speak to your teacher. Thank you very much for being part of this important and exciting project!

What if I do not wish to take part or change my mind during the study? Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason for doing so.

What happens to the research data? The answers you give will be completely confidential. The information collected will only be seen by the researcher and any reference to it will be anonymised. The information you provide will be kept in an encrypted file and destroyed at the end of the project.

How will the research be reported? The research will be reported to the University at the end of the project (estimated 2024/5) and will be used in articles for academic journals and or as part of conferences. Throughout this process, all your information will be kept anonymous.

How can I find out more information? Speak to your teacher and they can help you contact me or my supervisor.

Safeguarding and Child Protection: If you tell me about something which indicates a risk of serious harm to yourself or other person(s), I may not be able to keep this confidential as I will work in partnership with the school and follow their Safeguarding Policies.

What if I want to complain about the research? Speak to your teacher and they can help you contact me or my supervisor.

D6: Pupil Consent Form (to be completed with their parent or carer)

Title of Investigation: An exploration of how curriculum is designed and delivered in the English Primary School to ensure 'success in life', through an analysis of the perceptions of pupils, parents/carers and their teachers.

Please answer the following questions by circling your responses:

Has your child read and understood the information sheet about this study? YES / NO

Has your child been able to ask questions and had enough information? YES / NO

Does your child understand that they are free to withdraw from this study at any time, and without having to give a reason for withdrawal? YES / NO

Your child's responses will be anonymised. Do you give permission for members of the research team to analyse and quote your child's anonymous responses? YES / NO

Do you agree that I can audio record the enquiry session with your child's class? YES / NO

Please sign here to show that agree for your child to take part in the research and feel you and they have had enough information about what is involved:

Parent/Carer Signature:

Date:

Your Name (block letters):

Your child's name (block letters):

End

Appendix E: Snapshot of the pupil collaborative enquiries

The collaborative enquiries were designed to extend and deepen the insights gained through the questionnaires with the pupils. The collaborative enquiry approach (3.3.3) provided the dialogic structure for pupils to interrogate their own assumptions and test each other's reasoning. Across three sessions, children moved beyond listing markers of success towards wrestling with conceptual, ethical and existential questions. This commentary synthesises the enquiries, foregrounding pupil voice while drawing out cross-cutting themes that connect with the wider arguments of this thesis. Because contributions were co-constructed rather than individually authored, quotations are now attributed to an anonymised pupil code.

Enquiry One: Do you have to be an adult to be successful?

This enquiry revealed the interplay between survival, material security and aspiration. Pupils began by sorting their earlier questionnaire responses into a hierarchy of importance. This provoked disagreements about the necessity of money, health, shelter and intelligence. One pupil argued that *'you don't need money in life, you just need to be alive'* (Enq1), while another countered that *'you do need money so you can get the food and home, yeah, and you would die without somewhere to live'* (Enq1). The conversation circled repeatedly around the distinction between sufficiency and luxury. As one child observed, *'you don't really need a nice house as long as it's got a roof'* (Enq1). Another added, *'my granddad was really poor and didn't have any luxury… he barely had food'* (Enq1). Material sufficiency was foregrounded as a baseline for success, while the pursuit of excess was treated with scepticism. The pupils also challenged received cultural messages. One asked, *'where do we get the message from that we need to own a mansion…? People who own the mansion'* (Enq1). This recognition of the symbolic nature of status objects shows a nascent critique of consumer culture and celebrity narratives. The enquiry also moved into existential reflection. One child suggested, *'you don't have to survive because you're still in your body when you're dead'* (Enq1). Another wondered, *'are you your body or is there something else that's you?'* (Enq1). Such comments reveal a willingness to pursue metaphysical dimensions of success, questioning the relationship between survival, selfhood and meaning. Overall, the pupils in this enquiry concluded that success is not bound to adulthood. They pointed to children who succeed in sport or music and argued that success depends less on age than on opportunity, motivation and

disposition. The discussion resonates with earlier findings that pupils see success as following one's own path rather than being tied to conventional milestones. It also challenges the implicit assumption in assessment frameworks that achievement must be tied to age-related benchmarks.

Enquiry Two: Is it more important to have friends or achieve your own goal?

The second enquiry focused on the tension between relational and individualistic models of success. Pupils quickly identified that goals and friendships are mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive. One began: *'I think friends, because I don't think you would be able to do that without your friends to help you'* (Enq2). Another elaborated: *'your friends can also help your mental health, because if you don't really have many friends, then you might feel a bit lonely and you might not have the spirit to achieve your goals'* (Enq2). Yet the discussion was not one-sided. Some argued that individual perseverance was vital: *'struggling is sometimes good for you… it's basically like climbing a mountain, it's hard, but once you make it to the top, you feel proud of yourself'* (Enq2). Others pushed back: *'if you've got a friend on the mountain, then it would be easier to hang on'* (Enq2). These exchanges illustrate pupils' capacity to weigh metaphors and counter-metaphors, testing out competing visions of resilience and interdependence.

The group also debated the relativity of goals. One pupil remarked, *'going to the shop is an easy goal, you could do it plenty of times and it wouldn't really change much'* (Enq2). Another countered: *'maybe a goal like going to the shop could be harder than climbing a mountain… it may be easy to other people, but actually really hard for them'* (Enq2). This recognition of subjective difference demonstrates an emerging sense of equity in defining success. Ultimately, the enquiry highlighted the relational scaffolding of success in life. As one child concluded, *'to every success there's probably a struggle and to reach your goals, there's always going to be a struggle, and your friends can help you get through that struggle'* (Enq2). Success was understood not as a solitary achievement but as a process co-constructed with others, in which both individual striving and mutual support play essential roles.

Enquiry Three: How can you achieve universal success?

The third enquiry brought explicitly ethical and collective dimensions to the fore. Pupils quickly recognised the difficulty of universal agreement: *'I don't think you can achieve universal success*

because there will always be at least one person who thinks that's not good, because no one thinks the same' (Enq3). Others explored the role of inequality and human nature. One noted, *'if you all have the same amount of money, then obviously one person would want to be a lot richer… someone always wants to do a bit better'* (Enq3). Another introduced the problem of harm: *'if achieving success makes someone else unhappy, is it still OK?'* (Enq3). The group also gestured towards collective goods. Greta Thunberg was cited as an example: *'she's done the universal success by raising awareness of climate change'* (Enq3). Here, success was framed not in terms of private gain but in terms of contributing to global wellbeing and sustainability. While sceptical about the possibility of truly universal success, pupils nonetheless articulated criteria for more inclusive forms: fairness, non-harm, and the balancing of personal achievement with collective happiness. The three enquiries demonstrate pupils' capacity to articulate success not as a fixed endpoint but as a contested, relational concept shaped by values, relationships and circumstances. They consistently returned to happiness, belonging and adaptability as indispensable features of success in life, while also recognising the inequalities that make universal success difficult to achieve. These discussions resonate strongly with the wider dataset: the importance of embodied dispositions over credentials alone, the central role of relationships, and the tension between children's lived values and the priorities embedded in assessment. These enquiries also offered pupils a rare opportunity to set aside curriculum frameworks and co-construct their own definitions of success in life. In these dialogic spaces, they debated ethical questions, weighed up priorities, and imagined what success might mean in practice. In this sense, the enquiries both reinforced and deepened the findings from surveys and interviews, providing dialogic evidence that pupils saw success as grounded in wellbeing, connection and personal congruence rather than test results or material gain.

Appendix F: Parent perspectives through unstructured interviews

PA11 defined success as the capacity to cope with challenges and to maintain balance across domains. For her, resilience was central: *'being able to cope with what life throws at you, having the confidence to keep going even if things are hard'*. She also stressed the importance of wellbeing and practical independence, describing how schools should support children to develop the self-confidence to pursue their own direction rather than conform to narrow standards of attainment.

PA14 emphasised joy and equilibrium: *'being successful is being happy and enjoying your life… not just working all the time but making sure you have time for family and friends'*. She argued that schools should include practical life skills such as budgeting and cooking, alongside core subjects. In her view, *'the system doesn't always let children find out what they're good at… it's like a treadmill, and not every child fits that'*. Her frustration lay in the equation of success with exam results, at the expense of personal growth and happiness.

PA17 combined recognition of academic basics with a clear rejection of high-stakes measures. For her, success was about wellbeing, self-reliance, and family: *'Reading and maths are important, of course, but they're not everything. Children need to know how to look after themselves, how to get on with people, how to solve problems'*. She described choosing to prioritise time with her children over pursuing professional advancement, adding that *'it doesn't prepare them for life, it just prepares them for tests'*.

PA18 was outspoken in his dissatisfaction with the education system, describing it bluntly as *'broken'*. He explained: *'The system wants grades and certificates, but that doesn't show who the child really is'*. Reflecting, *'sometimes it's just about someone noticing what they're good at, even if it's not maths or English'* (PA18). For him, relationships and wellbeing outweighed credentials. He also emphasised the central role of home life in shaping opportunities, noting simply, *'I think home life plays a huge role'*.

PA19 framed success around adaptability: *'The ability to change when things change, that's important, because life doesn't go the way you think it will'*. She placed strong value on emotional literacy, suggesting that schools should help children *'learn how to talk about how they feel… it would stop so many problems later on'*. She was critical of the limits of academic achievement, remarking that *'academia has its limitations… it does not teach you the skills and experience needed to operate in the real world'*.